

PAUL W. POWELL NO
LOOKING
BACK



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Dedication

To Three of the Greatest Men I Have Known

Herbert H. Reynolds

John F. Baugh

Paul Piper

All Benefactors of George W. Truett Theological Seminary

“They...being dead yet speaketh.”

Hebrews 11:4

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Introduction

Do you remember Lot's wife? Well, you ought to, because Jesus told us to. (Luke 17:32) She is the lady, who having escaped the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, looked back and turned into a pillar of salt.

A young boy, hearing this story for the first time, said, "That's nothing. My mother was driving me to school the other day, and when she looked back she turned into a telephone pole." That's not exactly what Jesus had in mind. He was warning us about looking back longingly to our old sinful life after we have been, by the grace of God, delivered from it.

You will recall that Sodom and Gomorrah were two wicked cities in the Old Testament noted for their sexual perversion and immorality. God shared with his friend Abraham his intent to destroy those cities because of their wickedness. Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family had moved there and were about to fall victims to the approaching wrath of God. Abraham began to make intercession on behalf of the cities, and as a result, God allowed Lot and his family to escape into the hills before destruction came. As they fled the city, Lot's wife looked back longingly to what she had left behind, and God turned her into a pillar of salt.

Jesus, no doubt, had this in mind when he said, "No man, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Jesus was saying, "If you are going to follow me, you must leave the past behind. You must be done with the old life. You've got to make a clean break with the past. There is no turning back."

When we come to Christ, like our Lord, we need to set our faces steadfastly toward Jerusalem—our place of total commitment. A thousand things can distract us—the world, false doctrines, worry, anger, fear, guilt, and discour-

agement. To be true to him, we must look beyond them and not back to them.

This call, then, is a call to put our hand to the plow, our feet in the field, our eyes on the cross, and never look back.

This, like most of my books, is a book of sermons. It is intended for the pastor at the crossroads. It may help our laypeople, but it is written for preachers. After the needs of my own congregation, they have always been my greatest love and concern. These good people are our best hope for the renewal and revival we need in America.

There is an old western starring Gary Cooper, Richard Widmark, and Rita Hayworth, who are on the run from a band of Indians. They come to a narrow pass that can easily be defended by one man. They decide that the girl and one man should go on, and the other man should stay behind and try to stop the pursuing Indians.

So, Gary Cooper and Richard Widmark cut a deck of cards with the agreement that the person who drew the high card would stay and defend the pass. Richard Widmark won the draw, so Cooper and Hayworth rode on ahead.

After a short ride, they heard shooting. They pulled their horses to a stop, and Gary Cooper said to Rita Hayworth, "He cheated me, you know. I don't know how, but he did." She asked, "Why?" He replied, "Because someone had to stay. All over the world, it happens. Someone has to stay. Someone has to get it done."

That's the challenge we face today—someone has to get it done. The deck has been cut, and you and I have drawn the high card. Let's get it done, and let there be no looking back.

Paul W. Powell
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Chapter 1

Fit for the Kingdom

Luke 9:61-62

I haven't done much plowing with a mule in my life, but I soon found out that it didn't take much to satisfy me.

When I was a boy, I visited my relatives in the country in the summer, and occasionally my uncle sent my cousin and me to the field to plow. We would take the old mule, hook him up to the Georgia-stock plow that had been left in the field since the last plowing, and spend the day going back and forth, row after row, until the work was finished.

Plowing with a mule is hard work. You have to keep the mule going. He'll stop every chance he gets. You have to keep the plow in the ground at the right depth. And you have to plow a straight furrow. Occasionally, the plow would strike a root just underneath the surface of the ground that would either jar the plow to a standstill or pop back and hit your leg hard enough to make you want to quote scripture!

I soon learned if you wanted to plow a straight furrow, you had to put your eyes on an object at the end of the row and plow toward it. If you kept looking back to where you had been, you would wander all over the place; you could never plow a straight furrow looking back.

Jesus had this in mind when He said to a would-be disciple, "No man, having put his hand to the plow,

and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

When Jesus spoke these words, He was on His way to Jerusalem. As He and His disciples traveled a man stepped forward and said, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go” (Luke 9:57). Jesus responded that foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but He had no place to lay His head (verse 58). This is not to imply that Jesus was a homeless person. He had many friends who welcomed Him into their homes. It meant His was a life of hardship and sacrifice. The man needed to understand this from the beginning.

While they talked, Jesus turned to another man and said, “Follow me.” The man was willing, but he asked to first go home and bury his father. Jesus responded, “Let the dead bury their dead: but go and preach the kingdom of God” (verse 60).

Jesus was not being disrespectful of the dead. In all probability the man’s father was still alive. The custom in that part of the East was for a son to remain at home until his father died, and when he had taken care of his father’s burial, he was free to go his own way. Jesus was saying that He came first. Loyalty to Him must be above all others. He would allow no rivals.

Then a second volunteer stepped forward saying, “Lord, I will follow you; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home in my house” (verse 61). That’s when Jesus responded by saying, “No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (verse 62). Jesus was saying to the man, “If you are going to follow me, you have to leave the past behind. You must be done with your old life. You’ve got to make a clean break with the past. There can be no going back.”

Jesus used three great symbols of discipleship in His teachings. All three were made of wood. All three likely required the services of a carpenter—a cross; a yoke; and a plow.

Jesus spoke of the cross when He said, “If any man would come after me, tell him to deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). He spoke of the yoke when He gave the great invitation, “Come unto me, all you that labor, and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Here Jesus Speaks of the Plow.

The cross, the yoke, and the plow symbolize different aspects of commitment. The cross is an instrument of death; the yoke and the plow are implements of toil. The cross is a symbol of sacrifice; the yoke and the plow are symbols of service. On a cross the man bleeds; in a yoke or behind a plow, he sweats.

Christian commitment means that we are ready for either—ready to die on the cross or ready to submit to the yoke or to put our hand to the plow. When we follow Jesus, it should be with such complete surrender that we are ready to die for Him, or ready to work for him. Ready to bleed, ready to sweat, ready to suffer, or ready to serve—whichever He may require.

To be fit for the Kingdom we must make an irrevocable commitment to Christ. What does that mean? It means three things:

- We must put our hand to the plow.
- We must put our feet in the field.
- We must put our eyes on the cross.

To the Work, To the Work

First we need to put our hand to the plow. That means we will follow Jesus through blood and sweat and tears. We'll stay at the task 'til we get to the end of our row. It means we will be committed till the setting sun and our work is done. A man doesn't put his hands to the plow to rest on it or to lean on it, but to hold on to it, and follow it. He puts them there to work. We are not saved by our works, but we are saved to work. We are not here to sit and soak and sour until the second coming. We are here to serve. People who won't work are misfits in God's kingdom.

It takes third-world Christians to teach us about service and sacrifice today. Jim and Viola Palmer have been missionaries for 26 years. They are currently working with the Miskito people along the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua and Honduras. The Lord is doing an unusual work among those people, and over 100 churches have started spontaneously in the last six years. The challenge of these missionaries is to provide trained leadership to those churches.

To do this, the Palmers have a monthly, week-long pastor training program. The pastors come from their jungle villages to receive training and then go back to work among their people for another month. In addition to Jim's training, Viola, a nurse, teaches them elementary medicine so they can help their people with their medical needs. The Palmer's son is involved as well as he teaches agricultural methods to the pastors.

The diet of the Miskito people is mostly rice and beans, an edible root called yucca (or casava), and a banana drink called wolwol (pronounced why-wool). Their diet contains almost no nutrition, so the Palmers teach them to grow butter beans, field peas, okra,

squash, and especially sweet potatoes. So the pastor is trained not only as a spiritual leader, but also as one who can teach the people better agricultural methods and help them medically.

These young pastors take their training seriously and are very faithful in attendance to the training school. One week, one of Jim's young pastors was absent the first day. When he came the second day, Jim asked him where he had been. He replied that he had to stay behind to bury a young child. Jim, who is often in the villages, asked, "Is it someone I know?" The pastor replied, "It was my little son."

The pastor was so dedicated that he buried his child on Monday, left a grieving wife, walked four miles down a jungle trail, then rode in the back of a truck several hours in order to get to the training session to help him become a better pastor. That's putting your hand to the plow and not looking back.

Baptism is very important to these people. They don't count converts when they lift their hand or make a profession of faith. They count them only when they go down to the river in front of the whole village and give public testimony of their commitment to Christ by being baptized.

Jim was observing a baptismal service one day when he noticed that a young lady who was to be baptized had a black necklace with an amulet around her neck. It was a part of their superstitious beliefs that the amulet would ward off evil spirits. It troubled Jim to see her being baptized wearing the necklace. He had hoped the pastor had told her that because of her faith in Christ, she didn't have to worry about evil spirits anymore.

The pastor lowered her into the water and brought her up again. As she started to walk out of the water,

she reached up, jerked that necklace from her neck, and defiantly threw it into the water, symbolizing that she was through with the spirit world and now trusted Jesus completely. That's putting your hand to the plow and not looking back. That's saying goodbye to the old way of life.

Where is that kind of commitment among us? Who among us has such resolve?

We need to roll up our sleeves, loosen our ties, and go to work in the kingdom. We need to put a hand to the plow and not look back. We need to follow Jesus 'til the end of our row, 'til the setting of the sun and our work is done.

Asleep at the Switch

Second, you need to put your feet in the field. Plows are made for the field, not for the church, and the field is the world (Matthew 13:38). I have three convictions about the church. One is that God wants His church to grow. Second, that the church grows by the Word of God. And third, God's Word must be planted in people's hearts.

First, God wants His kingdom to grow. In the parable of the mustard seed, He said that the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, one of the smallest of all seeds, and when planted grows into a large tree-like bush that the birds can lodge in (Matthew 13:31-32). That's what He wants and expects of His kingdom. He expects His kingdom to grow from a small beginning to a world-embracing enterprise.

Second, it grows by the word of God. The seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11).

The third conviction is that the word of God must be sown in the human heart. When that happens, the church has tremendous potential for growth. Anyone

can determine how many seeds there are in an apple. All we need to do is quarter it and carefully count them. But only God knows how many apples there are in a seed. The possibility of growth in one seed is beyond comprehension.

