

Truth On Fire

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The Greater Homeland

The American public has developed a visceral concern for homeland security since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Prior to that tragic date, the phrase “a vulnerable United States” would have been considered an oxymoron. That is no longer the case. A few of the more visible and immediate reactions to the wounds inflicted upon us by Islamic madmen have been the establishment of the Homeland Security Department and high-tech enhancements to our airport security systems. Recent reports of suspected terrorists infiltrating our society through the Canadian border are portentous reminders that homeland security at this point is packing more symbolism than substance! The bottom line is the citizens of this nation are demanding to be safe and to feel safe once again, and will hold elected officials responsible at the ballot box for failure to achieve these objectives.

All the heated rhetoric about homeland security (about which we shall surely be inundated in the coming months) prompts us to reflect upon the greater homeland of which every believer in Jesus Christ shall one day be a part. The Lord Jesus confirmed it, saying, “*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also*” (John 14:2-3). We know that Abraham of old was cognizant of this same truth, because the scripture says that while *he sojourned in the land of promise [the homeland], as in a strange country...he looked for a city [the greater homeland] whose builder and maker is God*” (Hebrews 11:9-10). Abraham would affirm with us that there has never been a homeland immune from attack or strife, including his own. But the greater homeland that awaits the believer shall never suffer the first scintilla of sin or violence!

What then is the Biblical guarantee that God will bring every believer without exception into the greater homeland? It is the doctrine of predestination! The NT Greek word translated “predestinate” is **proorizo**, a combination of **pro** (beforehand) and **orizo** (to determine; Eng. “horizon”). It literally means to preset a destination or outcome that is immutable as to its fulfillment. It is used in the NT of both people and events, but our focus here is with people. Thus when the scriptures speak of God predestinating someone, it signifies that He has determined by sovereign decree to accomplish a purpose or goal in that individual that no force in heaven or on earth can defeat!

Two of the key issues regarding predestination are 1) its objects and 2) its ultimate goal. The objects of predestination are those *whom he did foreknow* (Romans 8:29). These are the same individuals who have been *blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ* (Ephesians 1:3). Two of these “in Christ” blessings are predestination *unto the adoption of children* (1:5) and an *inheritance obtained* as a result of predestination (1:11). In short, the objects of predestination are those whom the Spirit of God has placed into spiritual union with Christ after hearing and believing the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation (1:13). The Bible doctrine of predestination has nothing to do with unbelievers who are still “in Adam”.

The ultimate goal of predestination is *to be conformed to the image of His Son* (Romans 8:29). The process of conformity begins at the moment of regeneration (i.e., the new birth), continues through life as a matter of progress in personal holiness, and culminates at the resurrection, at which time Jesus will endow His children with glorified bodies like unto His own (Philippians 3:21). Paul refers to this event as *the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body* (Romans 8:23), which is synonymous with *the adoption of children* cited in Ephesians 1:5.

It is unfortunate indeed that theologians down through the centuries have so fiercely debated and divided over the objects of predestination when the primary thrust of the doctrine is God's ultimate goal for all who are in Christ! Spiros Zodhiates has well stated: "Because it is neither possible nor permissible for us to pry into God's secret counsel, it is not proper to be *fixated* [italics mine] with determining who the predestined are. Instead, we should contemplate the glories of what they are predestined to" (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, p. 1224). Amen!

Brethren, the truth of the greater homeland should transcend our concerns about homeland security. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we have a fixed future and an eternal citizenship in the city whose builder and maker is God! The doctrine of predestination should not be feared or avoided, but rather embraced, for it is God's sovereign and gracious guarantee that He will indeed save to the uttermost all who come unto Him through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ!

So Little for So Long Time

Every single question that Jesus directed toward men in His earthly ministry contained at least three inherent qualities. First, each one was intended to foster the apprehension of spiritual truth in the recipients. Secondly, they were always penetrating and thought provoking in nature, challenging the hearer to reason his or her way to the proper conclusion and, as a result, undertake an appropriate course of action. Thirdly, none of them were asked for the purpose of acquiring information.

A prime example is found in Luke 6:46 as Jesus was addressing His newly-appointed apostles, a group of disciples from whom He had chosen the Twelve, and a great multitude of people who had sought Him out for both teaching and healing (6:17-19). He asked, "*And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*" The spiritual truth to be apprehended was the inconsistency of saying one thing and doing another—giving lip service to His authority while disregarding His directives. Such asynchronous alignment of lips and life is the very essence of hypocrisy. If someone on the receiving end of the question thus reasons that he or she is playing the hypocrite, then the challenge is to undertake a life of obedience that reflects a genuine recognition of His Lordship and brings the lips and life into agreement.

A less well-known but equally powerful question was directed toward the apostle Philip on crucifixion eve. Jesus said to him, "*Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip?*" (John 14:9). The context has Jesus engaged with the apostles (minus Judas Iscariot) in perhaps the most intensive and comprehensive teaching interlude of His ministry. Simon Peter and Thomas had raised a few questions and doubts respectively about where Jesus was going and the way to get there. Jesus in turn affirmed that He was the way to the Father, and that knowing Him was in essence knowing the Father. At that point, Philip interjected saying, "*Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us*" (14:8). The statement implied that Philip was not satisfied with Jesus alone. Even though he used the pronoun "*us*" in stating his desire, I doubt that he spoke for the entire group. I believe John, the beloved apostle, had arrived at Jesus-alone satisfaction long before this conversation took place.

The question posed by Jesus to one of His elect servants lends itself to our encouragement as well as our instruction. First, notice that when responding to both Peter (13:36-38) and Thomas (14:7-8), the Lord did not employ a personal address. But He addressed Philip by name—in part to signify the personal attention He was giving to the issue raised by Philip, and in part as an expression of His tenderness and concern for one in whom He had invested so much.

Secondly, the knowledge vacuum of which Jesus spoke was relative rather than absolute. In other words, Philip knew the Lord Jesus in terms of a saving relationship, but his spiritual perception of Christ had not advanced to the maximum extent warranted by three years of exposure and interaction.

Thirdly, since the phrase "*so long time*" equates to a three-year period for Philip, why not assume for present-day purposes that three year-old converts who still exhibit spiritual

dullness and lack of Jesus-alone steadfastness have suffered in their spiritual advancement?

Lastly, we may conclude that knowing Jesus to fullest extent possible in this life is the most noble and rewarding pursuit that can be undertaken by a sinner saved by grace!

Brethren, I wonder whether that penetrating question Jesus directed toward Philip in those precious hours before His arrest and trial might have some thought-provoking relevance for you and me at this hour. How long has Jesus been with us—or to be more Biblically correct, in us? Has it been three days, three months, three years, or three decades? To what extent have we advanced in our theological as well as experiential knowledge of Him? Do we live with a Jesus-alone satisfaction? Or can we hear the Lord Jesus addressing us by name in our heart of hearts, admonishing us that for so long time we have come to apprehend so little about His magnificent Person and matchless grace?

Dealing with Truth Vacuums

The television, radio, and print media have recently reminded us of two alarming trends among the youth of America. The first is the increase in violent acts committed by elementary school children. Episodes of children under age twelve bringing lethal weapons into classrooms, and physically assaulting teachers and fellow classmates, are becoming more frequent. Who imagined that armed police and security officers would become regular fixtures in our nation's grade schools? The second is the growing use of the drug Ritalin to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children. The Journal of the American Medical Association states that as many as 6 million of our children are currently taking this prescription drug. The additional billions of federal (tax) dollars spent for child-related educational programs along with well-meaning national campaigns such as "It Takes a Village" and "Leave No Child Behind" appear to be impotent in curbing these debilitating trends.

What say the experts on the matter? Well, medical science believes the answer can be found in unlocking the chemical secrets of the brain, and discovering the miracle drug that will correct chemical imbalances and rectify undesirable behaviors. Others contend that we are what we eat, and thus children with better diets will become better children. Many child psychologists blame media violence for provoking similar kinds of behavior in its youthful viewers. Sociologists argue that family disintegration as evidenced by parental violence and abandonment is the major culprit. The list of alleged causes is lengthy! And while many expert postulations contain a microbe or two of substantive thought, all of them fall short in terms of identifying the fault and the fix, the cause and the cure!

When all else fails, consult the Word of God—the inerrant repository of eternal truth! Bible believers understand that the sin nature within children is the ultimate cause behind the acts of violence committed by them (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:23; 5:12). The fix for sin in any life is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of all sinners—the eternal and life-changing benefits of which are applied by God to those who believe the Gospel. This general truth as it applies to the individual is indisputable, which is why every local church should be feverishly engaged in the evangelization of children! But the dynamics of growing child violence within society at large requires further investigation.

The burgeoning violence we are witnessing in America's children can be attributed directly to the progressive suppression of truth and a corresponding surge in demonic activity. Do you remember the demon-possessed boy that Jesus healed after His transfiguration? He was given to regular fits of violence induced by the demon (Mark 9:18). When Jesus asked "*how long*" it had been since this condition "*came unto him*", the father answered, "*Of a child*" (9:21). We must remember that Jesus broke four hundred years of prophetic silence as He entered upon his public ministry. As predicted by the prophet Amos, a "*famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord*" was in full swing (Amos 8:11). This no doubt accounts for the great number of demon-possessed adults and children Jesus encountered during His three-year ministry. As He continued to

disseminate the truth and wield His power among the masses, there was a conspicuous decrease in the incidents of demon-spawned activity. No attempt is being made here to assign demon possession as the cause for every act of child violence or hyperactivity. The Scriptures, however, strongly support the belief that demons frolic in truth vacuums, and no child is immune!

Brethren, the ongoing efforts of infidels to obliterate the truth from our educational institutions and curriculums have constituted an open invitation to the devil's minions to conduct search and destroy missions at will among the children of our nation. But the fault does not rest entirely with these agencies. Parents without a spiritual or moral compass, and pulpits with secular agendas, are equally culpable.

An awareness of the true fault suggests a straightforward cure! Reinststate the Word of God as the authoritative voice in all matters spiritual and temporal! Give it its due reverence and preeminence in every corner of society—our churches, our homes, and our schools! It must begin with the people of God before it can impact the nation! We cannot justify our criticism of government for suppressing the truth if we are guilty of neglecting it in our own daily endeavors! Nor can we remain ambivalent toward these alarming trends when we understand the real cause and possess the Gospel cure!

The Reproductive Freedoms of God

In Washington this last week, and at sundry sites across the nation, the supporters of abortion rights held vociferous rallies to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade*—the Supreme Court ruling handed down on January 22, 1973, that granted to women right-to-privacy protections regarding the decision to terminate a pregnancy. The majority of justices opined that the Constitution guaranteed that right, and so began the damnable practice of legalized infanticide.

The Florida Times-Union published a letter from the CEO of Planned Parenthood in Jacksonville, in which she encouraged pro-choice sympathizers to become more vocal in their support of abortion rights. Her two-fold argument was that *Roe vs. Wade* had finally secured the “reproductive destiny” of women in America, and that a well-organized and financially robust pro-life agenda was threatening to turn back the clock on reproductive freedom. My truth-based conviction that abortion is equivalent to cold-blooded murder caused me to write a response to the editor. Excerpts are included below:

“The recent letter from the CEO of Planned Parenthood of Northeast Florida is yet another indicator that advocates of abortion rights are in dire straights. They are losing the public argument—pure and simple!

“The writer claimed ‘the *Roe* decision finally granted women control over their reproductive destiny.’ Are we to assume that women had no control over their sexual activities prior to this ruling? Were they denied access to birth control alternatives? What about sexual purity and abstinence? Buzzwords like ‘reproductive destiny’ are designed to define the issue in extreme terms (i.e., abortion rights grant total control whereas the lack of that right equates to no control at all)! The fact is the most critical choices impacting one’s ‘reproductive destiny’ come into play long before a woman is impregnated, and will continue to be the overriding factors in the matter without regard for *Roe vs. Wade*!

“One of the great pro-choice falsehoods is the idea that, because the unborn fetus is part of a woman’s body, it is therefore under her sovereign control. Such is not the case. Early into the first trimester of pregnancy, the fetus has its own heartbeat, blood supply, and distinguishable appendages. The central argument put forth by abortion advocates is that of dependency. In other words, since the fetus is totally dependent upon the mother (i.e., a non-viable tissue mass), the decision to continue or terminate the pregnancy is hers alone. The logic of this argument is absurd. Should the same reasoning be applied to a three month-old child or an elderly invalid since both are non-viable entities apart from the sustenance they receive from those upon whom they depend?

“The ruling in the case of *Roe vs. Wade* is arguably the most inhumane judgment ever passed down by the Supreme Court. It obliterated the identity of innocent unborn humanity, and robbed them of the sacred Constitutional protections to which they are

entitled. In the name of pro-choice, some 42 million of them thus far have been denied the opportunity to make the first choice.”

Brethren, each time this issue surges to the forefront of public debate, I am reminded of David's inspired musings concerning his own development in the womb: *“I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; 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 scriptures teach us that the fetus is an imperfect yet personal substance that God Himself is continually fashioning until the day of separation from the womb. Fetal development is the fearful and wonderful work of God! And while its substance may be non-viable, it is nonetheless human! Abortion is thus two-dimensional in its damnability! It is first an act of infanticide—or homicide, pick your poison! It is moreover an act of interdiction by ungodly men into the secret affairs and reproductive freedoms of God!

An Expected End

The Bible is littered with admonitions for the people of God to pray. Prayer is routinely depicted as the primary spiritual posture for the worship of God. For stalwarts of the faith such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Samuel, David, Elijah and protégé Elisha, Daniel, and the apostle Paul, prayer was no less important than breathing.

Prayer is the sacred venue for fellowship with God. Prayer is the highest expression of dependence upon God, and pleases Him as an exercise of faith. Prayer is the prescribed pathway into the warehouse of God's riches from which the humble petitioner may secure truckloads of palletized mercy from the loading docks of grace!

The prophet Jeremiah issued to the Israelites who were carried captive into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar one of the most remarkable and insightful prayer instructions recorded in scripture. He wrote: "*And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace*" (Jeremiah 29:7). The command for the captives to pray was one of several imperatives enjoined by the Lord in Jeremiah's letter that included the building of houses in which to dwell for the long term, the planting of gardens as a sustainable food source, and the marrying of Israelite to Israelite coupled with prolific childbearing so that the Jewish population in Babylon might increase rather than diminish in spite of the captivity (29:5-6). In other words, the God-imposed captivity was never intended to induce a self-imposed caducity! Its design was restoration rather than resignation!

The real-time relevance of this passage can be seen in at least three ways. First, it tells us that the Lord had endorsed the concept of praying for our enemies long before its NT articulation by Jesus (Matthew 5:44). The phrase "*I have caused you to be carried away*" was intended to teach the sovereign providence of God in the matter. The Jews would be more inclined to pray for their captures if they had it clearly in mind that God Almighty was ultimately the Administrator of Babylonian affairs. In this same spirit did Jesus pray, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34).

Secondly, it teaches us that the potential for effectual prayer during the time of captivity was not forfeited as a result of the captivity, indicating that prayer could still make a difference in their lives! What an encouragement! So many times within the disobedient and dark corridors of life we feel that all hope is lost, that God is through with us, that our captivity is more than we can bear, and that the road which leads back to spiritual Jerusalem no longer exists. But the Lord made it clear to His people that the length of captivity was preset for *seventy years*, that He would *perform His good word* toward them, and *cause them to return* to Jerusalem (**29:10**). He had *an expected end* for them (**29:11**), which tells me that no believer should expect his or her spiritual journey to end in the midst of chastening!

Thirdly, it reminds us that what is good for a nation—even a pagan nation such as Babylonia—is good for the people of God who dwell therein. America is moving ever closer to the precipice of paganism! There are forces at work within the halls of Congress, the anti-Christian media, the Hollywood culture, and the philosophical elites of

academia to discredit the Word of God and all who obey it! Yet we must pray for the peace of our nation. We must intercede for its leadership as well as the opponents of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Why? In the peace thereof we shall have peace!

Remember the historical reference provided by Luke following the conversion of Saul of Tarsus? He remarked: "*Then had the churches rest [peace and wholeness] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied*" (Acts 9:31). You will observe that the churches seized upon the time of peace as an opportunity for evangelism and ministry expansion! The church in America appears to be taking peace for granted as she remains asleep at the switch!

Brethren, what comfort is to be derived from the truth of God's faithfulness! The captivity in Babylon was perhaps the darkest hour in Israel's history, yet the Lord used His anointed prophets to keep hope on the horizon! God's expected end for them, and for us in this hour, was expressed in these words: "*Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart*" (29:12-13). May the Lord Jesus Christ grant to each of us who know and trust Him such an expected end!

A Mission-Critical Difference

Our military establishment is renown for its chain of command and well-defined structural components. For example, consider the Army. It is the sum total of its regiments. A regiment consists of two or more battalions. A battalion is composed of companies, a company of platoons, and a platoon of squads. Each squad consists of individual soldiers, who receive specialized training in some aspect of war, and are referred to as specialists. The squad is designed to meld the diversity of the specialists into one cohesive unit capable of conducting effective and multi-purpose missions. A typical squad might include an expert marksman (sniper), a medical expert (corpsman), a communications expert (radioman), a language expert (interpreter), and a munitions expert. While all of these receive the same basic training, it is the specialty training that enables each one to make a unique and mission-critical difference within the squad.

The vital and indispensable role of the specialist within the military is being accentuated once again as the United States continues to assemble its war machine in the Persian Gulf. We are referring in particular to the great number of reservists who are being called back into active duty. The Associated Press has cited Pentagon statistics which reveal that currently 37 percent of these former “weekend warriors” are older than forty. The Department of Defense is not commandeering them into service for sheer body count, but for the specialized skills they bring to the combat arena without regard for their age.

It is entirely appropriate at this hour to think of the local church as a squad of specialists that God has uniquely equipped for spiritual warfare. It is God's design for each member to make a mission-critical contribution to the assault on the gates of hell, which Jesus said would not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:18). The apostle Paul frequently employed metaphors of war to emphasize the spiritual nature of life in Christ as set against the principalities and powers of darkness (Ephesians 6:10-20). He also admonished Timothy to *endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ*, and affirmed before his death that he had *fought a good fight* (2 Timothy 2:3; 4:7). Blessed is that disciple in whose mind the concept of spiritual war was etched early on in his or her Christian walk.

Who then are these specialists? Well, the scripture identifies seven of them in Romans 12:6-8. God has specialized some members of His body with the gift of prophecy—the unique ability to forthtell the word of God in black and white terms. The prophets of old were both foretellers and forthtellers, but, in this age of completed revelation God's prophets are expounders of the written word! They are spiritual snipers with a God-given ability to keep sin in the crosshairs and the church focused on the main issues.

The gift of ministry is the ability to perceive areas of need that are often overlooked by others. They are spiritual mechanics, who are motivated to keep the machinery of war running. What would the church be without this group of specialists? The gift of teaching enables its recipient to pursue expository depth in the scriptures, and to expound the truth discovered with clarity and simplicity. In some respects they are spiritual drill sergeants, whose job it is to instill within the recruit the what, why, and how of military discipline and combat tactics. The gift of exhortation is the ability to encourage and

motivate others. The faint of heart are ill suited for the rigors of spiritual war. The exhorter seeks to light the fires of hope under the weak and discouraged, and render the assistance necessary to get them back to the front lines.

The gift of giving is an uncommon capacity for monetary generosity coupled with the ability to create wealth as a resource. No military unit can wage war without adequate financial underpinnings. The giver derives his or her greatest satisfaction from providing for such endeavors, and desires to function in virtual anonymity. The gift of ruling is an administrative gift that is usually coupled with a vision. They are spiritual gunnery sergeants who love to take charge (in a good sense), and see a mission through to its completion. The gift of mercy is the God-given capacity for both empathy and sympathy toward those who are hurting. They are spiritual corpsmen, who desire the healing of those who are wounded in action.

Brethren, America may be poised for yet another war, but the Church has been engaged in a spiritual life and death struggle for the last two thousand years. God has equipped every believer with a spiritual gift. It is high time for every Christian soldier to take his or her God-given specialty to the front lines of combat, and make a mission-critical difference for His glory, and for the furtherance of His Kingdom!

The Price of Rain

Have you ever noticed how certain events that keep repeating themselves have a tendency to become conspicuous? Baseball fans remember well the slugfest that took place between Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire. The two-man quest to overtake Hammerin' Hank Aaron became a conspicuous story because game after game these guys kept pounding fastballs into the grandstands. The same was true of Barry Bonds, who kept launching long fly balls into watery graves beyond Candlestick's right-field fence. His four-bagger performances game after game riveted the interest of a nation. Tiger Woods dominated sports headlines by winning one major championship after another—four in a row to be exact. The point is events that repeat themselves become conspicuous, and thus get our attention!

A similar phenomenon took place in the latter days of David's reign over Israel. The scripture says *there was a famine for three years, year after year* (2 Samuel 21:1). Now David might have chalked up one bad year to unfriendly rainfall patterns. He might have rationalized a second bad year as an unfortunate coincidence. But after three consecutive years of drought, the situation reached crisis proportions, and David was motivated to enquire of the Lord. It is obvious that David had no clue as to the cause other than a sense of God's displeasure. The Lord answered: "*It is for Saul, and his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites*" (21:1). This revelation was for David, as well as for us, the source of profound spiritual instruction! The ultimate cause of the famine was sin in the form of a broken vow!

There are two critical timelines that must be kept in mind. The first is the roughly four hundred years that elapsed between the oath of protection made by Joshua to the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:3-21) and the violation of that oath by Saul *in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah*. The second is the thirty-five or so years that elapsed between Saul's breaking of the vow and the conspicuous consequences for that transgression. Together they teach us that (1) God considers a vow to be very serious business, and (2) God never sweeps a broken vow under the carpet, as men are prone to do. By God's reckoning, a vow made four hundred years ago is no less binding than a vow made four hours ago! Nor does the passage of time diminish one iota the grievous nature of a broken vow or the necessity for reconciliation.