Sowing the seed is our responsibility. Tragically, many churches have fallen asleep at the switch. They just sit and wait for people to come to them. They are content to sit and sing “Just As I Am” to one another. What they need to do is what Jesus said—go into all the world and tell people the good news and then disciple them. Instead, they have turned inward and seek their own comfort and ease rather than reaching out to a lost world. Having great programs, beautiful facilities, and eloquent preachers is not what Jesus talked about.

The pattern for evangelism is set out in scripture. The Psalmist wrote, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Psalms 126:5-6).

Do you see the progression? It’s going and sowing, weeping and reaping, returning and rejoicing.

There is little joy in most churches today. Could this be why? Could it be because we have no harvest to rejoice over? No one is being saved. And there is so little harvest because there is so little burden over the lost. Great revivals come when we weep for the lost.

Adlai Stevenson, who was twice the Democratic candidate for President of the United States (1952 and 1956) lost two elections by a landslide. When asked how it felt to lose he said, “It hurts too bad to laugh, and I am too big to cry” (Moody Monthly, November 1966, p. 19). I wonder if the church of Jesus has gotten too big to cry?

We are not just to go and evangelize, we are to pray for more laborers. In the very next verse of the next

chapter, Jesus sent out the 70, two by two, into the cities where He would come later, and He said to them, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He would send forth laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:1-2).

In these verses Jesus identified the biggest problem of the church: a labor shortage. Then He tells us what to do. We are to pray that the Lord of harvest would “send forth” laborers into the harvest. That word “send” in the original language is a very strong word. It means “to hurl,” “to cast,” “to throw with great force.” It is the same word that is used to describe Jesus casting demons out of people (Matthew 9:33). That took a violent overthrow. Jesus was saying that we should pray that there will come such an irresistible compulsion in the hearts and lives of men and women that they cannot help but go out and tell the good news of Jesus Christ.

How long has it been since the church has been on its knees praying that God would call out laborers into the harvest? How long has it been since the deacons have devoted more time to praying that young men and young women would be called to preach and called to the mission field than they spent discussing church finances?

Maybe the place to begin plowing is in our own hearts. In the Old Testament God calls His people to repentance with the phrase, “Break up your fallow ground” (Jeremiah 4:3; Hosea 10:12). Fallow ground is ground that has been plowed but left unplanted. It has been hardened by the sun, crusted over, and grown up in weeds. It must be plowed again and the weeds cleared before a crop can be planted. “Break up your fallow ground” is a call to repentance, i.e., as Hosea said, “It is time to seek the Lord” (Hosea 10:12).

Maybe our hearts have become hardened and crusted by sin and indifference. Tears may be the best lubricant

for the rusty hinges of our heart.

But you say, “I don’t know how to witness!” Well, learn how. Ask the pastor to teach a class in soul-winning. Better still, ask him to take you with him when he goes out to win people week after week. One of his primary responsibilities is to be an example and an equipper (Ephesians 4:11).

We need to be passionate about outreach to a hurting world. Evangelism is not someone else’s job, and we cannot be satisfied with transfers of letter. Transfers are simply moving sheep from one pasture to another. That may build our herd, but it does not build His. It is time to put our hand to the plow and our feet in the field.

The Author and Finisher

Finally, we must put our eyes on the cross. Jesus had “steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,” (Luke 9:51) i.e., the cross, and so should we.

The writer of Hebrews, having called the roll of the heroes of the faith who have gone before us, writes, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a crowd of witnesses, (examples), let us set aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

We have entered the race. Now we must rid our lives of the things that encumber us from running well. We must not grow weary. We must persevere to the end. And we must keep our eyes on Jesus all the while. He is the author and the finisher of our faith.

Richard of Chester wrote in the thirteenth century,

“O, dear Lord, three things I pray: to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, to follow Thee more nearly” (Qtd. by George Barna in Second Coming of the Church, A Blueprint for Survival, Word Publishers, 1998, p. 16). That should be our heart cry, also.

Years ago there was a missionary society among the Moravians headed by Count Zinzendorf that sent many missionaries into America. The seal for this society, the stamp that was made upon all of their documents and papers, was a picture of an ox standing between an altar and a plow, with this motto underneath: “Ready for either.”

The plow meant work, and the altar meant sacrifice, and the face of the ox standing between the plow and the altar is just the place where every true Christian ought to stand: willing to work, willing to suffer as God sees fit.

Hand on the plow; feet in the field; eye on the cross. That’s what we need.

Remember missionaries Jim and Viola Palmer? Jim said one day they were discussing the language of the Miskito people and his wife asked him their word for love. He said, “Latwan.” She said, “No, that is the word for hurt.” He said, “No, that is the word for love.” She insisted that it was the word for hurt. So he said, “Why don’t we ask one of the pastors?” So they asked the pastor, “What is the word for love?” He responded, “Latwan.” Jim then asked, “What is the word for hurt?” He replied, “Latwan.” Jim then said to the pastor, “You mean that the word for love and the word for hurt are the same word?” And he replied, “Yes.”

Jim said, “We wondered how we would translate John 3:16?” Then we realized how to do it, “God so hurt for the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Some of you have put your hand to the plow and then let go. Some of you have looked back and plowed a crooked row. Now you need to come back to the Lord as Hosea said, “It is time to serve the Lord.” You need to get a new grip on the plow, you need to put your feet in the field, and you need to set your eyes on the cross, and plow a straight line to the end of your row. And it all begins at the foot of the cross.

Chapter 2

Faith of our Fathers

1 Peter 3:15

A Baptist pastor was inviting people in his neighborhood to visit his church. An elderly lady said, “No thank you, young man, I’m a Methodist.”

“If you don’t mind,” he asked, “tell me, why you are a Methodist?”

“Well,” she replied, “you see, my parents were Methodists, my grandparents were Methodists, and my great-grandparents were Methodists.”

The frustrated young pastor responded, “That’s no reason, just because all your relatives are Methodists. What would you do if all your relatives were idiots?”

“In that case,” she smiled, “I’d probably be a member of your church.”

Do you know why you are a Baptist? Perhaps you joined because your family was Baptist. Is it because of the influence of friends? Or because the church meets your needs? There has got to be a better reason than that. I hope you are a Baptist by conviction, i.e., because you believe it comes closest to the Biblical pattern of God for his people.

The scriptures admonish us to be people of conviction. The apostle Peter writes, “Be ready always to give an answer (a verbal defense) to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

Our forefathers did this with great zeal and conviction.

tion with their very lives, and we need to do the same. We need to recover and rededicate ourselves to believing what they believed, living like they lived, and standing like they stood. We need to reclaim and re-acclaim our Baptist heritage—the faith of our fathers. What is it? What were their cherished beliefs?

- The Lordship of Christ
- The Authority of Scripture
- Salvation by Grace
- Soul Competency
- Religious Liberty
- Regenerate Church Membership

What Comes First

First, we believe in the lordship of Christ. Paschal said, “The last thing one settles in writing a book is what one should put first.” When it comes to Baptist beliefs, there is no doubt as to what should be first. It is the Lordship of Christ.

The title “lord” in the original language is the word “kurios” which variously means, God, master, supreme authority. The essence of Christianity is this: Jesus Christ is God. He is not just sent from God or a representative of God or a part of God. He was and is God. He is the master, the supreme authority of our lives. The lordship of Christ was the theme of the first Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter declared, “Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

The Lordship of Christ, said Vance Havner, was the initial confession of the Church; it is the essential confession of a Christian (Romans 10:9); and it will be the eventual confession of all creation (Phil. 2:10-11).

The Lordship of Christ was the message the first missionaries carried into the Roman world. In Thessalonica, the preaching of the apostle Paul created such an uproar that the city officials accused them of turning the world upside down. What were they saying that was so revolutionary? “There is another king, one Jesus” (Acts 17:7).

In the Roman world, Caesar alone was King. He was the absolute ruler of men. Christians were willing, as Jesus had taught, to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar’s but they would render only to God the things of God’s, and if there was a conflict of wills they said, “We must obey God rather than men.”

That’s still our conviction today. Clarence Jordan, who translated the Cotton Patch version of the New Testament, established the Koinonia Farm in Georgia. The farm was both interracial and controversial. He often stirred up his Southern audiences with his call for racial justice. After one such sermon in one church, an elderly woman made her way down the aisle and responded straight from the gut-level of her culture. “I want you to know that my grandfather fought in the Civil War,” she said, “and I will never believe a word you say.” Clarence, who was tall and gracious and Southern himself, smiled and replied, “M’am, your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ.”

Baptists have already made that choice – Jesus is Lord. We will follow Him.

The Baptist Faith and Message

Second, we believe in the Bible as our sole written authority for faith and practice. We believe with the apostle Paul that “All scripture is given by inspiration of

God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The word “all” means “every single part of the whole.” The word “perfect” is from a Greek word that means “complete or mature.” The scriptures are given to make us complete in Jesus Christ. The word “inspired” means “God breathed.” Peter helps us understand inspiration when he says, “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. . . but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20-21). The word “moved” means “to be picked up and borne along.” It’s the picture of a ship that shoves out from the shore, hoists its sails, and a mighty burst of wind fills the sails and drives it forward. Just so, the Spirit of God came up to the writers of scripture and compelled them to write what they recorded. God was both the initiator and the motivator of scripture. The formula for scripture was holy men plus the Holy Ghost equals Holy Scriptures.

We believe the scriptures are the inspired, authoritative, sufficient, and true word of God. They teach us what to believe and how to live. We have no creed but the Bible. Baptists have had statements of faith through the years, but they were never creeds. There is a difference. A Statement of Faith is something people generally believe. A Creed is an official statement you must believe.

Southern Baptists had no statement of faith at all for their first 80 years of their existence (1845 - 1925). Nada! Zip! In 1925 after great debate, the convention narrowly approved the first version of our Baptist Faith and Message. But no one was asked to sign it. It was only a statement of what we generally believed.

That statement served us with minor word revisions for the next 75 years until the 2000 session of the Southern Baptist Convention. At that time major changes were made that threatened the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of the believer. And it was made a statement of “doctrinal accountability,” which in essence made it a creed. Missionaries, seminary professors and denominational employees were required to sign it or resign.

That was contrary to our cherished Baptist principles of “no creed but the Bible.” Many of our people refused to sign this man-made creed, and that is basically what the present Baptist controversy is all about. It is not about the Bible. We all believe the Bible. It is about an attempt on the part of the few leaders to force everyone else to accept their interpretation of the Bible.