How many of us have made vows in the past—Godward or manward—that have been violated either by willful act or by neglect? It is a reasonable expectation that any believer, having reached the point of desperation over a conspicuous absence of Holy Ghost power, would earnestly enquire of the Lord for an answer to the spiritual drought. What he or she may find totally unexpected is the Lord placing His finger of conviction on some long-forgotten violation of an oath or promise. The fact is moving into the future with God often requires that we deal honestly and completely with our past!

The price paid for the restoration of rain was severe! By Gibeonite request, David delivered seven sons of Saul to be hanged *unto the Lord* (21:6). Two of the seven were the sons of Rizpah, whom *she bare* unto Saul; and the other five were those *brought up* by Michal, the barren daughter of Saul (21:8). Rizpah alone displayed a mother's grief,

and a resolve that the death of her sons would not be in vain! How so? She made a bed of sackcloth upon a rock close to the rotting corpses, dispersed the *birds by day* and the *beasts by night*, and remained faithful in that task *until water dropped upon them out of heaven* (21:10). Where are the Rizpahs of our generation willing to maintain a prayer vigil at the foot of the Cross until the living waters of Spirit power, secured for us through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Rock of Ages, become a reality once again for the Church at large?

It is noteworthy that the restoration of God's favor, as evidenced by the resumption of rain, was followed immediately by a rekindling of war with the Philistines (21:15). The scripture cites four distinct battles: three against the sons of the giant Goliath (21:16, 18, 20), and one versus Goliath's brother (21:19). All four were formidable adversaries, but all were defeated in due course!

In light of the relationship between rain and war, we must ask, "Is war a suitable alternative to famine?" Absolutely! A thousand spiritual battles conducted under the rain of Holy Ghost power is infinitely better than a single day of famine in a state of powerlessness! If given the choice between a fight and a famine, you choose the fight every time!

May the Lord Jesus grant to all of us a willingness to pay the price for spiritual rain without regard for its severity, knowing that the favor of God is worth far more than it will ever cost us in this life!

The Doctrines of Goodness

God is good! The Bible affirms this truth from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of the Revelation. God is good in His essential character—the impeccable standard of moral excellence. God is good in the providential benevolence He bestows upon both the just and the unjust. God is good in His redemptive work on behalf of sinners, enduring on the Cross of Calvary the rigors of substitutionary sacrifice, wherein He tasted death for every man! The fact that God is good made it inevitable that He would lavish goodness upon His creatures as an antidote for all the badness inflicted upon them by sin.

We will focus our attention upon the Greek word **chrestotes**, which is translated in the NT as “goodness”, “kindness”, and “gentleness”. It speaks of moral excellence with an inherent usefulness toward those who are impacted by it. Our purpose is to examine its usage in four different texts, and set forth an equal number of affirmations regarding the goodness of God. Let us call them The Doctrines of Goodness.

First, the scripture states that goodness is totally absent in the unregenerate sinner. In Romans 3:12, Paul declared: “*There is none that doeth good, no, not one.*” *Doeth good* could be translated *is practicing goodness* or *is practicing kindness*. The point is there are no traces of **chrestotes** (moral excellence or inherent usefulness) to be found in fallen humanity. Its presence in the life of any man, woman, or young person must be attributed solely to the redemptive power of God’s goodness and grace.

Secondly, the goodness of God is akin to the grace of God. According to Paul, God raised us up together with Christ, and made us sit together in heavenly places, so that “*in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness [chrestotes] toward us through Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:7). The kindness (goodness) of God given to us through Jesus Christ flows from the inexhaustible treasure trove of grace. Goodness and grace are two peas in the same pod! The man who says “God has blessed me with His goodness” could express the identical meaning with “God has graced my life!”

Thirdly, the goodness of God leads sinners to repentance. In Romans 2:1-5, the apostle Paul issued a stern rebuke to those who sat in judgment of others while committing the very same sins themselves. He warned the hypocrite that he shall in no wise escape the judgment of God, and then rebuked him for despising “*the riches of his goodness [chrestotes] and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness [chrestos] of God leadeth thee to repentance.*” According to scripture, God displays His kindness, tolerance, and patience toward the hypocrite (and all lost sinners) in an effort to lead them to repentance (i.e., to salvation by grace through faith). *Leadeth* is present tense, suggesting an ongoing activity on God’s part. God’s goodness is effectual when met with a faith response. But when met with a calloused heart that refuses to repent, the spurning of God’s goodness results in one “*treasuring up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.*”

The scripture teaches that God's goodness is resistible in the matter of salvation. It is therefore a gross contradiction to declare that God's grace is irresistible since goodness and grace are inseparable, and appear to be used interchangeably by Paul. Moreover, the treasuring up of wrath is the business of the sinner alone. God never bestows goodness upon a lost man for the express purpose of compounding the severity of his damnation! What God would lead a sinner toward repentance only to libel him at the same time by denying to him the very repentance that his goodness was intended to produce? That God does not exist within the pages of Holy Writ! Sinners libel themselves by despising the goodness of God!

Fourthly, the goodness of God manifests itself in Spirit-filled believers. The fruit of the Spirit is "*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness [chrestotes], goodness [agathosune], faith, meekness, temperance*" (Galatians 5:22-23). The word *gentleness* in this context is weighted toward the idea of kindness—a gracious God-like spirit founded upon moral excellence, rendering one useful in impacting the lives of others, especially in evangelism. Jesus was the embodiment of gentleness! Pulpits lacking in gentleness will eventually empty the pews! A marriage void of gentleness will likely end in divorce court!

Brethren, may God grant us both the wisdom and wherewithal to embrace The Doctrines of Goodness. O how we ought to praise God daily for the goodness that led us to repentance, and brought to us that which we could never possess outside of grace! Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift!

The Lord Is There!

The prophet Ezekiel, who was deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. along with King Jehoiachin, conducted his ministry primarily among the Jewish exiles. Most of his prophetic content appears to have originated from supernatural visions. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Daniel, who was also brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C. By the time Ezekiel reached the city of captivity, Daniel had been promoted to a position of prominence in the Babylonian government. Ezekiel's name means *strength of God* or *God strengthens*, which was appropriate considering the nature of his mission. In particular, the vision and prophecy concerning *the valley of dry bones* (Ezekiel 37:1-14) was intended to encourage the Jewish captives regarding the Lord's ability to wield His strength in restoring Israel to life from spiritual death and destitution, and Jerusalem as the centerpiece of His kingdom on earth!

In the last chapter of his prophecy, Ezekiel described the manner in which the restored land would be apportioned to the tribes of Israel (48:1-29), and concluded with a series of measurements for the city of Jerusalem with names for the gates thereof (48:30-35). Ezekiel was no doubt referring to the Jerusalem of the yet-to-come millennial kingdom. At the last, he disclosed the name of the city as *Jehovah-shammah*—"The Lord is there"! It is "Jerusalem" by tradition, but shall be "The Lord is there" by reputation! That title is eminently profound, and suggests to us at least three meaningful references.

The first is a theological reference, which tells us Who it is that shall be there. Jehovah—the Self-Existent God of covenant, redemption, and Messiah—shall be there. Jehovah Himself—in bodily presence as the glorified Jesus of Nazareth, the King of kings and Lord of lords—shall reign on this earth from His Jerusalem headquarters. The scoffers of this present age shall cease their scoffing, and the doubters shall forfeit all reason to doubt further. Jehovah will descend upon the scene with Almighty power to destroy His enemies and establish His throne. He is the stone that the builders rejected, but shall become the chief cornerstone in the fullest sense of that word. Ezekiel presents Him as Israel's enduring and unfailing hope. In the current age, that same hope is extended to sinners at large if they will bring a repentant heart to the Lord Jesus, and out of humble dependence call upon and trust Him to save them from their sins!

The second is a chronological reference, which indicates when He shall be there. The verb "is" is a present-tense reference that stands in contrast to the past. The name "The Lord is there" shall superimpose itself upon the annals of redemptive history so that "The Lord was there" shall become an archaic phrase. For the present time, however, we find great consolation in every reference to the past affirming that the Lord was there!

The burning bush from whence God called Moses was not consumed because the Lord was there! Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walked away unscathed from the fiery furnace because the Lord was there! The first stone from David's sling dropped the giant Goliath because the Lord was there! The walls of Jericho disintegrated to rubble because the Lord was there! Peter walked on the water because the Lord was there! Lazarus walked out of his tomb because the Lord was there! Consider all the churches where multitudes in time past came to trust Jesus for salvation because the Lord was

there, but now exist as ecclesiastical relics and spiritual vacuums because the Lord is no longer there! The Lord-is-there reputation of the millennial Jerusalem shall be marvelous indeed!

The third is a geographical reference, which specifies where He shall be. Think with me for a moment about the implications of that name. If you and I were residents of Jerusalem, we would employ the phrase "The Lord is here". Only if we journeyed to a location outside of the city would we say, "The Lord is there"! So the geographical reference confirms that the name "The Lord is there" is one that will be established by reputation to those outside the city, and would certainly provide a motivation for them to visit! What is the reputation of your church to those outside of its membership? Would they affirm that the Lord is there? Would they say that the Lord was there at one time? Would they question whether the Lord had ever been there? As a member, could you say unequivocally, "The Lord is here"?

Brethren, the truth is many who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ are living somewhere between "The Lord was there" and "The Lord is here"! It should be our desire that local churches be so filled with the presence and power of God that even a lost and dying world would have to affirm, "The Lord is there"! May God by His grace make it so as a much needed foretaste of the kingdom to come! Amen!

On Being a Man of War

It appears that war with Iraq is inevitable. March 17 is the date being bandied about as the deadline for Saddam Hussein to comply fully with U.N. Resolution 1441 (which mandates the total disarmament of Iraq with regard to weapons of mass destruction) or face an invasion. While the U.N. has been allotting more and more time for weapons inspectors to scour potential hiding places for these weapons, emotions on both sides of the issue are heating up. Most notably in recent days have been the voices of religious leaders and organizations, expressing opposition to a pre-emptive strike by citing the example of Jesus.

What I often find amazing is the abject Biblical ignorance of religious spokespersons who come across as Bible-thumping opponents to war. Many are guilty of misrepresenting Jesus as a pacifist, using the phrase "What Would Jesus Do?" as a sentimental pretext for their anti-war argument. But it was no pacifist who drove the moneychangers and religious hucksters from the temple on two separate occasions, (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13). Neither will the Lord Jesus display any pacifistic qualities when He "*shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).

In his Revelation of Jesus Christ, John the apostle saw "a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war...and the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses...and out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Revelation 19:11, 14-15). In no way do these words represent the Lord Jesus or the armies of heaven that follow him as pacifistic! In this role, both He and they are unquestionably in attack mode against the enemies of truth!

War was often a way of life for the nation of Israel. On the eastern banks of the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel sang praises to the LORD God Who had delivered them from Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt. Among the many accolades offered was this tribute: "*The LORD is a man of war: the LORD is his name*" (Exodus 15:3). Right-thinking Bible interpreters see this as a reference to the pre-incarnate Christ. It was Joshua who laid siege to Jericho, and led a pre-emptive strike against it—all under the Lord's direction (Joshua 6:1-21). And Samson achieved legendary status as a Spirit-empowered army of one, destroying three thousand Philistines in his death as the LORD God answered his prayer for vengeance against his enemies (Judges 16:27-30).

King David wrote these words concerning the LORD his God: "He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms" (Psalm 18:34). In another place, "Blessed be the LORD my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight" (Psalm 144:1). David was a man of war with an inner desire for peace, demonstrating that men of peace can be mighty warriors as well. At times, David was forced to deal with men who hated peace, including some within his own family (son Absalom) and political cabinet (counselor Ahithophel). He expressed his perplexity over

such situations, saying, "I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war" (Psalm 120:7). And again, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords" (Psalm 55:21). David was a man of war, but there was no war in his heart! He was a man of peace who had war thrust upon him as the leader of a nation. He faced every foe with firm resolve, prayed for the Lord's guidance, and summoned courage for every military encounter. His son Solomon later penned this proverb: "For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 24:6).

Brethren, my purpose is not to endorse any position regarding a war with Iraq. There are many who oppose military action with good conscience for reasons they consider to be valid. My problem is with the idiocy and arrogance displayed by the religious elites, who seek to bolster an opposition argument by appealing to a Jesus that bears virtually no resemblance to the Christ of scripture! Let us be much in prayer for President George W. Bush, and for his counselors! My sense is he is much more like David of old than the trigger-happy warmonger that anti-American forces have portrayed him to be.

Moments of Truth

"We concluded that tomorrow is a moment of truth for the world." These were the words of President George W. Bush as the crisis summit in the Azores was finalized in a formal news conference. Saddam has one more day to disarm, leave Iraq, or else. The United Nations Security Council has an equal amount of time to put up or shut up. To use a medical analogy, diplomacy as a potential alternative to war is hooked up to life support systems within an intensive care unit. Nothing less than a miracle will keep it off the obituary pages of history. "Moment of truth" is a phrase laden with gravity and finality!

I would venture to say that all of us have had a few moments of truth along the path of life. We are speaking of those critical crossroad experiences where a decision to do this as opposed to that could permanently alter the direction of our lives. Our moments of truth may not exhibit the global magnitude of those faced by Saddam Hussein and the U.N., but they are every bit as critical in terms of eternity.

Moments of truth are a common occurrence in the scriptures. Eve, the mother of humanity, came to a critical crossroad as she compared notes between God's directive and Satan's sales pitch. She allowed deception to run its damnable course after she decided to eat the forbidden fruit. She first bought into the lie that God had withheld valuable information from them, and then consumed the fruit as an exercise in self-improvement. Adam subsequently joined her in the transgression. The first couple faltered in their moment of truth. The attempt at God-likeness ended in the abyss of godlessness and death.

Cain, the first man to enter this world through the womb, likewise had a moment of truth. With these words did the Lord God set the issues of life and death before him: "*If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door*" (Genesis 4:7). The Lord put the ball in Cain's court using the clearest of terms. His acceptance before God was contingent upon obedience to the truth. It had nothing whatsoever to do with election or predestination. Cain rejected God's proffer of grace, choosing rather to gratify the hateful impulses he harbored toward his righteous brother.

Pharaoh faced a moment of truth when told by Moses, "*Let my people go!*" (Exodus 5:1). He relented, and then recanted! Jonah faced a moment of truth as the Lord said, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me*" (Jonah 1:2). He rebelled, but was later redirected! Peter faced a moment of truth as Jesus said, "*Come*", in response to this request: "*Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water*" (Matthew 14:28-29). The issue was whether Jesus' word was sufficient to produce supernatural results in the face of tough circumstances. At first he succeeded, then succumbed to fear, and finally began to sink. The nobleman whose son was at the point of death was faced with the same issue. Was Jesus' word sufficient to produce a long-distance healing? He believed the word, his son was restored to health, and his entire household believed unto salvation (John 4:46-53).

I am reminded of the words of Paul to the Romans: "*Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar*" (Romans 3:4). In the context, the apostle was stressing the impeccable

faithfulness of God to honor His promises in contrast to Israel's propensity for unbelief. Paul is not teaching here that no man is capable of telling the truth. His two-fold point is (1) God alone can be depended upon for absolute truthfulness, and (2) no man, even at his best state, is capable of such a distinction. By application, it means that all responses of mere men at the moment of truth lack absolute predictability.

The one exception was the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who was the truth (John 14:6), full of grace and truth (John 1:14), and the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9). In every moment of truth He acted in an absolutely predictable manner. Gethsemane was a moment of truth as the iniquity of the world began to weigh heavy upon His soul. He continued to pray! Pilate's Hall was a moment of truth as He endured an onslaught of scourgings and false accusations. He remained steadfast in His objective! On the Cross, we see the greatest of all moments of truth! There we marvel at His undying compassion for sinners as His heart ruptured and His blood flowed on their behalf and for their sins. Who can fathom the grace that uttered the words, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*"?

Brethren, we can be certain that many more moments of truth will face the global community. But how will you and I face the moments of truth that confront us? I invite you to join me in saying, "Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the absolute predictability of your grace to strengthen me in my moments of truth!"

Our Military: The Ministers of God?

The pre-emptive invasion of Iraq has ensued, and the anti-war protesters are out in vociferous vehemence against the war effort and our President. Many placards are calling for his impeachment while others are too unsavory to cite in a Christian missive. As a two-tour Viet-Nam veteran, I can appreciate the suspicion with which some hold our government. But I am also aware that governments are God-ordained, and serve a divine purpose in the disposition of national and international affairs.

In Romans 13:1-7, the apostle Paul set forth a series of principles designed to govern our attitudes and behavior with respect to the “higher powers” that govern us. It is a critical passage because it augments the teachings of Jesus, who, as far as scripture is concerned, said nothing definitive regarding his disciples and military service. Jesus did instruct them to “*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*” (Mark 12:17). That context deals with the issue of paying obligatory tribute (taxes) imposed by the government. In Nike speak, Jesus said, “Just do it!” But what about situations where a military conscript (draft) is in play? Should the disciple render military service, and become a combatant?

Let's consider a few of the principles set forth by Paul. First, God himself has *ordained* (established, set in place) the *higher powers* or authorities (13:1). In other words, God both established the nations and ordained that they should be governed in an orderly manner (as opposed to anarchy). The higher powers exist to maintain that order. Secondly, resisting what God has ordained is equivalent to resisting God himself. The result is self-imposed peril (13:2). Thirdly, the two-fold purpose of government is to promote the good and pummel the evil. The doers of good praise this kind of institution, and have nothing to fear from it. Doers of evil are fearful and terrified by its sword as it functions in God's stead as his revenger to execute wrath upon them (13:3-4). Fourthly, the people of God are obligated to fund the government with their tax dollars. The fact that rulers are called *the minister of God* (13:4) and *God's ministers* (13:6) tells me that paying my tribute (taxes) to the government is every bit as critical to the work of God in this world as giving my tithe (tenth) to the church. And in spite of its flaws and shortcomings, no nation in human history has reflected God's ideal for human government to a greater degree than has the United States of America!

Now what do these principles have to do with a believer taking up arms against an enemy? In my mind, plenty! A few rhetorical questions are in order. Is it consistent to reason that the God who ordained government has no desire for his people to be a part of what he ordained? Would God vouchsafe the sword (combat weaponry) into the hands of a government minister and deny the same sword to a gospel minister? Why would God obligate a believer to fund the sword carrier and preclude that believer from becoming one? Why would God ordain government to prosecute a war against evil and at the same time ordain that his people be conscientious objectors to war? Frankly, there is no difference between the armed marine returning hostile fire in an effort to eliminate enemy targets and the NYPD officer exchanging bullets with and killing an armed bank

robber. Inflicting revenge upon the doers of evil is the work of God, and both are engaged in the same work! Believers should consider military service a privilege!

The question arises, "What about turning the other cheek, and doing good to our enemies, as Jesus taught?" In examining scripture, I conclude that there is a clear distinction to be made between insults and injuries that come within the context of my faith in Christ and those incurred in a secular context. If I am engaged in door-to-door evangelism, and a man who resents my presence knocks me off his porch with a left hook, I am instructed by Christ to exhibit a gracious spirit toward him, and go on my way rejoicing. If I am walking through the local supermarket with my wife, and a thief grabs her purse, I will make every effort to run him down, subdue him with force, and recover the purse. Why? I am instructed to love my wife as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it. I will gladly put myself in harm's way to protect her. And if my country tasks me to bear arms in a military campaign against evildoers, I will do so as the minister of God! There is no contradiction whatsoever in these three responses!

Brethren, it is indeed a challenge to sift through the issues of war. It is ugly, and will always remain so. But we should understand that God himself has a stake in the outcome. It is unquestionably his desire for evil to be punished by the very sword he has ordained. Continue to pray for our military personnel—the ministers of God—who have been sent into harm's way to eradicate an evil regime and to liberate a nation. Many of them are our brothers and sisters in Christ!

Repentance in Its Proper Balance

The church is no stranger to doctrinal controversy. During the first century, several churches established by Paul later became recipients of inspired letters aimed at exposing erroneous teachings that had infiltrated the fellowship. In almost every instance, the proponents of error sought to obfuscate gospel truth on one or more of the following three fronts: (1) The person of Christ—he was less than God, or less than man, or both; (2) The work of Christ—his death was anything but substitutionary, or his resurrection was anything but bodily, or both; and (3) The basis upon which God saves sinners—anything but faith apart from works. The good news is there is nothing new under the sun with regard to doctrinal error. The scriptures are sufficient to expose and correct error in any shape, size, or form. The bad news is the gospel is still under rigorous attack, and susceptibility to error is as real as ever.

Within evangelical Christianity, there rages a third-front controversy regarding the role of repentance in personal salvation. At issue is whether repentance is a requirement for salvation. The “free grace” camp argues that making repentance requisite to salvation adds something to faith as the basis for justification, and therefore distorts the gospel. In their thinking, repentance is an evidence of salvation that can manifest itself before or after regeneration, but should never be confused with faith as a requirement for eternal life. Many within this group contend that the Gospel of John alone sets forth the way of salvation.

On the other extreme is the “sovereign grace” camp. Most within this group are advocates of “Lordship” salvation. They view faith and repentance as virtual equivalents, and insist that no salvation exists apart from total surrender to the Lordship of Christ. This view is typical of Calvinists who believe that God regenerates his elect prior to faith, thus producing “Lordship” faith without fail in all whom he saves. In their thinking, a lack of submission in every area of life is evidence that God never regenerated them. So who is correct?

The Lord Jesus illustrated the essence of repentance in a parable delivered to the chief priests about a farmer and his two sons, whom he instructed, “*Go work to day in my vineyard*” (Matthew 21:28). The first replied, “*I will not*”, but afterward repented, and went to work (21:29). The second said, “*I go, sir*”, but did not go to work (21:30). Jesus then asked, “*Whether of them twain did the will of his father?*” (21:31). They answered correctly, and Jesus added, “*Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you*” (21:31). They had believed the message of John while the chief priests had rejected it. Jesus further stated, “*And ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him*” (21:32).