Several years ago, Richard Jackson gave me a Bible that had embossed on the front cover in gold letters, “The Baptist Faith and Message.” Richard had it right. The Bible is our creed, and I have signed every page of it. I don’t need anything more, and I won’t sign anything less.

The fact that we don’t have a creed doesn’t mean a person can believe just anything and be a Baptist. When I became Dean of Truett Seminary, I told our students that our teaching would be consistent with the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message, i.e., what Baptists had generally believed through the years. One of them replied, “I thought we were through with all of that.” I told them, “A river without banks is a swamp and Truett is not going to be a theological swamp. The river is wide and deep and there is room to row around in it, i.e., there is room for differences of interpretation. But the banks are God’s word, and we will stay in the banks. We are bound by scripture. It is our written authority. It is our creed.”

The Place of Grace

Third, we believe in salvation only by voluntary response of repentance and faith to God's grace through the gift of His Son. It is "Not by works of righteousness which we have done," writes the Apostle Paul, "but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7).

"Not by works of righteousness...but by his mercy." That's the way of salvation. The difference in Christianity and every other world religion is the difference in "do" and "done." Salvation in other religions, if they have such a concept, depends on what you do. In Christianity it depends on what Christ has done.

If you want to be a good Hindu, you must practice the ascetic discipline. That is something you do. If you want to be a good Buddhist, you must master the four noble truths. That is something you must do. If you want to be a good Jew, you must live by the Old Testament law. That's something you do. If you want to be a good Muslim, you must obey the Koran. That is something you do. But if you want to be saved, you must trust in the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ. That's something He has already done.

The Tower of Babel ought to teach us something. The lesson of it is that we will never reach heaven by our own means. We can't climb up to God but He has come down to us.

We must then respond to Christ's finished work with voluntary faith and trust. Good works are important in the Christian life but as an outgrowth of salvation and the natural result of a life made right with God, not a

means of being made right with God.

Both the Ability and the Right

Fourth, we believe in soul competency and its corollary, the priesthood of the believer, i.e., that God has endowed us with the capacity, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to understand and interpret the scriptures for ourselves. And we believe that through the finished work of Christ, He has granted us direct access to God through prayer and the confession of sin.

There have always been people who have said you can't trust individuals to interpret the Bible for themselves. Rather they need religious masters to do that for them. This is the belief of the Roman Catholic Church. They believe the individual can read the Bible, but the church, i.e., the religious hierarchy, must interpret it. They believe the church is to the Bible what the Supreme Court is to the constitution. They interpret it and tell you what it means. Strangely, some Baptist leaders are saying the same thing today. They are saying that individuals are not competent to read and interpret the scriptures for themselves. They say we need religious masters to do that for us.

If we must have spiritual masters, who would they be? Denominational leaders? Seminary professors? Local pastors? Who? A few years ago, a prominent Baptist leader told a group of ministers that professors at Southern Baptist seminaries should be required to teach agreed-upon orthodoxy. They were to teach "whatever they are told to teach, and if we tell them to teach that pickles have souls, then they must teach that pickles have souls."

How absurd. What if these protectors of orthodoxy said blacks don't have souls as some people once be-

lieved? (Leon McBeth, Baptists: A Sesquicentennial History, Baptistway Press, Dallas, 1993, p. 23). Should professors have to teach that? The arrogance of these “masters” exceeds their intelligence. Professors must teach the truth as they understand it, not what some denominational “masters” tell them, and so must we.

Those who say we must have religious masters to tell us correctly what the Bible says obviously have not read the Bible where Jesus said, “One is your Master, even Christ, and you are all brothers” (Matthew 23:8). That puts us all the on the same footing before the Lord, and He will be our teacher if we earnestly seek Him.

There is a scriptural precedence for this belief. The apostle Paul wrote of the Christians at Berea, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). Paul was preaching “The word,” i.e., the scriptures to them. The word “noble” means liberal, i.e., they did not have closed minds. They were open to new truth. We all need to be open-minded to truth. We must not be so open-minded our brains fall out, but how can we learn if we have closed minds? These Bereans “searched” the scriptures daily. The word “searched” is used in the judicial sense. Like a lawyer pouring over his case to present the facts to the jury, like a judge studying the trial transcript to determine his sentence, so they poured over the scriptures to see if Paul’s preaching squared with what God said. Obviously they were competent to do that or Paul would not have commended them for doing it.

No person, church, religious leader, or government has the authority or the right to tell us what we must believe. Nor does any Baptist have the right to tell another Baptist what he or she must believe. Jesus alone is our

master, and we are all brothers. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are capable of reading and deciding for ourselves what God's word says.

The apostle Paul said God has given the church gifted leaders for the purpose of equipping us for more useful service, and we ought to avail ourselves of their ministry. "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). The word "perfect" is a fishing term that means "to mend a net." When fishing with a net, occasionally the net will catch on a snag and tear. The fishermen must periodically mend it or else the fish will filter through. Just so the Lord has given gifted teachers to the church to help supply that which is lacking in our lives, to make us complete and mature in Christ.

We should know what the church fathers and reformers taught and take seriously the statements of faith that have been handed down to us, i.e., we must not ignore the voice of the Holy Spirit through the collective voice of the church. And we should use the best principles of interpretation. But in the final analysis, we must search the scriptures prayerfully and carefully and decide for ourselves what they say. Soul competency is a wonderful privilege but it is also an awesome responsibility. When I stand before God these so-called "masters" will not be there to answer for me. I will be on my own and so will they.

Freedom & Conscience

Fifth, we believe in religious liberty for all people. If we are competent to make religious decisions for ourselves, we should be free to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience. This is, perhaps,

Baptists' greatest contribution to the world.

When the people of Iraq pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in 2003, a reporter said, "These people are going to have to get used to this, because they have lived for years under the policy of 'compulsory adulation.'" The word compulsory and the word adulation do not belong in the same sentence. There is no such thing.

In Europe, the early church reformers broke with the established church to gain religious freedom. But they welded the church and state together and forced people to worship their way. In Switzerland Ulrich Zwingli led a break with the Catholic Church but allowed no freedom of religion. In front of the church where he ministered is a huge statue of him with an open Bible in one hand and a sword in the other. He held both the power of the church and the power of the state. And he used the sword to force his religious beliefs on others.

Anabaptists (re-baptizers) Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel were imprisoned for life for preaching believers' baptism. They escaped and continued preaching. Conrad died, but Felix was captured and drowned as a heretic.

Maeyken Wens, an Anabaptist woman of the 16th century, was arrested for preaching the gospel as she understood it from her own study of scripture. She was imprisoned, tortured, and refusing to recant, was sentenced to death by burning. Part of her sentence by the court was that her tongue be screwed to the roof of her mouth so that she might not preach on the way to her execution. Her teenage son took his younger brother to the execution and, when it was over, they searched the ashes to find the screw with which their mother's tongue had been silenced. It was a precious symbol of an unfettered conscience! (William L. Turner, Adjunct Professor,

Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, “Why We Are Here?” in Christian Ethics Today, Summer 2005, p. 6).

In fifteenth-century England things were no better. John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, John Bunyan and countless others suffered persecution and imprisonment for refusing to acquiesce to the worship of the established church.

John Murton, one of the three men who started the first Baptist Church in Holland, was another who was cast into prison in England for his preaching. Afraid that he would die in prison without his views on religious liberty being printed, he devised an ingenious way to get his message out. In prison he had no paper or ink. He was brought a bottle of milk for food every day. Stuffed in the top of that bottle of milk was a wad of paper that served as a stopper. Using that wadded up paper to write on and using the milk as ink he wrote down his convictions concerning religious liberty. The paper was then picked up by a confederate who held the paper with otherwise invisible writings over a candle and the milk turned brown and the message could be read. Thus his message on religious liberty was preserved for us (Jesse C. Fletcher, The Southern Baptist Convention Sesquicentennial History).

In America, Roger Williams was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for denying Puritan authority over his conscience. In 1651, Baptist Obadiah Holmes was sentenced to 30 stripes with a three-corded whip after he violated the law by taking forbidden communion with a blind Baptist in Lynn, Massachusetts. His friends offered to pay the fine for his release, but he refused. They offered him strong drink to anesthetize the pain of the flogging. Again he refused. “It is the love of liberty,” he said, “that must free the soul.” No wonder Roger Williams thundered, “Forced worship stinks in

God's nostrils!"

Baptists more than any other group were responsible for the separation of church and state being written into our constitution. Thus freedom of religion was granted to all people.

The First Amendment neither inculcates religion nor inoculates against it. Americans can be loyal to the Constitution without being hostile to God, or they can pay no heed to God without fear of being mugged by an official God Squad.

Baptists are free people, and all worship should be free. It is the only worship God wants. We believe in a free church and a free state that both understand that the word "faith" and the word "forced" do not belong in the same sentence.

No Apology Necessary

Sixth, we believe in a regenerate (born again) voluntary church membership. Only those who have truly and openly confessed Christ should be members of the church. Then they should be baptized by immersion as an outward confession of this inward conversion.

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, our Baptist forefathers in England, wanted to purify the church from all the corruption of the established Church, and they became convinced the only way to do this was to have a church made up of believers -- people who sincerely, deliberately, and freely affirmed Christ as Lord of their lives. So they rejected infant baptism because it was performed on people who could not believe and began preaching and practicing believers' baptism.

Many people think that the single-most important characteristic of Baptists is the way they baptize - by immersion. Not so! Smyth and Helwys were first con-

cerned with “who” rather than “how” they baptized. In the formation of the first Baptist church in Holland in 1609, John Smyth first baptized himself by pouring water on his head and in turn baptized Helwys and others of the congregation the same way. It was 1641 before they came to understand that baptism by immersion was the scriptural way and that it would be a common practice among Baptists.

The Bible teaches both – baptism of believers and baptism by immersion -- and both are important. Years ago, I baptized Frances Lovell who had been a Methodist for 79 years. As she came out of the baptistery she quipped, “I’ve been a Methodist so long, when I get to Heaven, I’m going to have to apologize to John Wesley.” I responded in jest, “Yes, and if you had not been baptized, you would have to apologize to John the Baptist.” We were both teasing, but the truth is that baptism by immersion is scriptural and, thus, important.