The parable took less than thirty seconds to deliver, but provided the basis for drawing several undeniable conclusions about repentance. Repentance implies accountability to a higher authority. Repentance always produces actions that comply with the directives issued by that authority. Lip service and subsequent non-compliance are typical of the unrepentant. The bottom line in repentance is doing the will of the Father. Entrance into the kingdom of God is contingent upon repentance. Repentance is the forerunner of

faith. Although it is not part of John's Gospel, our Lord's parable soundly refutes the free grace position!

What exactly is repentance? By strict definition, it is a change of mind! But the change is dynamic rather than static, meaning that sinners who change their minds about the Lord Jesus and his ultimate authority respond by obeying him. What do they obey? The gospel! The truth that he died for their sins, that he rose again the third day, and that he ever lives as the one and only way to the Father! Repentance means it is no longer my will, but the will of the Father! It is abandoning any and every hope I have outside of Jesus for my soul's salvation, and trusting him alone to do what he alone can do—forgive my sins and impart eternal life! It paves the way for me to embrace God's grace-through-faith terms, resulting in my justification. It is the initial act of capitulation that establishes within my soul a working platform for all of the Lordship issues that will arise beyond justification within the realm of discipleship! The sovereign grace position of Lordship salvation distorts the gospel by putting the cart before the horse, implying that sinners must become disciples before they can be saved. It is essentially a gospel of salvation by works.

Brethren, the free grace and sovereign grace positions both contain elements of truth, but are flawed in the extremities they have adopted. Free grace tends to produce unregenerate church members while sovereign grace tends to produce Pharisees. Which is worse? The scripture represents faith as the sole condition upon which God justifies sinners, yet teaches us that no sinner can arrive at the city of faith without walking the pathway of repentance. Anything less is lip service! This is the true gospel in its proper balance!

Foundational Documents

English novelist Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873) is credited with the quotation, "The pen is mightier than the sword." We are not surprised to learn that it was a gifted wordsmith who framed that oft-cited axiom. Nor are we reticent to affirm its validity. An awe-inspiring drama is currently unfolding in Iraq, teaching friend and foe alike that there is no military machine on earth that can survive a confrontation with ours! What many fail to realize is that America's true strength is not derived from its high-powered tanks, air superiority, sophisticated night-vision equipment, precision laser-guided armaments, or best-in-class combat troops, but rather from the Constitution—a foundational document penned by a generation of freedom-loving patriots. Its essential principle is that government must be confined to the rule of law.

As the Bible student works his or her way through the book of Acts, it becomes abundantly clear that there is another awe-inspiring drama that God intends to be played out on the world stage. We are referring to overt demonstrations of Holy Ghost power within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ as it takes the gospel to the ends of the earth, and exemplifies righteousness and purity in the midst of a world full of wickedness and hostility. The apostle Paul often used military metaphors to describe the church's spiritual weaponry, and penned these words to the church at Corinth: "*The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds*" (2 Corinthians 10:4). And like America, the church derives its true strength from its own foundational document—the Bible! Its essential principle for church governance is the kingdom rule of Christ!

Recent news clips of U.S. tanks and armored vehicles rolling at will through the streets of Baghdad have prodded me to consider the resolve (or lack thereof) with which local churches are rolling through the highways and byways of their communities with the gospel message. In his first letter to the same Corinthian church, Paul issued this admonition: "*Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame*" (1 Corinthians 15:34). Paul connected the act of spreading the knowledge of God as depicted in the gospel with the work of righteousness. In his mind, the failure to do so was both sinful and shameful, and the church at Corinth was guilty on both counts! If genuine revival is to revisit the church in America, the sin of apathetic indifference toward lost sinners will have to be confessed and forsaken!

The principles of freedom as articulated in the Constitution are driving our efforts to liberate an Iraqi people from one of the most wicked and oppressive dictatorships in history. Our current administration actually believes those principles, and that conviction has produced the actions we are now witnessing! The principles of freedom from sin and death as articulated in the gospel ought to drive the church into evangelistic action with a view to liberating lost sinners. But that scenario appears to be the exception rather than the rule. The reason for an absence of action must be found in the absence of conviction!

Brethren, the Constitution and the Bible both serve as proof positive that the pen is mightier than the sword. While the Constitution may well be the most powerful treatise ever crafted by mankind, it is not an inspired document. But the Bible is inspired, having been penned by holy men of God as the Holy Ghost moved upon them to write! If the principles set forth in the Constitution are worthy of the ultimate sacrifice of our soldiers in the defence and propagation of freedom, how much more should the scriptures, and the gospel of grace contained therein, captivate our minds and hearts, solidify our convictions, and drive us into an effort to win the lost at any cost?

The Path to Peace with God

The combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom is over according to military sources. It is now time to shift our attention toward the installation of military police units to quell civil unrest and establish a semblance of order within the newly liberated nation. But will we see a corresponding decline in the magnitude and frequency of peace rallies and anti-war protests? The question has nothing to do with the legitimacy of protests or the right to express visceral opposition to war. It has everything to do with a proper view of genuine peace, and how societal misconceptions about peace can impact our evangelistic efforts.

The prevailing idea of peace these days seems to be the absence of conflict. A significant group of political leaders and the citizens they represent have embraced this idea, and oppose war under any circumstances. The logic behind the opposition to war is clear. Since peace is the absence of conflict, how is it possible for an armed conflict—the antithesis of peace—to bring about the condition it contradicts?

This mindset fosters the policy of peace through appeasement. In other words, the best way to persuade my enemy to lay down his arms is for me to lay mine down first. If my enemy is angry with me because of some principle I hold dear or an action I have taken, then the surest road to peace is for me to become less stringent about the principle or change the behavior that my enemy finds grievous. There is truth in that approach worthy of life application, but in the final analysis it is less than adequate in expressing the true nature of peace.

In its most comprehensive sense, peace is the resolution of conflict. Does this include the procurement of peace by appeasing an offended party? Yes! But it also takes into account the peace procured by the total conquest of one hostile party by another. Therefore a peace outcome between two formerly hostile parties may be the result of either appeasement or conquest. The gospel of Jesus Christ depicts a sovereign God going about the business of resolving the conflict between himself and sinners by staging the greatest of all conflicts—his own death on the Cross of Calvary! In the task of liberating sinners from the clutches of sin and death, and restoring harmony between holy God and sinful man, appeasement was not an option!

The course of action chosen by God Almighty for the reconciliation of sinners to himself was a brutal and bloody ordeal that constituted spiritual warfare on the grandest scale! On this Lord's Day, as a prelude to Resurrection Sunday, many preachers across our land will herald the sufferings of the Lord Jesus on our behalf, including the illegal arrest, the false accusations, the scourgings, the contemptuous spittle that ran down his bloodied visage, the nails driven through his sinless hands and feet, and those three hours of darkness during which he bore in his body the iniquities of every descendant of Adam, and tasted death for every man! As gruesome as it is to contemplate, it is the cause for rejoicing within the soul of every believing sinner who has experienced the grace of forgiveness and life made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who walked from the grave glorified and victorious on the third day!

The apostle Paul was therefore able to declare that God had “*made peace through the blood of his cross*” so that he might “*reconcile all things unto himself*” (Colossians 1:20). Peace through sacrificial bloodshed was God’s recipe for conflict resolution! Those *who sometimes were far off* [Gentiles] are now *made nigh by the blood of Christ*. *Jesus is our peace*, and enabled God *to reconcile both* [Jew and Gentile] *in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and to preach peace to those who were afar off* [Gentiles] *and to them that were nigh* [Jews] (Ephesians 3:13-17). The only way the enmity between God and men could be slain was by the slaying of Christ! In other words, God’s solution for conflict was another conflict of far greater import, wherein the death of one secured the liberation of many!

Brethren, a thousand years before the Prince of Peace walked the streets of Jerusalem, and died outside its city gates, king David wrote these words: “*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within they palaces. For my brethren and companion’s sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee*” (Psalm 122:6-8). By prophetic hindsight, we may draw the conclusion that prayer for the peace of Jerusalem inevitably brought about the means to that end—the slaying of the sinless Lamb of God on behalf of its residents. In the context of Iraq, it is entirely possible that prayers offered to God for peace may have made war unavoidable as a means to obtain that end! With respect to evangelism, we can expect the Cross of Christ, as the crux of the gospel message, to become increasing distasteful to a world in which appeasement is rapidly becoming the preferred path to peace!

Our Pits and God's Pity

The pits! No doubt you have heard that expression used by someone at some time to describe a situation that was either unpleasant or downright disastrous. The origin of this expression is uncertain. Perhaps it was first used by someone who broke a tooth by biting into a peach or date, and from thenceforth referred to every painful experience in life—whether physical or emotional—as pit-like. If the standard dictionary is any indication, it derives its metaphorical meaning from relatively deep holes in the ground. Pits with concealed holes serve as traps—hidden dangers and unexpected troubles—for individuals and animals that fall therein. It is safe to say that the “pits” represents any unpleasant or perilous situation without regard for its origin!

The many biblical references to pits align themselves with the deep-hole concept. The pit into which Joseph's brothers cast him was in fact a well without water. Instead of leaving him to die as first planned, they lifted him out of the pit, and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to a company of Ishmeelites, who took him to Egypt (Genesis 37:20-28). In giving the Law, the Lord ordained that the owner of a pit who left it uncovered must *give money* to the owner of an ox or ass whose animal fell into the pit, and died as a result (Exodus 21:33-24). As retribution for a provocative insurrection against his leader Moses, the Lord opened the earth under the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and they all went down quick (alive) into the pit, and perished from the congregation of Israel (Numbers 16:26-33).

The pits in scripture are likewise figurative. The *strange woman* (one who delights in amoral sexual exploits) has a *mouth* that is a *deep pit*, entrapping those whom the Lord abhors (Proverbs 22:14). How many men have fallen into the pit of sexual promiscuity and deviance by her verbal enticements? David reflected, “*The proud have dugged pits for me, which are not after thy law*” (Psalm 119:85). The pits David refers to are likely the same verbal and political entrapments used by (1) the scribes and Pharisees against the Lord Jesus for religious advantage, (2) Sanbalat and Tobiah against Nehemiah to derail the restoration of Jerusalem, and (3) Haman against Mordecai and the Jews for his own political ends. In each case, it proved true that “*whoso causeth the righteous to go astray in an evil way, he shall fall himself into his own pit*” (Proverbs 28:10). One of the ominous realities of our daily walk is that pits aplenty await the practitioner of righteousness!

Justification by faith does not grant immunity from those plenteous pits! Space precludes us from citing every instance in scripture where the righteous served spiritual pit time. But glaring examples include Lot, who pitched his tent toward Sodom, and ultimately fathered two sons from virgin daughters while in a drunken stupor; Samson, whose insatiable ego ultimately led him to the lap of Delilah, blindness, public humiliation, and death; David, whose unbridled lust for Bathsheba led to adultery and murder, leaving an indelible blemish on his record; Jonah, who rejected a less-than-ideal preaching assignment, and spent three days and nights sloshing about in the digestive juices of a great fish before agreeing to God's terms; Peter, who, in the most crucial hour, denied three times that he knew Jesus his Lord; and Demas, whose love for this present world finally disengaged him from the gospel ministry.

The pits of life come in many shapes and sizes, and one size does not fit all! David testified: *"I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings"* (Psalm 40:1-2). What was the horrible pit to which he referred? We do not know. But various phrases within the Psalm suggest some form of spiritual disobedience from which the Lord had delivered him. He cites the blessedness of making the Lord his trust, suggesting that the pit was related to unbelief (40:4). He talks about God opening his ears, and does so with Messianic overtones, suggesting that the doing of God's will was not being done during this pit time (40:6-8). He pleads for tender mercies to compensate for the innumerable evils that surround him and the iniquities that have taken hold upon him, which resulted in heart failure (40:11-12). A fresh infusion of faith and mercy brought him up and out with a new song of praise and adoration (40:3, 16).

Brethren, be assured that God has an inexhaustible supply of pity for the pits you and I will encounter in this life. It is one thing to land in a pit, but quite another to live there. It is God's desire to bring us up and out of every pit, lavish us with tender mercies, and put a new song in our mouth, even praise unto our God! Living in the pits is...well...the pits!

Our Safe Room

A recent edition of the Florida Times-Union carried an article in its Lifestyle section about an emerging American phenomenon--the Safe Room. The author stated, "While a jittery nation worries about crime, war, terrorism and chemical attacks, more Americans than ever are finding refuge in 'safe' rooms." He referred to them as "steel and concrete havens," and added, " The public's hunger for security is producing a small but growing industry of manufacturers of in-house fortresses." One company that designs and markets safe rooms "thinks fear of the unknown will convince mainstream America to invest in safety."

The need to feel safe and secure in the face of the unknown is basic to human nature. God by design built those desires into mankind. Two opposing thoughts come to mind when I hear the words "finding refuge", "hunger for security", "invest in safety", and "fear". The first relates to the cultural climate for evangelism. The gospel of Jesus Christ promises to all believers an eternal safety and security from the most lethal threat known to mankind--sin and its deadly consequences! The second is the awareness that sinful men inherently display a propensity for embracing systems of false security that are either temporary or illusionary.

It remains to be seen who the major players will be in this expanding market. But we can affirm without fear of contradiction that God Almighty has been in the safe room business from the beginning, and has amassed a peerless track record of building safe rooms for his people in the most unusual places. Nobody does it bigger or better! These safe rooms are almost always invisible to the naked eye, but by faith we understand that they are as real and tangible as anything that can be experienced through the human senses!

The scriptures have much to say about safety and being safe. David laid down in peace, and slept, because *the Lord only made him to dwell in safety* (Psalm 4:8). The Lord is able to *arise and set in safety* the poor and needy that are oppressed (Psalm 12:5). The *horse may be prepared against the day of battle, but safety is of the Lord* (Proverbs 21:31). David said, "*Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe*" (Psalm 119:117). Solomon wrote, "*The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe*" (Proverbs 18:10). And again, "*The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe*" (29:25).

What are some of the safe rooms that God has built for his people? Well, the ark built by Noah according to the Lord's blueprints was a safe room from the external chaos and destruction brought about by the Flood. Inasmuch as the ark is a type of Christ, the Lord Jesus himself is *the* safe room for all who trust him for the salvation of their souls! The Lord transformed the Red Sea into a safe room by sending a strong east wind to part the waters so that Israel could have dry passage to the other side. The Lord built a safe room in the midst of a fiery furnace for three young Hebrew men who refused to participate in Babylon's false worship. The Lord likewise turned a den of lions into a safe room for Daniel, whose faithful prayer life led to religious entrapment. And only the Lord

could build a safe room out of a whirlwind and chariot of fire to translate his prophet Elijah into heaven without tasting death. NASA, eat your heart out!

We must keep in mind, however, that God on occasion opts to bypass the safe room. That is, he decides at times for his own purposes that he will not provide for the physical safety of his servants. It was Herod who *vexed the church by killing James the brother of John with the sword* (Acts 12:1-2). There was no safe room provided for James.

Herod afterward imprisoned Peter for the same fate, and assigned four quaternions of soldiers (sixteen) to guard him around the clock (12:3-4). But God built a safe room inside the prison, woke him up as he slept between two soldiers, and escorted him beyond the prison gate into the city streets. Prayer played a pivotal role in building Peter's safe room, and he ended up at the prayer meeting (12:5, 12).

The book of Hebrews also speaks of "others" who did not accept deliverance, but were rather tortured, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, and sawn asunder. And while these "others" obtained no safe room from God in the time of trial, they did obtain two other priceless and arguably more valuable possessions--a *better resurrection*, and a *good report through faith* (Hebrews 11:35-40).

Brethren, while this world goes about the business of marketing and building its safe rooms, let us remember that we have the ultimate safe room in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the first and last word--the alpha and the omega--on the subject of safety! The church is facing a golden opportunity in these last days to tell the story of Jesus, and his love for sinners! All other so-called "safe rooms" are either temporary or illusionary!

Insights from John Owen

Many church historians have heralded John Owen (1616-1683) as the greatest of the Puritan theologians. As a traditional Puritan in the best sense of that word, his writings exude inveterate passions for the sovereignty of God, the supreme authority of scripture, the untarnished preaching of the Word, and purity within the church as expressed in the personal holiness of believers. The reader of Owen will discover a depth of sanctified thought and love for the Lord Jesus that is regrettably rare within the ranks of contemporary Christian authors.

A collection of his insights is provided below for your edification. Enjoy!

- “A man's assurance may be as good, as true, when he lies on the earth with a sense of sin, as when he is carried up to the third heaven with a sense of love and foretaste of glory.”
- “There is no death of sin without the death of Christ.”
- “He suffered not as God, but He suffered who was God.”
- “Temptations and occasions put nothing into a man, but only draw out what was in him before.”
- “Temptation is like a knife, that may either cut the meat or the throat of a man; it may be his food or his poison.”
- “Meet thy temptation in its entrance with thoughts of faith concerning Christ on the cross; this will make it sink before thee. Entertain no parley, no dispute with it, if thou wouldest not enter into it.”
- “I will not judge a person to be spiritually dead whom I have judged formerly to have had spiritual life, though I see him at present in a swoon as to all evidences of the spiritual life. And the reason why I will not judge him so is this—because if you judge a person dead, you neglect him, you leave him; but if you judge him in a swoon, though never so dangerous, you use all means for the retrieving of his life.”
- “Sin may be the occasion of great sorrow, when there is no sorrow for sin.”
- “As men's diversions increase from the world, so do their entanglements from Satan. When they have more to do in the world than they can well manage, they shall have more to do from Satan than they can well withstand.”
- “He leads none to heaven but whom He sanctifies on earth. This living Head will not admit of dead members.”
- “The least grace is a better security for heaven than the greatest gifts or privileges whatsoever.”
- “Our forgiving of others will not procure forgiveness for ourselves; but our not forgiving others proves that we ourselves are not forgiven.”

- “Generally, it is taken for granted by all that Christ is able to save us if He will; yea, who shall question His ability to save us, though we live in sin and unbelief? And many expect that He will do so because He can if He will. But indeed Christ hath no such power, no such ability: He cannot save unbelieving, impenitent sinners; for this cannot be done without denying Himself, acting contrary to His Word and destroying His own glory...Christ is able to save all those, and only those, who come to God by Him. While you live in sin and unbelief, Christ Himself cannot save you.”

Insights from Thomas Brooks

Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) is perhaps an unfamiliar name to all but those who have cultivated a deep appreciation for the Puritans and their writings. James Nichol first published The Works of Brooks in 1866, nearly two hundred years after his death. Charles Haddon Spurgeon remarked: "The volumes now before us are by that marvelously rich author Thomas Brooks, whose wealth of imagery surpasses all others of his age. The mere marginal notes of Brooks are more valuable than pages of ordinary writers...Of all the Puritans he is the most readable, if we except John Bunyan."

We have provided for your edification a brief collection of quotations from his Works. Enjoy!

- "Labor mightily for a healing spirit. Away with all discriminating names whatever that may hinder the applying of balm to heal your wounds...Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous."
- "We know metals by their tinkling, and men by their talking."
- "If God were not my friend, Satan would not be so much my enemy."
- "Satan can never undo a man without himself; but a man may easily undo himself without Satan."
- "As our greatest good comes through the sufferings of Christ, so God's greatest glory that he hath from his saints comes through their sufferings."
- "It is your duty and glory to do that every day that you would willingly do upon a dying day. Ah, how would you live and love upon a dying day? How would you admire God, rest upon God, delight in God, long for God, and walk with God, upon a dying day? How would you hate, loathe, and abhor your bosom sins upon a dying day?...Thrice happy is that soul that labors with all his might to do that at first that he would give a thousand worlds to do on a dying day."
- "As sinful commissions will stab the soul; so sinful omissions will starve the soul."
- "Better to bear than to swear, and to die than to lie."
- "A boat rows against the stream; the current punishes it. So is a nation violating a law of God; it is subject to a judgment. The boat turns and goes with the stream; the current assists it. So is a nation that has repented and put itself in harmony with God's law; it is subject to a blessing. But the current is the same; it has not changed, only the boat has changed its relationship to the current. Neither does God change—we change; and the same law which executed itself in punishment now expresses itself in reward."
- "Oh, then be ashamed, Christians, that worldlings are more studious and industrious to make sure of pebbles, than you are to make sure of pearls."

- “Now believing is nothing else but the accepting of Christ for thy Lord and Saviour as He is offered to thee in the gospel; and this accepting is principally, if not only, the act of thy will; so that if thou art sincerely and cordially willing to have Christ upon His own terms, upon gospel terms, that is, to save thee and rule thee, to redeem thee and reign over thee, then thou art a believer.”
- “Solomon got more hurt by his wealth than he got good by his wisdom.”
- “Where one thousand are destroyed by the world’s frowns, ten thousand are destroyed by the world’s smiles. The world, siren-like, sings us and sinks us.”
- “You must distinguish between delays and denials.”
- “Ah, how often, Christians, hath God kissed you at the beginning of prayer, and spoken peace to you in the midst of prayer, and filled you with joy and assurance upon the close of prayer.”
- “God looks not at the elegancy of your prayers, to see how neat they are; nor yet at the geometry of your prayers, to see how long they are; nor yet at the arithmetic of your prayers, to see how many they are; nor yet at the music of your prayers, nor yet at the sweetness of your voice, nor yet at the logic of your prayers; but at the sincerity of your prayers, how hearty they are. There is no prayer acknowledged, approved, accepted, recorded, or rewarded by God, but that wherein the heart is sincerely and wholly.”