This is our heritage. And it came at a great price. For it, men and women have suffered persecution, banishment, beatings and prison and even death. It is fitting then that Roger Williams of Rhode Island reminds us: “Having bought truth so dear, we must not sell it cheap.”

Let us rededicate ourselves to the ‘Faith of our Fathers.’ Hear the words again of that great hymn.

*Faith of our fathers! Living still
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword,
O how our hearts beat high with joy
When-e’er we hear that glorious word!
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!*
(The Baptist Hymnal, page 352)

Chapter 3

Prescription for a Healthy Church

Titus 1:5

Our generation is the most health-conscious generation that has ever lived. That's partly due to the fact that people are living longer than ever before. One hundred years ago the average life expectancy in America was 47.6 years. But with the discovery of penicillin, heart surgery, and other advances in medicine, life expectancy is now 77.6 years. With people living longer, we want quality of life to go along with the quantity medicine has given us.

As a result, television programs, magazine articles, and internet postings abound with information on diets, exercise programs, and medicines to help us keep our bodies healthy.

There is another body whose health we need to be concerned about, and that is the body of Christ, the church. America is sick morally and spiritually. The symptoms can be seen everywhere: one out of thirty-two U.S. adults is behind bars, on probation, or on parole. Thirty-five percent of women and sixty-five percent of men say they struggle with pornography.

One-half of all marriages end in divorce, and millions more are held together by a thread. In addition, we are possessed by materialism, sedated by drugs, addicted to alcohol, and plagued by the sexual abuse of children

and the physical abuse of women. Add to that bigotry, prejudices, fraud in high places, gambling, and a thousand other things, and it appears we have a sickness unto death. What was said of Noah's day can be said of ours, "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

A part of the mission Jesus gave to his church was to help heal the spiritual sickness around us. Albert Schweitzer, who had five earned doctorates and excelled in music, medicine and missions, chose to spend his life in Africa as a medical missionary. On one occasion when visiting a patient in a hospital, she asked him, "Who are you?" He replied, "I am Dr. Schweitzer, and Jesus has sent me to help heal you." That's what the church is here to do—help heal the sickness of our world.

But in many instances, the church is as sick as the world. The divorce rate among evangelicals is as great as that of non-Christians. Twenty percent of church-going women say they are addicted to pornography. And thirty-three percent of ministers admit having visited sexually-explicit websites.

Every denomination is in major turmoil. The Roman Catholic Church has seen a twenty-nine percent decline in the number of priests over the last forty years. There are 3,200 parishes without a resident priest versus 550 in 1965. In addition, several denominations have either accepted or are considering ordaining homosexual ministers.

This is no time to throw rocks. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, "We are all in the same boat on a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty."

Only a healthy church can help heal a sick society. That's why we need to be concerned about church health. But in a society that promotes individual spirituality,

I hear people say, “I’m not interested in the church. I could follow Christ if He didn’t bring along His bride – the church.” But He always does. The Bible knows nothing of churchless Christianity. To be drawn to the cross is to be drawn together. You can’t be committed to Christ and not be committed to the church.

The apostle Paul was talking about church health when he wrote to Titus, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting...” (Titus 1:5). The word translated “set in order” is a medical term that describes what a doctor does when you go to him with a broken or dislocated bone. He sets it back in place. He straightens it, and puts the two pieces back in right relationship with one another so it can heal properly.

Things were fractured in the church and Titus was sent to straighten them out, i.e., make the church healthy again. We face the same challenge today.

The marks of a healthy church are not buildings or budgets and bucks. They are far more basic than those. What makes the church healthy? Let me offer a prescription of six suggestions.

- Good Leadership
- Meeting for Divine Purpose
- Unity of Spirit
- Faithfulness and Fruitfulness
- A Ministering Body
- Generous Giving

Why Churches Get Headaches

The first mark of a healthy church is good leadership. The early church was led by the Holy Spirit. It was continually listening to and following Jesus. Believers understood that Jesus was the head of the church, and

the church was His body. It existed to do His will and His work on earth.

Jesus' leadership, then, is the first thing that produces a healthy church. But the church must also have the care of a shepherd. That's why Paul instructed Titus to ordain elders in every city. High on the list of things that produces a healthy church is also the leadership of a good pastor. A good shepherd loves his sheep and keeps a watchful eye on them at all times.

Problems arise, however, if the pastor forgets Christ is the head of the church and begins to think he is the head. Problems arise when he thinks God speaks to him and he in turn is to tell the church what to do. When the pastor tries to be the head of the church, the church winds up with a "headache" – a headache of migraine proportions—a headache that Excedrin or Anacin will not cure.

The corporate model is not for the church. The pastor is not a CEO. Size, power, and control are not the way of the kingdom. Pastors are to be humble servants of Jesus Christ. They are to delight in rescuing the perishing, perfecting the saints, and glorifying God. Being a good shepherd involves feeding, equipping and watching over the sheep.

Faithfulness to the Biblical model is essential to church health. The Biblical model for a pastor is clearly this, "Be a shepherd and love the sheep." The Lord is the "chief shepherd," and we are under-shepherds that serve under his authority (I Peter 5:4).

A good pastor will get a vision for his church, but he will share it with them, not shove it on them. He will lead, not drive his people. They are sheep, not cattle. Leadership, first from Christ, and then the care of a shepherd, are foundational to a healthy church.

Sharing and Caring

Second, a healthy church meets for a divine purpose. We don't meet to be entertained, although the worship ought to be an enjoyable and inspiring experience. We meet like the early church to worship God, to study the scriptures, to pray, and for fellowship (Acts 2:42).

One reason we meet is to worship the Lord. He promises to meet with us when two or three gather in his name (Matthew 18:20). Another reason for gathering is to learn the scriptures. As St. Jerome said, "Ignorance of scripture . . . is ignorance of Christ." In a healthy church, the Bible is preached in the pulpit, taught in the classroom, believed in the pew, and lived in the streets.

Prayer is another reason we meet. Prayer is the primary work of the church. Jesus said, "My house shall be called the house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13). Corporate prayer can be powerful (Acts 4:24). But it is rare in most churches. Taking prayer requests can eat up a lot of time, especially when all we hear about is someone's distant relative we know nothing about who is going to have surgery. We need to pray for things like wisdom, courage to witness, for laborers, for our leaders, and for our nation to be saved, like the early church did, not just for the sick.

And, finally, we meet for fellowship. The word fellowship does not suggest a church social. It refers to mutual care for one another. People need to have a sense of belonging. New people need to feel welcomed. And we all need encouragement to the highest kind of living (Hebrews 10:25). G. K. Chesterton once said, "It was neither preaching nor praying that made me a better man, but all those people who believed in me more than I deserved, and I could not let them down."

A healthy church is full of loving people who bear

one another's burdens and celebrate one another's joys. It's a place where broken people can safely confess their sins to one another and pray for each other that they may be healed (James 5:16).

True worship never ends at the church. It ends with God's people going out to live and serve in his name.

Stay Out of Civil War

The third mark of a healthy church is a spirit of unity. A church at civil war will not be a healthy church any more than a home that is filled with bickering is a healthy home. A church in conflict dissipates its energy on in-fighting rather than out-reach. A healthy church is a happy place where people get along with one another, laugh a lot, and love one another. It is like a happy family.

The early church was "in one accord." It was unified. Unity comes from being committed to a cause that is greater than our differences. It comes from our commitment to Christ and His Kingdom.

Unity and uniformity are not the same. The early church was made up of people from all over the Mediterranean world. There were orthodox Jews and Gentile proselytes; educated priests and unlettered laymen; people who had adopted the Greek culture, and those who clung to their Jewish traditions. There were wealthy land owners and people in need of relief. Yet they were unified.

The church is bound together by faith, not by flesh. Even when divided by race, we are united by grace.

The unity of Christianity has always been threatened. Occasionally, the threat has been imposed from without, but most often it comes from within. We Baptists are especially vulnerable to it. Our strong convictions and

independent spirit are contributing factors. Sometimes, we just seem to enjoy a fight. Amzi Clarence Dixon, a Baptist pastor in Chicago and a leader in the Fundamental-Moderate battle that devastated Northern Baptists in the 1920's and 30's, said, "Above all things I love peace, but next to peace I love a fight, and I believe that the next best thing to peace is a theological fight." (Qtd. by Pamela and Keith Durso in The Story of Baptists in the United States, p. 159). That's us.

We are bound to have differences in the church. Jerold Hewett said, "Nobody can build a straight road that runs in front of everybody's house." But we must learn to put those differences aside and defer to one another for the sake of unity and the Kingdom.

Faithfulness and Fruitfulness

Fourth, a healthy church is faithful to the mission of Christ. What is the mission of the church? Jesus said He came to seek and to save that which was lost. He said He did not come to be ministered to, but to minister and to give His life as a ransom for many. Then He said, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). His mission, then, is our mission.

The question for the church is "Are lives being transformed? Are people being saved? Disciplined? Ministered to? Are missions being promoted?" That's what Jesus was about. And that's what the church is to be about.

Bill Parcells, a former coach of the Dallas Cowboys, said, "The game tells you what you are." Forget what the mission statement of the church says. Mission statements are an exercise in futility. They are usually drawn up in the comfort of air-conditioned buildings, by people sitting on cushioned seats, and then promptly forgotten.

Besides, Jesus gave us our mission statement in the Great Commission, and to my knowledge, He has not given us permission to change it.

Faithfulness and fruitfulness, not bigness, are the marks of a healthy church. Look at what the pastor and the people are doing. Are they growing in knowledge of the Lord? Are they ministering to one another? What are they doing to reach out to the lost world? That's what counts.

Healthy churches will grow in some way. However, not all growing churches are healthy. Churches can grow by entertainment, by manipulation, by false teachings. And it seems as though the churches that ask the least are growing the most. Winning new converts to Christ and his church without neglecting discipleship is our mission. If a church is listening to and following the Lord, it will be doing that.

The Right People in the Right Seats

Fifth, a healthy church is a ministering body. It is to do His work on earth. The Scriptures teach that the risen Christ gives gifts to His people so they can minister effectively. He gives two kinds of gifts, individual gifts and church gifts. To individual believers He gives the ability to teach, to organize and lead, to show mercy and help the needy, to make money and to give, etc. Lists of these gifts are found in several places in scripture (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). None of these lists is complete. They are illustrative, not exhaustive. There seems to be a gift for every need in the church.