Insights from Richard Baxter

Church historians have showered Richard Baxter (1615-1691) with a wealth of posthumous accolades. As a Puritan pastor and evangelist, he refused to be content with a ministry confined to his congregation, but took to the streets of Kidderminster, England to share the truth with sinners and saints alike. It is alleged that nearly the entire population (approximately 2,000) was converted during his ministry. For this reason, his was the most fruitful Puritan pastorate on record. He believed that thirty minutes of personal work could have more impact upon an individual than ten years of public preaching! His oft-quoted motto for ministry was this: "I preached, as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."

Baxter was the author of some one hundred forty books. One of his classics is The Reformed Pastor, in which he clearly articulates the ministerial practices that made the difference in his own pastorate, and exhorts preachers to go and do likewise. He declared: "If God would but reform the clergy, the people of England would soon be reformed." In Baxter's mind, reformation had to do with emulating the Lord Jesus in everyday practice rather than embracing a doctrinal system. In the words of J.I. Packer, it was being "spiritually alive and morally in shape."

May the following quotes from Baxter encourage us all to that end!

- "I cannot but look upon all the gory and dignity of this world, lands and lordships, crowns and kingdoms, even as on some brain-sick, beggarly fellow, that borrows fine clothes, and plays the part of a king or lord for an hour on a stage, and then comes down, and the sport is ended, and they are beggars again."
- "A sin of infirmity may admit apology; a sin of ignorance may find out excuse; but a sin of defiance can find no defence."
- "What a deal of sorrow and after-complaining might this small labor [of self-examination] prevent! How many miles of travel, besides the vexation, may a traveler save by inquiring of the way!"
- "It much more concerned us, to be sure that we deserved not suffering, than that we be delivered from it."
- "As sick men used to love health better than those that never felt the want of it; so it is too common with poor men to love riches better than the rich that never needed. And yet, poor souls, they deceive themselves, and cry out against the rich, as if they were the only lovers of the world, when they love it more themselves though they cannot get it."
- "Oh, sirs, deal with sin as sin, and speak of heaven and hell as they are, and not as if you were in jest."
- "When the earth is soft, the plough will enter. Take a man when he is under affliction, or in the house of mourning, or newly stirred by some moving sermon, and then set it home, and you may do him good. Christian faithfulness doth

require us, not only to do good when it falls our way, but to watch for opportunities of doing good.”

- “Other things may be the worse for breaking, yet a heart is never at the best till it be broken.”
- “David could bear persecution without murmuring, but when he came to prosperity he could not turn away his eyes from vanity.”
- “[Holiness is] nothing else but the habitual and predominant devotion and dedication of soul, and body, and life, and all that we have to God; and esteeming, and loving, and serving, and seeking Him, before all the pleasures and prosperity of the flesh.”
- “Overvalue not therefore the manner of your own worship, and overvilify not other men's of a different mode.”
- “This life was not intended to be the place of our perfection, but the preparation for it.”
- “O spend your time as you would hear of it in the Judgment!”
- “It is not the work of the Spirit to tell you the meaning of Scripture, and give you the knowledge of divinity, without your own study and labor, but to bless that study, and give you knowledge thereby...To reject study on the pretence of the sufficiency of the Spirit, is to reject the Scripture itself.”

The Persuaded Who Become Persuaders

The art of persuasion is an enviable skill. Most of us probably wish we had that gift in greater abundance than we currently possess. Why? Because we believe that enhanced abilities to articulate arguments and muster emotion in a timely manner might make a meaningful difference both in our lives and in the lives of others. Salespersons typically desire greater effectiveness to close more deals! Most concerned parents would mortgage the family home for the verbal ability to deter a son from whoremongering and drunkenness, or a daughter from harlotry. Many a pastor has poured out his heart before God for an expository argument that might drive the people of God toward absolute surrender, warring spouses toward reconciliation, and young people toward a life of holiness and fruitfulness void of frivolity and sensual lust.

The art of persuasion plays a critical and often pivotal role in Christian ministry. As a matter of fact, the work of Christ and His kingdom cannot be carried on in this world apart from persuasive acts! There are at least three axioms arising from scripture that validate that assertion.

First, the servant of God is preeminently a persuader of men. No individual personified this truth more than the apostle Paul. To the Corinthians he wrote: "*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men*" (1 Corinthians 5:11). In the context, the persons in view are born-again believers headed for the Judgment Seat of Christ. After a synagogue meeting in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas spoke to a group of Jews and religious proselytes who were hungry for salvation truth, and "*persuaded them to continue in the grace of God*" (Acts 13:43). It was grace that made them desirous of truth, and the truth of Christ would set them free if they would continued in that grace! Paul persuaded them to that end! It should be noted that neither here nor anywhere else in scripture does Paul teach or suggest that grace is irresistible!

Paul continued to exercise his persuasive gifts in Corinth as "*he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks*" (18:4). The persuasive power exhibited by Paul caused his Jewish detractors to bring him before the authorities with the following accusation: "*This fellow persuadest men to worship God contrary to the law*" (18:13). He would later spend three months in the synagogue at Ephesus "*disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God*" (19:8). After delivering his testimony in Caesarea, king Agrippa responded: "*Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian*" (26:28). In his lodging at Rome, he expounded the truth to many, "*persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening*" (28:23). Paul the persuader is a role model for us all!

Secondly, no one can become a persuader without first being persuaded. Why was Paul such an effective persuader of men? He was a persuaded man! Paul was persuaded that no power in heaven or on earth could separate the believer from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). He was also persuaded that the One in whom he had trusted, and to whom he had yielded every fiber of his being, was able to keep that which he had committed unto Him against that day (2 Timothy 1:12).

These persuasions enabled Paul to remain faithful unto death, and to persuade many along the way to trust his Lord, to walk his walk, and to talk his talk! Paul is proof positive that the persuaded make the best persuaders!

Thirdly, the sword of persuasion cuts both ways. That is, for every persuasive force that recommends sinners to the grace of God, there is an opposing persuasion aimed at discrediting the gospel, dissuading the sinner who hears it, and destroying the messenger. The episode at Lystra is illustrative. The unbelieving Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who had been shadowing Paul, came to Lystra as well. They *“persuaded the people, and, having stone Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead”* (Acts 14:19). This is clearly an extreme case of opposition!

Most of the dissuasive forces that we encounter are much more subtle. Pastors may have an hour or two each week to impress the urgency of godliness upon their hearers, who, within the same time frame, are exposed to a hundred hours of ungodliness from family, peers, television and radio, all of which tend to negate the effects of Christian doctrine and admonition. Make no mistake! Whenever and wherever the truth of Christ is sown with godly persuasion, the devil is close behind with ungodly dissuasion designed to pluck that holy seed from the heart and or rob it of its urgency.

Brethren, the spirit of tolerance fomented by political correctness within our culture casts a shadow of suspicion upon any and all persuasive acts rooted in absolute assurance. But persuade we must without fear or compromise. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father, and eternal Hell awaits the unbelieving and disobedient. We will become persuaders of men to the extent we are persuaded of these truths!

The Believer's Advocate

A legal firm in our city has taken out a huge billboard ad that reads: "When the going gets tough, the tough get a lawyer." What first impressed me was the cleverness employed by the firm in using a popular time-tested slogan to promote the advocacy business. I can still recall my high school track coach (circa 1965) reminding his runners that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. My second thought was the reality behind the slogan. Life at times does indeed get tough, and people going through a tough time might well be willing to pay for a lawyer's time! My third consideration was its application to the spiritual realm. There are no tough issues in life more needful of resolution than those that impact the soul of man, and the Bible has plenty to say about the advocacy of God Almighty on behalf of those who trust him!

One such man was David—a man of God for whom the going got tough on many occasions. In Psalm 35:1, we find him soliciting the services of his personal defense attorney, praying: "*Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me.*" *Plead* means literally to *toss* or *grapple*, and figuratively to *wrangle* (*engage in a controversy*). It implies a third-party defense of one grappler from the ill-intended attacks of another. David envisioned himself in a spiritual fight against ungodly grapplers, and petitioned the Lord his God for assistance in defending him from his adversaries.

David was essentially saying, "O Lord, come to my defense! Toss them about who desire to toss me about! Reconfigure the battle array so that it is no longer 'them striving with me' but rather 'them striving with You'; and no longer 'them fighting against me' but rather 'them fighting against You!'" The king of Israel understood that, if you're going to face trial in the tough and contentious courtrooms of life, you had better secure the toughest Advocate you can, and defer your defense to him! Blessed is the saint who learns early on in his or her spiritual walk to petition the Lord as the first line of defense rather than the last resort!

Divine advocacy was a familiar theme to the apostle John, who penned these words: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). Advocate in Greek is **parakletos**, which refers literally to one who comes alongside of another to render aid in the time of need—an intercessor or comforter. The adversarial grappler in the context is none other than one's own personal sin. And, in this most vulnerable condition, the Lord Jesus Christ serves as Defense Counsel for the believer as he represents his own before the Father!

Jesus the Lawyer has never lost a case! Why? Because he is the propitiation (full satisfaction) for our sins! In his substitutionary death on the Cross, the full measure of Divine justice against sin, as demanded by the Law, was exacted upon and from Jesus Christ! He bore *our sins in his body on the tree* (1 Peter 2:24). He was God's Scapegoat—the Lamb of God—who took away *the sin of the world* (John 1:29). Sovereign God has decreed that only those who trust his Son Jesus shall be justified in

his sight, and have the benefits of his vicarious death applied to their souls! Sin always makes the going tough in life! But the advocacy of Christ is God's guarantee that our righteous standing, grounded in the merits of Christ, shall never be reversed!

The apostle Paul taught Divine advocacy with these words: "*Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth*" (Romans 8:33). One benefit of justification is immunity from any spiritual charge that might bring the elect under condemnation once again. Accusers may abound, but none can make the charges stick! Why? Because a "Justified!" verdict in God's courtroom overrides every accusatory claim!

Paul employed this rhetorical declaration to establish an incontrovertible link between justification and election. Every believer in Jesus is both justified and elected whereas unbelievers are unjustified, unelected, and therefore chargeable. God's elect are justified—all of them! The elect are believers, and only believers are elected! Failure to grasp this basic primer on election has led many good-hearted and otherwise godly men (The Puritans, Spurgeon, et al) into the philosophical and unbiblical morass of five-point Calvinism.

Brethren, perhaps we should adopt the slogan to read: "When the going gets tough, the believer has the toughest Lawyer in town." Personally, I have never been fond of reducing the majesty of Jesus Christ to a simplistic jingle. But the truth, without regard for its expression, is still the truth, and there are few truths so precious to the believer as the advocacy of Christ on behalf of his clients—the elect. Therefore any jingle stored within our spiritual memory banks that prompts us to seek God early in tough times serves us well. If the going gets tough where you live, defer your defense to the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Truth in the Midst of Our Trouble

A bit of humorous analysis often heard from those who are encountering tough times goes something like this: “So I said to myself, ‘Self, cheer up! Things could be worse!’ So I cheered up, and, sure enough, things got worse!” All of us know too well that trouble—the stuff of tough times—can come in bunches like a series of body blows delivered in a prize fight. Just when you think things cannot get any worse, that is exactly what happens! Sound familiar?