To the church He gives gifted leaders (Ephesians 4:11). The work of these leaders is to be equippers and examples in Christian service. They are not to do all the work of the church; they are to see that it is done.

Jim Collins suggested that the challenge of leadership is to get “. . .the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats” (Jim Collins, Good to Great, p. 41). That’s what a coach does. He knows his players and their abilities and puts the right person in the right position. Then he teaches them and inspires them to do their best. He doesn’t try to play every position. He sees that every position is filled and that players are performing to the best of their abilities.

When the old Houston Oilers professional football team was considering drafting Earl Campbell, the Heisman Trophy winner from the University of Texas, one of their scouts said to Bum Phillips, the Oilers’ coach, “Earl Campbell is a sprinter, not a distance runner. He can’t run a mile. Do you still want to draft him?” Bum replied, “Yes, I just won’t give him the ball when it’s third down and a mile.”

A good pastor is like that. He knows his people’s gifts and uses them accordingly. Like a player-coach, he helps people identify and develop their gifts for service. His job is to build them up and send them out. In unhealthy churches, people just attend and pay their dues. In healthy churches, people use their gifts in ministry. Ministry brings power and vitality to a church.

Give A Little

Sixth, a healthy church gives generously to the needs of the church and the world. Good stewardship begins with putting God first. In the U.S. we worship the unholy trinity of individualism, materialism and consumerism, even in the church. We need to ask ourselves how our church can spend its money better.

Kirk and Rosie Farnsworth in their book, All Churches Great and Small, remind us that the American church

runs off the same thing the world does – most of what we get we spend on ourselves, and a pittance goes for the rest of the world. Is it too much to ask that the church strive to spend 50% on itself and 50% on the world? Or at least 70% on itself and 30% on the world?

Congress recently appropriated funds to build a bridge called “bridge to nowhere” in Alaska from Ketchikan, population 8,900, to the island of Garvina, population 50. It will replace a 7-minute ferry ride to the airport. The cost? \$365 million. What a waste! (Public Heritage Foundation, October 20, 2005, Web-Memo #889). But that is miniscule compared to the money that is wasted week by week on churches that are going nowhere.

I serve on a foundation board. When people make requests of me, I want to know answers to some of the following questions: What is your budget? How much do you spend on administration? How much do you pay the director? How much of what you receive goes to help the people you are there to help? I’m not going to give money to an organization just to keep the organization going. I feel the same way about the church.

The challenge we face today is to build healthy churches. The Lord expects it, and the world needs it. But it won’t be easy. It will be much like the lady who had a dozen kids. The city was paving the street in front of their house, and one of the children wandered out in the street and got tar all over him. When she saw him covered with tar, she said, “Sakes alive, I think it would be easier to have another one than to clean you up.”

It might be easier if the Lord just started over. But He won’t. He expects us to deal with our ills. He expects us to clean up our act and help Him heal a sick world and serve Christ till He comes again.

Chapter 4

Calling Down Fire

Luke 9:51-56

The second human emotion mentioned in the Bible is anger. After being expelled from the garden Eve conceived and bore two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was a tiller of the ground and Abel was a keeper of sheep. Obviously worship was well developed and well defined by this time, for they both brought sacrifices to the Lord. Cain brought the fruit of the field and Abel the fruit of his flock. The sacrifice of Abel was accepted and the sacrifice of Cain rejected. This angered Cain greatly.

Gently and mercifully the Lord dealt with Cain, seeking to cool his anger. God assured him if he would do right, he, too, would be accepted. But if not, the Lord, warned, “Sin lieth at the door” (Genesis 4:7).

It is a vivid picture! Anger is pictured as a ferocious beast crouching at Cain’s door ready to spring on him and devour him. He was told that he must master his passions or they would devour him like a wild beast.

Cain did not heed God’s warning and tragedy struck. He killed his brother Abel and became a fugitive and vagabond. Cain found his punishment unbearable and he now feared that every man who found him would attempt to slay him. Having given way to his anger, he now lived in fear of the anger of others. Anger is like that. Left unattended in our hearts it will destroy us.

Anger was not just a problem for the first mortal man born on this earth but for every mortal man. Today it

expresses itself in a myriad of ways: road rage, spousal abuse, security guards and metal detectors in schools, airports, at athletic events, courthouses and almost every other public gathering place. Beyond that there is anger that comes when we are betrayed, cheated, treated rudely or someone badmouths us.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bible speaks often and candidly about anger. The scriptures say, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls” (Proverbs 25:28).

In ancient days the walls of a city were its chief means of defense. A city with the walls broken down was vulnerable to every enemy. Uncontrolled anger is like that. Rather than being a sign of strength, it is a sign of weakness. Either we master it or it masters us.

Again we are told, “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city” (Proverbs 16:32). It was a sermon on this verse that helped move General Sam Houston, the hero of Texas independence, toward Christ. Prior to becoming a Christian, his life had been marked by a fierce temper. Before his Texas years, he had been a senator and the governor of Tennessee. Following a failed marriage, he lived for a period of time among the Indians in Arkansas. While in Washington representing the rights of native Americans, he beat Senator William Stansbery from Ohio with his hickory cane for insulting him. Since he had formerly been a member of that body, the Senate tried him, found him guilty, and fined him a token amount (Marquis James, *The Raven*, University of Texas Press, 1999, p. 163).

When Houston moved to Texas, talk of revolution against Mexico was in the air. His reputation as a fighter made him the logical choice as commander of the newly-formed army of the Republic of Texas.

After Texas won its independence, Houston was elected the first president of the Republic. While serving as president of Texas he got into a quarrel with his friend, W.H. Wharton. Wharton's hand dropped to his Bowie knife. Houston raised his arms above his head and said, "Draw - draw if you dare" (*The Raven*, p. 302). Wharton did not dare. Few men did without regretting it. Such was Houston's way of life.

When Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845, Sam Houston became the state's first senator. He would later serve two terms as its governor. It was while he was in Washington serving as a senator that one Sabbath day he went to the E. Street Baptist Church to hear Dr. George W. Sampson preach. His text that day was this verse from Proverbs 16:32. Houston went back the next Sunday, and the next and the next. Then one Sunday following the sermon, he asked Dr. Sampson for a book to help him beat down the doubts in his mind. Dr. Sampson placed in his hand a copy of Nelson's "Cause and Cure of Infidelity" (*The Raven*, p. 367).

That was in 1846. It would not be until eight years later, October 19, 1854, at the age of 63 that Sam would make his profession of faith in Christ. (*The Raven*, p. 384). But it started that day with a sermon on anger.

It was a part of the mission and message of Jesus to deliver us from the perils of anger. One place where we see this is the occasion of Jesus and His disciples traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Some of His disciples were sent ahead to a Samaritan village to make preparation for Jesus' coming. But the people of that village did not "receive" him. The Samaritans did not worship as did the Jews, and knowing that these travelers were on their way to Jerusalem to observe the Passover, they did not treat them kindly. This angered James and John, and they asked Jesus if He wanted them

to call down fire from heaven and consume them.

This should not surprise us. When people treat us rudely, reject us, cut us off in traffic, or when a driver goes too slow in the passing lane, or someone badmouths us, what do we do? We want to get even; we want to pay them back. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth we say.

Remember, also that this was James and John talking. Jesus had nicknamed them “Sons of Thunder.” They were called “the Thunderstorm Boys” because they could cloud up and rain all over you in an instant. They had a short fuse. And, this was a Samaritan village. There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans were half-breeds, the result of inter-marriage between Jews and Assyrians. The Jews spoke of them as dogs. Jewish-Samaritan relations were a major racial issue of that day.

Then, too, there was scriptural precedent for what they were suggesting. Elijah had once called down fire from heaven on fifty soldiers of the king of Moab who were sent to arrest him (II Kings 1:10). If Elijah did it, why shouldn't they?

Jesus reproved James and John saying, “You know not what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.” And they went to another village (Luke 9:55-56).

James and John knew the scriptures, but they did not know the spirit of Jesus. Anger and vengeance are not His way. Jesus knew that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would leave us all blind and in need of dentures. He knew that people who fight fire with fire usually end up with nothing but ashes.

What is Jesus' spirit? It is to love all people, Samaritans as well as Jews; to respect their right to believe or not believe in him; to take rejection without retaliation;

to persuade, not coerce. It was His way to deal patiently with those who did not believe in Him. Judgment could wait. It would come soon enough. So Jesus simply walked away. “They went to another village” (verse 56).

This experience helps us to understand the spirit of Jesus. He was not an angry or vengeful person. When people hurt Him, rejected Him, disappointed Him, he forgave them, and simply walked away. This is the spirit we are to have.

There are three other experiences in the life of Jesus that help us to understand His spirit and the spirit that ought to characterize us. They teach us three things about the spirit Christians need:

- We ought to forgive those who let us down.
- We ought to weep over those who turn us down.
- We ought to pray for those who nail us down.

Outwitted

First, it is the way of Jesus to forgive those who let Him down, i.e. who disappointed Him. It always hurts when people we know and trust let us down; especially when that person is a close friend or a Christian brother. Peter is a case in point. He denied Jesus three times and bitterly disappointed Jesus as well as himself (Luke 22:34).

You know the scene. Jesus was meeting His disciples in the Upper Room to observe the Passover when He warned Peter that he would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed the next morning. Peter assured Him it would not ever happen. He’d die first.

Jesus and the disciples went from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested and hastened off for trial. The other disciples scampered into the night, but to Peter’s credit, he followed the mob

to the courtyard of the high priest where the first part of Jesus' trial took place. It was spring-time and someone had built a fire in the center of the courtyard to break the chill in the air. As the trial proceeded, the night grew cold, the fire grew hot, and Peter grew lukewarm. Three times someone approached Peter asking if he was a disciple of Jesus. Three times he denied it. The third time it was with cursing and swearing as if that was the surest way to convince people he was not Jesus' disciple (Mark 14:71). Just then, the rooster crowed and Peter, realizing that Jesus had known him better than he knew himself, began to weep (Mark 14:71-72).

Then came the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Early Easter morning a group of women went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. When they arrived they were met by an angel who told them, "He is not here; for He is risen" (Matthew 28:6). Then he instructed them to go and tell the disciples...and Peter, that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. He named Peter specifically because he wanted to make sure Peter knew he was included.

In Galilee, Jesus again singles out Peter and in a moving encounter asks him three times the same question, "Do you love me?" It was one time for each denial. And three times Peter affirms his love for and devotion to Christ. And each time Jesus again commissions him to his apostleship saying, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

In this encounter Jesus teaches us how to resolve problems with people who disappoint us or let us down. It was Peter who had failed Jesus. But Jesus did not stand back and wait for Peter to come to Him with hat in hand. He took the initiative. He approached Peter and talked with him face to face. That's the way we should resolve differences. There is simply no better way to deal with grievances than to talk person to person with the one we feel hurt us. If a person knows they have

wronged you, as Peter did, then you should go to them and seek reconciliation. Don't wait until they come to you. But, if they do not know they have hurt you, you don't need to go to them. Just forgive them and begin to show love to them.

One Sunday night following an evening worship service, a lady came to me to say, "I want you to know I have forgiven you." I was speechless. Bewildered! I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn't know I had done anything to offend her. She left me standing there to wonder what she referred to, and I don't know to this day, twenty years later. That bothered me to no end. And, quite frankly, I didn't appreciate it. This was rude on her part and did more harm than good.

Judy Stills reminded us, "The Holy Spirit is always a gentleman." And this was not the act of a gentleman or a lady. I hold no ill will toward her, and wish her the best in life, but I really don't care for her. I'd just as soon never see her again.

The one thing we cannot do is allow anger and bitterness to linger in our hearts. As Francine Rivers wrote, "Problems not dealt with have a way of growing like weeds in a garden. If given full freedom, problems become a lifestyle that chokes out all the good memories, the lessons learned, the goals and the clear insights. Eventually it kills love itself" (Francine Rivers, Leota's Garden, p. 59).

The scriptures say, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). We must always seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

I have heard that Edwin Markham, the poet, reached the age of retirement and found that his banker had defrauded him. He was ready to retire but was penniless. He came to the place where he could no longer write

poetry. Because of his bitterness the candle of joy had been blown out in his heart. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by the man he had thought was a friend. One day he was sitting at his desk doodling, drawing circles on his paper, not writing poetry but only thinking of the man who had wronged him. Markham later testified that the Holy Spirit convicted him with, "Markham, if you do not deal with this thing, it's going to ruin you. You cannot afford the price you are paying. You must forgive that man." The poet prayed, "Lord, I will and I do fully forgive." The root of bitterness was pulled out. The joy began to flow, and so did his mind and pen. He then penned perhaps his most famous poem, "Outwitted":

*He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!*

There is the solution to anger and bitterness. When someone has wronged you, draw a circle and take them in. Forgive them for Christ's sake . . . and your own! That is the spirit of Christ.

Tears of Grief, Tears of Joy

Second, it is the way of Jesus to weep over those who turned him down, i.e., who rejected him.

Jesus understood rejection. The scriptures say, "He is despised and rejected of men" (Isaiah 53:3). His hometown of Nazareth rejected him, and so did the Gadarenes. Now He had come to Jerusalem for the last time and they, too, would reject Him. The city and the people He loved had had ample opportunity to know that He was the Messiah who had come to save them. Just a few days

before, they had welcomed Him with hosannas at His triumphal entry. Soon they would turn against Him and ultimately cry for His crucifixion. As Jesus overlooked the city, He wept saying, "Oh, Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37).

Jesus could have called down fire from heaven to destroy the whole city that rejected Him. That was God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. But that was not Jesus' way.

Rejection can come to us in many ways: a divorce, a termination, a friend shunning us, not making the team or pep squad, losing an election, not being invited to a party. Even the children of divorce feel rejection. And when rejection comes we experience hurt and anger. At times we want to strike back. We want to get even. But that is not Christ's way. He wept over them.

These were the tears of a broken heart. Washington Irving said, "There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than 10,000 tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and of unspeakable love."

In an old William Holden movie, "The Revengers," a rancher searches for the gang who killed his family and destroyed his home. In a moving scene, a lady who befriended him, said, "You must be careful what you put in your heart. If you fill it with hate, there'll be no room for love and laughter and tears. And your heart will rot."

If we respond to hurts as Jesus did it will be with tears. We need to have broken hearts over broken relationships. We need to weep, not fume. Tears are the

lubricant that can smooth over any rough relationship.

You Can and You Must

Third, it was the way of Jesus to pray for those who nailed him down, i.e. who hurt him. On the cross of Calvary, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The cross, it has been said, was the worst possible torture a man could endure. First, he was stripped to the waist. Then his executioners tied his hands together, bent him over and took a whip of long leather thongs with lead pellets or pieces of bone and glass embedded in the thongs, and beat him across the back until his back was in ribbons. Many times the thrash of those thongs would come about the victim's face and take his eyes out of their sockets, even tear his teeth out. Often death followed from the scourgings alone.

After the scourging, in Jesus' case, they placed a crown of thorns on His brow. His blood ran down as they jerked His beard off with their hands. Then they spat in His face until He was covered with spittle. Hatred, prejudice, intolerance, bigotry, all the human heart could devise, were poured out on Christ.

Then they gave Him the 250-pound cross to carry. He stumbled under its weight until Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross for Him (Mark 15:21).

They led him to Golgotha's mountain and there put spikes in His hands and feet. No vital organs were involved, but the nails tore into His flesh. Then strong men lifted the heavy cross and let it drop into the hole in the earth. As it hit bottom with a thud, the weight of His body tore His hands and feet even more. Throughout all of this, He did not utter a sound.

Then they left Him there to die. Sometimes crimi-

nals hung suffering on the cross for days until they died of thirst. A man can go without food for almost two months, but he can go without water only a few days. In pain and thirst, their tongue would often swell double. In agony, Jesus cried out, "I thirst!" (John 19:28). And His tormentors gave Him vinegar to drink.

Many times when a person was dying on the cross, the ravenous vultures would land on him and pick at him while he was still alive.

People sometimes ask, who crucified Jesus? Not the Jews. Not the Romans. You and I did it. The scriptures say, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid upon him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6). It was our sin that nailed him there.

And in the midst of it all, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Not only did He pray for those who crucified Him, but He taught us to pray for our enemies, also. He said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

You say, "But I could never do that." Yes! Yes, you can. You not only can, you must! How often have you prayed, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors?" Then you heard Jesus say, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

I have a friend who, speaking at a convention years ago, said some very strong things that he felt needed

to be said. Some people were offended. One man said to him following the sermon, "I have a long memory." Listen! The last thing you want when you stand before the Lord on Judgment Day is a long memory. You need to hope for holy amnesia when that time comes. For if you do not forgive other people their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you (Matthew 6:15). George Hebert once wrote: "He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass. He must forgive if he would ever reach heaven, for every one needs to be forgiven."

What does it mean to forgive? It's not forgetting the pain. It's not pretending it didn't happen or doesn't matter. It's not just tolerating a person. The Greek word literally means "to wipe away, to remove, to let go." It's a legal word that means to release from debt or punishment—to pardon. In practical terms, it means that if someone hurts you, insults you, lies about you, badmouths you, and you forgive them, you accept the consequences, suffer the hurt, and they go free. You let it go. You don't try to make them pay for it. You don't try to get even.

There is a saying: Doing injury to a person puts you below them; revenging makes you even with them; forgiving sets you above them.

You can forgive. Stephen did. He prayed for those who stoned him to death, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). You can forgive. Paul did. He wrote, "At my first answer (trial), no man stood with me, but all men forsook me. I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge" (II Timothy 4:16). And with God's help, you can forgive, also. Besides, to forgive what other people do to us compared to what God has forgiven is like comparing a molehill to a mountain or a mud puddle to the Atlantic Ocean.

The spirit of James and John was not the spirit of Jesus. His spirit was not to call down fire from Heaven, not to seek vengeance. The Spirit of Christ was to forgive, to weep, and to pray. That's the spirit we must have. That's the spirit He will give you if you receive Him.

Remember this, Jesus is not the enemy of your enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies. He came not to condemn but to save.

He will come to us in much the same way He came to that Samaritan village. We can accept Him or reject Him. If we choose not to receive Him, He will simply walk away. Judgment can wait. It will come soon enough. Will you welcome Him? Receive Him? Accept Him today? If you reject Him, that will be life's greatest loss for you. The choice is yours.

Chapter 5

Good News for the Low-Down Blues

Text: 2 Corinthians 7:5-6

The Academy Award winning movie, *Platoon*, was about the cruel and inhumane ways some of our American soldiers treated the enemy and how they brutally treated one another in the Viet Nam War. Reflecting on this experience, one of the men said, “I think now, as I look back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. The real enemy was within us.”

Isn't that the way it most often is? The greatest enemy we have is ourselves and the biggest battles we fight are within.

The Apostle Paul knew something of these inner struggles when he wrote, “For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears” (2 Corinthians 7:5-6).

Paul was giving a report on his missionary movements and moods. He had been in Troas and from there had sent Titus to Corinth with a strongly worded letter to that troubled church. In time, he grew restless waiting for Titus to return with the situation report. Would the church at Corinth receive his reprimand and repent, or would they reject it, rebel and relapse back into their pagan ways? Would his work in Corinth be in vain? How would the church he loved respond? Anxious and afraid,

he decided to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia to intercept Titus as he returned. In these verses he tells us what happened when he arrived there.

He found no relief from either outward strife or inward stress. Everywhere he turned, he faced constant, straining, exhausting pressure. He summed up the situation by saying, “Without were fightings, within were fears.”

In those words, Paul tells us he actually fought battles on two fronts. One was on the outside; the other was on the inside. One was external, and one was internal. He struggled outwardly with his enemies and inwardly with his emotions. Without were fightings, strife, and persecution. Within were anxieties, fears, and discouragement. Was Paul afraid? Yes, he said he was. All men are afraid at times. What was he afraid of? He was afraid of failure, afraid that the church would reject him, afraid that his work in Corinth had been in vain. And that depressed him.

Paul went on to say, “God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (verse 6). The Greek word translated “cast down” literally means “to feel lowly,” “to be depressed.” Paul confessed that because of his circumstances he was feeling low-down, depressed, and discouraged. We all feel that way at times. Psychologists tell us that depression is the impression left by fear. It comes when you view your life as a failure, or when you suffer some great loss, real or imaginary, and you feel overwhelmed, hopeless, and afraid. It can happen to anyone.