Trouble in life is unavoidable. If you are breathing, there is a strong likelihood that you are battling! Trouble comes in many forms, but is most often the residue of our relationships with people. David poured out his soul before God, saying, “*Lord, how are they increased that trouble me! Many are they that rise up against me*” (Psalm 3:1).

Dr. Gray Allison, former president of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, would often remind students that the ministry would pose no problems at all if it weren't for folks. It was a tongue-in-cheek yet fact-based admonition for us to enter the ministry void of naivety where people are concerned, and exercise diligence in building good and godly relationships with those for whom God had given us the spiritual oversight. David would no doubt concur since it was *they* who were behind his increased troubles!

The historical setting of Psalm 3, as set forth in the title, enables us to identify the source of his trouble: “*A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.*” A perusal of 2 Samuel 15-18 gives a clear sense of the danger faced by David after “*Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel*” (15:6). The *conspiracy was strong as the people increased continually with Absalom* (15:12). No event in David's life was more painful or troubling! It was more than political: it was personal! Up to this point, Saul's repeated attempts to kill him may have held that distinction. But Absalom's ego-driven attempt to overthrow his father's kingdom, and do him personal harm, exceeded all others in gravity and infamy. David had had his share of bad days, but this was the worst! And things got worse still when David received word that Joab had killed his son.

The troubled saint will find, however, that God always interweaves truth within the fabric of trouble, and the truth discovered serves as an anchor for the soul in the raging seas of life. What was David's anchor? Well, the word on the street was, “*There is no help for him in God*” (Psalm 3:2). But in this alleged state of helplessness, David found hopefulness in the following truth: “*But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head*” (3:3). As David exited Jerusalem, passed over the brook Kidron to the Mount of Olives and into the wilderness, he realized afresh that God was both *on* his side and *at* his side!

The Lord as our *shield* portrays him as a Protector. There were two types of shields commonly used in those days for armed conflicts: the smaller variety held by one hand, and used for deflecting blows, while the other hand wielded a sword; and the larger variety held by an armorbearer to protect the flanks and rear of his warrior master so that any immediate threat would be directly in front of him at all times. It was a common

practice for warriors to have multiple armorbearers (and therefore multiple shields) for complete sideward and rearward protection. It is the larger shield to which David refers.

The Lord as our *glory* portrays him as a Motivator. *Glory* denotes weightiness and substance. It signifies the core motivation that underlies our existence. God was that core for David! In this respect, the believer is like a nuclear reactor. The one and only event that can prevent it from operating safely and effectively is a breach of the nuclear core that results in a meltdown and subsequent disaster! David is essentially saying, “Yes, I have endured some crippling body blows in this struggle, but my core is still intact!” As Graham Scroggie has succinctly stated: “Absolom had the crowd, but David had God; and one with God is a majority.”

The Lord as *the lifter up of our head* portrays him as a Sustainer. *Lifter up* requires no linguistic analysis. Can you envision the defeated child with chin dropped to the chest, and the parent stretching forth a hand to that sagging chin for the purpose of lifting the head and speaking eye-to-eye those words of comfort and hope that will restore a sense of dignity to a wounded spirit? If so, you've got the picture. So God says to David, “Son, I know you're hurting, but you're still my man, and the apple of my eye! Absolom, Ahithophel, and others may have jumped ship, but I am still on board! Do not count me among your losses!”

Brethren, trouble may be unavoidable, but the truth of God in every life situation is both undeniable and unchangeable! When trouble comes our way, we must find the truth in our trouble—a virtual impossibility unless the Lord Jesus Christ is at the core of our existence. Embracing the truth in the midst of our trouble is the greatest deterrent to spiritual meltdown!

He Abideth Faithful

The Methodist minister Thomas O. Chisholm (1866-1960) gave us one of the greatest hymns ever to grace the pages of a Christian hymnal. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" is the hymn. According to Chisholm, it was simply his personal experiences based on Bible truth (apart from any special circumstances) that prompted him to write the hymn. In a letter written in 1941, he said, "My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years, which has followed me until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness." And all God's people said, "Amen!"

It was the prophet Jeremiah who penned the biblical text underlying this great hymn: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). Moreover, Moses was the first inspired spokesman to formally enunciate this truth to God's people: "Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9). The apostle John, the last inspired writer, twice refers to Jesus Christ as the faithful witness (Rev. 1:5, 3:14) and as the one who is called Faithful and True at his second coming (19:11). By my reckoning, that makes God's faithfulness a cover-to-cover theme in the scriptures.

In his epistles, Paul cited God's faithfulness on at least six occasions as a means of bolstering the confidence of believers. God is faithful, which means he can be depended upon to perform without fail all that he has promised to do on behalf of them that believe! One of those six citations was directed toward his protégé Timothy: "*If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself*" (2 Tim. 2:13). It is therefore apparent that our eternal security in Christ rests squarely upon the firm foundation of God's faithfulness. It is not based upon works of righteousness that we do after justification, nor is it contingent upon perseverance in the faith. It is strictly the result of God's mercy as an expression of his faithfulness!

The context is one in which Paul shares with his ministerial son the reality of suffering and the necessity of enduring hardness as a gospel soldier. He endures "*all things for the elect's sakes, that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory*" (2:10), and by implication expects Timothy to endure them for the same reason. The *elect* are those who are in Christ by virtue of the new birth. The salvation to be obtained is progressive holiness and spiritual growth in the realm of sanctification. These temporal masteries translate directly into eternal glories!

In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul dealt with the same issue in this manner: "*If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire*" (1 Cor. 3:14-15). In this sad scenario, the justified man who fails in sanctification still enters heaven, but forfeits many of the eternal glories that could have been his. Paul was willing to endure all manner of hardship to prevent this from happening, and

encouraged Timothy to do likewise as a pastor. And in Paul's mind, there was no one quite like Timothy when it came to caring for the spiritual state of God's people (Phil. 2:20).

Paul sets forth a *faithful saying* that consists of four conditional statements and expands upon the theme of eternal glory (2 Tim. 2:11-13). First, being *dead with him* includes a daily denial of self that unleashes the life of Christ through Holy Ghost power. A saved widow, for example, who lives in pleasure is *dead while she lives*, and thus fails to experience abundant life (1 Tim. 5:6). To reign with Christ is a millennial privilege reserved for those who suffer. Contrariwise, Christ will deny the same eternal glories and privileges to those who deny him through carnality and cowardice. And what if any of his own fails to persevere in the faith as a matter of daily dependence, and therefore falls into a state of practical unbelief and fruitlessness? He abides faithful! He cannot deny himself! The one who promised eternal life for a look of faith, and whose predestinating grace assures ultimate conformity to the image of Christ for those whom he justifies, will make good on his word without regard for our spiritual collapses—or successes!

Brethren, at times we may come to loathe the inconsistencies that plague us in our spiritual journey. Even Satan—the accuser of the brethren—will make a case against us, and seek to convince us that we are washed up as far as God is concerned. But through the misty shroud of doubt shines this most blessed assurance—he abideth faithful! He is the dependable and unmovable Rock of our salvation! Though heaven and earth pass away, he remains steadfast and unshakable! “He abideth faithful” is a blessed thought indeed!

The Journey Toward Sodom

In 1973, the Texas legislature passed the Homosexual Conduct Law prohibiting citizens from engaging in oral and anal sex. That statute made it a misdemeanor for same-gender couples to have sex, even in private. On Thursday, June 26, 2003 the United States Supreme Court struck down that law as unconstitutional. In 1986, the Court had considered a similar Georgia law that made sodomy a criminal offense. The respondent Hardwick had challenged the Georgia statute in Federal District Court on the grounds that it criminalized *consensual* sodomy, and won dismissal of the charges—a ruling later upheld by the Court of Appeals.

The Supreme Court, however, reversed the opinion of the lower Courts, upholding the constitutionality of the Georgia law. Justice White wrote for the majority: "The issue presented is whether the Federal Constitution confers a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy...We first register our disagreement with the Court of Appeals and with respondent that the Court's prior cases have construed the Constitution to confer a right of privacy that extends to homosexual sodomy...We think it evident that none of the rights announced in those cases bears any resemblance to the claimed constitutional right of homosexuals to engage in acts of sodomy...[The respondent] would have us announce, as the Court of Appeals did, a fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy. This we are quite unwilling to do."

The 1986 Supreme Court ruling was heralded as a triumph for morality and a major setback for gay rights activists. But like a pesky colony of subterranean termites, sodomites and their supporters continued to tunnel through the cracks in our moral foundation, and have now persuaded a more sympathetic Court to acquiesce. Patty Reinert of the Houston Chronicle writes: "The 6-3 decision, striking down Texas' sodomy law as a violation of constitutional privacy rights, reversed the court's ruling 17 years ago...The ruling, which also threw out all of the country's remaining sodomy laws in 12 other states, is expected to give a huge boost to the fight for equal treatment of homosexuals in other areas of American life, including employment, housing, marriage, child rearing and military service."

Justice Scalia, who wrote the dissenting opinion, accused the majority of taking sides in a "culture war" that would create "massive disruption of the current social order." In rendering this decision, Scalia believed the Court had signed on to the "so-called homosexual agenda," and invented "a brand new constitutional right" rather than waiting for laws to be rewritten by the legislative branch. He further warned that the decision marks the end of other state laws dealing with sex and morality, such as those prohibiting adultery, bigamy, prostitution, and incest. "Every single one of these laws is called into question by today's decision," he said.

There is one conclusion to be drawn from this latest assault on moral absolutes as defined by the Word of God: America continues its fatal journey toward spiritual Sodom and the judgment of God. There is therefore one question that must be asked: What can possibly avert God's wrath upon our nation as it persists along the path of moral relativism and the legitimization of perversion? The answer is found in Isa. 1:9: "*Except*

the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.” Paul cited this passage in dealing with God’s elective purpose for Israel, and used the word “seed” to describe the wrath-averting “remnant” that kept the nation from destruction (Rom. 9:29).

The phrase *very small remnant* is unique in two ways. First, it tells us that God is more concerned with sort than size. Consider the occasions where God did great wonders with very small things that were sanctified for his use (i.e., the stone in David’s sling, the five loaves and two fishes, etc.). Secondly, it establishes a mandate. The whole concept of *remnant* is absolutely meaningless apart from *holiness*! In other words, the church *must* be holy to make a difference in America’s destiny!

A purified church—the product of God-sent revival—can serve as that seed of hope. A polluted church—the product of sinful indulgence and cultural correctness—will eventually collapse upon itself, and bring the nation down with her. In the final analysis, neither the courts nor the politicians hold the key to America’s future. That awesome responsibility alone belongs to those who name the name of Christ. If there was ever a time to take time to be holy, it is now!

Brethren, even though another battle has been lost in the quest to preserve a semblance of moral rectitude in our nation, we must stay focused on the main issue at hand, which is whether the church will humble herself before God, confess her sins, turn from her wicked ways, and experience the grace of spiritual healing. There are no court decisions or legislative enactments that can compensate for the lack of a purified people of God! A godly remnant—even a very small remnant—is the critical need of the hour!