One of my heroes is General Sam Houston who commanded the army of the Republic of Texas that won independence from Mexico. He was the first President of the Republic of Texas; the Governor of Texas; the U.S.

Senator from Texas; and then governor a second time. Yet after all that, he died discouraged, feeling his life was a failure.

Why was that? Civil War was in the air, and there was talk in Texas of seceding from the Union and joining the Confederacy. Sam Houston was unalterably opposed to that. He had worked tirelessly to get Texas admitted to the Union and thought it would be a mistake to go back to independence. So he resigned from the senate and ran for governor a second term on an anti-secession ticket. He was elected in 1859 and immediately began stumping the state speaking against secession, sometimes facing mobs that threatened his life. He warned the people that the war would cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and countless millions of dollars. He said, "Your fathers and your husbands, your brothers and your sons will be killed, and you might possibly win this war, but I doubt it."

Despite his valiant efforts, Texas voted in 1861 to secede from the Union. Houston refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy and was deposed as governor. He then retired to private life in Huntsville and died two years later believing that his life was a failure. He was anything but a failure, but he thought so because of what Texas did. He died discouraged (TV Movie about Sam Houston, June 30, 1991).

Sally Kempton once wrote, "It's hard to fight an enemy who has an outpost in your head." That is what Sam Houston was doing. He was fighting an enemy who had an outpost in his head. He was feeling low-down and discouraged like we all do at times.

By the way, it turned out that Sam Houston was right. Texas lost more soldiers in the Civil War than any state in the Confederacy except Virginia (Marquis James, The

Raven, University of Texas Press, 1999, p. 428). In 1865 General George Armstrong Custer marched 3,000 troops from Louisiana to Austin to enforce reconstruction (Tyler Morning Telegraph, January 8, 2007).

This, by the way, was the same General Custer who led the 7th U.S. Cavalry against Chief Crazy Horse and his Sioux warriors at the Battle of Little Big Horn known as “Custer’s Last Stand.” His entire army of 225 men was massacred. There is a lesson in all this I think, “Don’t Mess with Texas!”

What happened to Paul and Sam Houston can happen to us. No one is immune to it. But it is especially common among the elderly—when you are shut in, when your health fails, when your children neglect you, when you can’t go as you once did, when you see life passing you by.

Being a spiritual person doesn’t keep you from times of despair. As somebody said, “Life is a rollercoaster; it has its ups and downs, and being a holy man doesn’t make you any different. It just makes you a ‘holy roller!’” Ministers in particular are susceptible. Dr. John Stott once remarked that it is the Christian’s chief occupational hazard.

You may be saying, “I don’t want to be like that. I want to be like the saints of old, always on the mountaintop of victory.” Really? Read their life experiences carefully and you will discover that they, like us, fought bouts of depression. Moses was so stressed over the difficulties of leading Israel that he asked God to take his life (Numbers 11:1-5); Elijah was so distraught over his inability to root out Baal worship in Israel that he sat down under a juniper tree and asked God if he could die (I Kings 19:1-6).

Jonah was so angry at God for not destroying

Nineveh that he sat under a gourd vine and asked to die (Jonah 4:3); David struggled under the guilt of moral and spiritual failure to the point that his psalms are filled with laments of discouragement.

Add to the group Joshua, who tore his clothes and fell on his face before God when he was defeated in battle (Joshua 7:7-9), Jeremiah cursing the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14), and Job perplexed over his failed health (Job 3:1-3), and you will discover that they, like us, often walked through the dark valley of despair.

No one is in charge of your happiness but you, so we must learn to deal with and defeat discouragement and low-down feelings if we're going to live victorious lives.

What do we do when we feel low-down? Depressed? Here are some suggestions that will help. They are not the whole answer. I'm not giving a medical diagnosis, but a spiritual one. If your depression is such that you need medical help then by all means get it. But, here are some things that will help with most of life:

- Stay active.
- Stay connected.
- Stay praying.
- Stay believing.

Get Up, Dress Up, Show Up

First, you need to keep active. When you are depressed the natural tendency is to withdraw; you want to crawl into the cave of self pity and pull the hole in over you. That's what Elijah tried to do. Running from Queen Jezebel, he almost ran clear off the continent. But you can't outrun the blues. He then sat down in a dark cave on Mount Horeb and wrapped himself in self-pity. The Lord came to him and asked, "What doest thou here,

Elijah?” (I Kings 19:9). Elijah lamented that he alone had been faithful to God, and now all it had gotten him was threats on his life.

But the Lord would have none of that. He told him to get up and get busy about the kingdom’s work. There were still 7,000 prophets who had not yet bowed their knees to Baal.

Remember this, life is too short for long pity parties. So no matter how you feel, get up, dress up and show up.

Leroy “Satchel” Paige was one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most famous baseball players ever. He was the first black player to pitch in the World Series. He was the first player from the old Negro League to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Legend has it that he won 2,100 games, 60 in one season and 55 without giving up a hit. And that was before he was allowed in the majors as a 42-year-old “rookie.”

One of the remarkable things about Satchel is that no one knew exactly how old he was. His mother Lula said that he was born in 1904, and that she wrote the birthdates of her thirteen children down in the family Bible. But the Bible was destroyed, and the date was lost forever. We’ll never know for sure when he was born, but in 1948, at the age of 42, an old man by baseball standards, he threw his first pitch for the Cleveland Indians. He went six-one to help the Indians win the American League pennant and then went on to pitch four more seasons after that.

After being out of the big leagues for a dozen years the Kansas City Chiefs brought him back for one final appearance on September 25, 1965. Satch was pushing 60, but he pitched three shut-out innings that day.

Satchel Paige, like Yogi Berra is famous for his sayings. He said, "Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind it doesn't matter." He reminded us, "Don't look back. Something may be gaining on you." And he asked the question, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?" One saying of his that I like best says, "You win a few, you lose a few, some get rained out. But you got to dress for all of them" (Qtd. by Dan Gutman, USA Today, July 7, 2006).

That's what I'm saying to you here. Get up, get out...face reality with the confidence that God is alive and at work in your life. Get involved with the needs of somebody else. Get your eyes off yourself and back on to the world.

Staying busy was one of the things that helped the Apostle Paul. He didn't sit in Troas wringing his hands in despair. He crossed the Aegean Sea and went into Macedonia to intercept Titus. It will help you, also.

Like a Breath of Fresh Air

Second, keep in touch with your friends. Remember that when you're sick or discouraged your job won't take care of you – your friends will. So, keep in touch with your friends. One of the things that contributed to Paul's discouragement in this experience was that he had lost contact with his friend and fellow-worker, Titus. When he saw Titus again he was encouraged and strengthened.

Time and again the Apostle Paul mentioned friends who helped him when he was down. One of those was Onesiphorus, of whom he said, "He often refreshed me" (2 Timothy 1:16-17).

Paul was a prisoner of Rome when he wrote these words. He was not held in a central prison but rather allowed to live in a rented home chained to a Roman

guard twenty-four hours a day. Apparently, many of the believers in Rome were ashamed or afraid to be identified with him and did not minister to him in his incarceration. But Onesiphorus searched diligently until he found Paul. He must have knocked on lots of doors asking if anyone knew the whereabouts of the preacher from Jerusalem. Once he found Paul, he visited him often.

Moffett translates the word refreshed, “he often braced me up.” J. B. Phillips translates it, “He put fresh heart in me.” And the Amplified New Testament says, “He revived me like a breath of fresh air.”

The Apostle’s spirits must have sagged from time to time. Imprisoned, inactive, ignored by his friends, but when Onesiphorus came, his spirits soared; his visits were like a cool drink on a hot day.

That’s what friends can do for you, so don’t lose contact with your friends. Stay connected. Someone wrote:

*He hadn’t time to pen a note; he hadn’t time to cast
a vote.*

*He hadn’t time to sing a song; he hadn’t time to
right a wrong.*

*He hadn’t time to love or give; he hadn’t time to
really live.*

*From now on he’ll have time on end; he died today
without a friend.*

Anonymous

Don’t let that happen to you.

Pray Without Ceasing

Third, keep praying. Don’t let your low-down feelings get you lower than your knees. And, while you’re there, read the Psalms. You’ll find in them every human emotion there is – fear, anger, jealousy, grief, guilt, loneli-

ness, discouragement, and even joy! It will help you to walk with the Psalmist through his struggles.

Harold Willington writes, “The devil glories when he sees the strongest Christian with the blues.” To that I would add, “The devil trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees.”

The Apostle does not mention prayer in this experience, but you can be sure he prayed. He prayed about everything. Prayer is so important because it not only changes things, it changes us.

Joseph Scriven wrote the beautiful hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Listen to it:

*What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and
griefs to bear*

*What a privilege to carry – everything to God in
prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble
anywhere?*

*We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord
in prayer.*

(The Baptist Hymnal, p. 182)

God Pleasing Despair

Fourth, keep trusting in the Lord. Believe that God is greater than all your circumstances and the problems that have you “down.” Believe that God has a purpose in your difficult circumstances. What is He trying to accomplish in your life through these circumstances? Put your priorities in proper order, put God first, not yourself. Consider that these problems may really be opportunities. Ask, “Are my disappointments God’s appointments?”

Somebody coined the phrase, “God-pleasing de-

spair.” They meant by that that in our despair we are sometimes driven to the only true refuge, God himself. The Apostle Paul experienced this and wrote, “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Paul suggests that the Lord allowed these things to happen to teach him his weaknesses and to bring him to a deeper trust in the Lord. He speaks of the Lord as the “God which raiseth the dead” (verse 9). He has the power to make dead things live again.

The greatest power in this universe is not the power to destroy. The smallest child can step on a bug and crush it. And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t put the bug back together again. Only God can make dead things live. Paul suggests that his trials brought him to God who can do that.

Soviet dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when visiting in Washington in 1973, told how he sunk into the depths of despair during his eight year sentence to a Soviet prison, unable for a long time to contact his family and friends.

One day, during a ten-minute break, he decided the only way out was suicide. The easiest method would be to pretend to escape, knowing he would be gunned down before he had gone more than a few yards. As he was getting to his feet to make such a break, a new prisoner who had just joined the work gang looked at him. Then, without a word, the prisoner drew a cross on the ground. Solzhenitsyn said, “I realized then that this was a message from God that I should not take my life.”

When he returned to the prison camp that night, he was told he would be released. Thus, he was able to begin his work of documenting the horrors of Soviet life. Had he given in to his despair, the world would never

have known his great genius as an author.

Don't forget when you're down to nothing, God is up to something. So keep believing. Faith sees the invisible, believes the impossible, and receives the incredible. It's the way to victory over despair.

Chapter 6

Guilt and Grace

Luke 7:36-50

Arthur Koestler wrote in the London Observer years ago, “If one looks with a cold eye at the mess man has made of his history, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he is afflicted by some built-in mental disorder which drives him toward self destruction.”

Koestler then proceeded to point out that we have made tremendous strides in virtually every area of our life – knowledge, communications, travel...but none of us has seen a curve representing progress in theoretical and applied ethics “since the days when Buddha sat under the banyan tree, waiting for his oxcart.” He concludes, “The biological evolution seems to have come to a standstill, at least since Cro-Magnum days...”

One of the great lessons of history is that mankind is always changing but man is ever the same. The scriptures give us the answer as to why. It is man’s willful rebellion against his creator. Every evil known to man flows from that fact. Look at the book of Genesis, and you will see a catalogue of sins that have plagued man since the beginning of history and are still plaguing us today:

Murder – Cain kills his brother (4:8);

Drunkenness – Noah gets drunk immediately after the flood (9:20-21);

Illegitimacy – Abraham has a son with his servant girl (16:3);

Homosexuality – Visitors to the cities of Sodom &

Gomorrah look for same-sex partners (19:5);

Incest – Lot’s daughters sleep with their father (19:31-32);

Rape – Dinah is violated by Shechem (34:2);

Kidnapping and slavery – Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers (37:24);

Prostitution – Judah and Tamar (38:24).

So what’s new? Nothing except the coverage. I’m not sure things are any worse than ever before in the world today. Maybe it’s just that the news reporting is better.

Regardless of which it is, we need to place a warning over sin: “Sin will always take you further than you want to go, teach you more than you want to know, keep you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay.”

One of the consequences of sin is guilt. Guilt is the memory and the shame and the regret that comes from past wrongs. We all have a voice inside us that will speak to us if we will let it. Sometimes it’s easy to hear; sometimes we have to turn down the volume of the distracting noise around us so we can listen. But the voice tells us if we are on the right or the wrong track. God has written His law in the hearts of men so that we know right from wrong (Romans 2:12-15). The conscience both accuses and excuses us. Guilt is the haunting fear that others know what we’ve done, or will find out. As Proverbs says, “The wicked flee when no man pursueth” (Proverbs 28:1).

We may hide our wrongs from other people, but we cannot hide them from ourselves. When a prominent evangelist was dismissed amid sex and drug allegations, he said, “There’s a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I have been warring against it all of my adult life” (Tyler Morning Telegraph, November 6, 2006). Others didn’t know, but he did, and it haunted him.

It ought to be said that if a relationship or practice has to be a secret you shouldn't be in it. The same thing goes for any practice. Richard Baxter left us sage advice when he said, "Spend your time in nothing on which you might not claim the blessings of God; in nothing in which you would not review with a quiet conscious on your dying bed; in nothing which you might not be safely and properly doing if guests surprised you in the act." We should ask ourselves and answer the question truthfully, "Is there any area in my life that would cause me great dismay if it was reported in tomorrow's headlines?" A little cancer will eventually kill us, and sin is a spiritual malignancy.

The answer to our sin, secret and otherwise, is the grace of God that brings forgiveness and cleansing. Playwright Eugene O'Neill said it best, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

There is a story in the life of Jesus that speaks to us of God's amazing grace. Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner one night. The houses of well-to-do people were built around an open courtyard. The courtyard often had a garden and a fountain in it, and in warm weather, meals were eaten there. It was a custom in the east that when a rabbi was at a meal in such a house, anyone could come from the street—they were quite free to do so, to listen to him teach—the door was barred to no one.

As they ate, a woman of the street, a prostitute, came in. She, no doubt, had listened to Jesus speak from the edge of the crowd and had glimpsed in Him the hand which could lift her from her sinful ways.

The guests did not sit at a table as we do. They reclined on low couches around the table resting on their left elbow, leaving the right hand free. Their feet were stretched out behind them, and during the meal their

sandals were taken off.

The woman had a small vial of very costly perfume that she wanted to pour on the feet of Jesus. Because His feet extended behind Him, she approached Him unobtrusively. But as she stopped or knelt behind Him, she was overcome with emotion and her tears fell on His feet. As the tears fell, she spontaneously wiped them away with her long flowing hair, kissed His feet, and then anointed them with the precious ointment. To kiss a person's feet was a sign of deep respect.

The Pharisee jumped to a conclusion and said to himself, "If Jesus was really a prophet he would not have allowed this kind of woman to touch Him. He surely would have known what sort of person she is. Consequently he could not be a prophet or he would have discerned her character" (Luke 7:39).

Jesus not only knew the kind of person she was, He also knew Simon's thoughts. So Jesus told a parable to Simon to illustrate the difference between his actions and the woman's. He told the story of two men who owed a debt. One owed \$500, and the other owed \$5,000. Neither had money to pay their debt, and so the creditor forgave them both.

Jesus' question to Simon was, "Which of them will love him most?" The obvious answer was the one to whom the most was forgiven. Then Jesus contrasted Simon's treatment of Him with this woman's and said to Simon, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." Then He said to the woman, "Thy sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:47-48).

The whole story demonstrates a contrast between two attitudes of mind and heart. Simon was proud and self-righteous and felt no need of forgiveness and, therefore, felt no love for Christ. The woman was conscious of nothing else other than her need for forgiveness and

was so overwhelmed with her love for Christ who could supply it that her tears flowed unashamedly. Jesus, therefore, said of her, “Thy sins which are many are forgiven.” The fact is, the more aware we are of God’s grace, the more we will love Christ and want to do for Him. This experience teaches us three great truths about guilt and grace.

- Jesus knows the depths of our sin.
- Jesus loves us in spite of our sin.
- Jesus forgives all sin.

Thou Art the Man

First, Jesus knows the depth of our sin. Simon said to himself, “This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is who touchest him” (verse 39). The truth is Jesus did know because He said of the woman “Her sins which are many, are forgiven.” More than that, He also knew Simon’s thoughts about Him.

Following Peter’s denial of Christ at His trial, Jesus met him and the disciples by the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus and Peter walked and talked, Jesus asked him three times, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” When Jesus asked Simon this question the third time, it grieved him that He asked him if he loved Him three times. Grief is often a part of the price we pay for sin. Then he responded, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee” (John 21:17). And the truth is, Jesus did know. He knows our sin, and He knows of our love and devotion.

Throughout scripture we are taught that the Lord always knows the depths of our sin as well as the depth of our devotion. When David sinned against the Lord by committing adultery with Bathsheba, he thought that

his wrong was safely hidden. Then the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. Nathan told David about two men in a city, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had many sheep in his flock. The poor man had only one small lamb which was like a pet to his children. Then one day the rich man prepared a feast for a visitor, and instead of taking one of his many sheep, he took the only lamb from this poor man and served it to his guests.

When David heard this, his sense of justice was aroused and said, "The man who has done this will restore the lamb fourfold for he had no pity on the poor man." Then Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man" (II Samuel 12:7).

This is precisely what David had done. As the king, he could have had his choice of any beautiful lady in his kingdom. But instead, he stole the only wife of his faithful servant Uriah.

Then David realized that God had been on to him all along. Weighted down by guilt and remorse he confesses his sin saying, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight..." (Psalm 51:4).

As Jesus sat by the city water well outside Samaria, waiting for his disciples to bring food from the city, a woman from Samaria came to draw water. She came alone because none of the respectable ladies in the city would come with her. She had been married and divorced five times and now had a live-in boyfriend.

When Jesus saw her He saw her not so much in terms of badness as sadness. The woman had been looking for something all of her life that she had not found. She had a spiritual thirst that had never been satisfied. She kept thinking it could be satisfied with another man, with another marriage. So she had flitted from man to man, from relationship to relationship, hoping to satisfy

her spiritual thirst. Finally she had quit fooling with the legalities of marriage and just started living with a man. But after all that, her soul was as parched and as dry as ever. Jesus spoke to her of living water that could satisfy the need that she felt. When she heard that, she said, “O sir, give me that water” (John 4:15).

When Jesus told her to go and call her husband, she confessed that she had no husband. That’s when Jesus revealed that He knew all about her past life. She was convinced that He was a prophet and rushed back into the city as an evangelist, saying to all who would listen to her, “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” (John 4:29).

To be forgiven we must confess our sin (I John 1:9). The word confess means to “to agree with,” or “to say the same thing as.” The Lord convicts us of sin in two places, in scripture and in our conscience. So He knows our sin already. When we confess our sin we are not letting God in on information that He did not previously have. He knows the hidden things of the heart (I Corinthians 4:5). He knows the secret of our soul. The Lord knows the depths of our sin.

The Touchable Christ

Second, the Lord loves us in spite of our sins. Simon was incensed that Jesus would allow such a woman to touch him. He would never do that. He did not think she was worthy of forgiveness, so he was offended. But Jesus did not share his disdain for her and freely allowed her to touch Him. The truth is, this woman touched Jesus in more ways than one. She touched Him with her hands, but she also touched Him with her tears. She not only touched His feet, but she also touched His heart. He is always touched by the tears of those who are genuinely

sorry over their sins.

This woman was not worthy of forgiveness, but neither are we. Remember this, God loves you because of who God is, not because of anything you did or did not do. That's what grace is all about. There is nothing we can do to earn the love and forgiveness of God. William Temple spoke for all of us when he said, "The only thing of my very own which I contributed to redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed" (Christianity Today, October 2006, p. 96).

We can touch Jesus, also. The scriptures speak of Jesus' openness to sinners like us when they say, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmity; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16). He will gladly forgive those who are genuinely sorry for their sins because Godly sorrow leads to repentance.

Did you catch that? Jesus can be touched by us. He feels our sorrow, our guilt, our remorse.

We not only need to touch Jesus, we need for Him to touch us and say as He did to her, "Thy sins are forgiven."

Rubbed Out, Not Rubbed In

Third, Jesus forgives the whole of our sin. The good news is that there is more grace in God than there is sin in us. If God ceased to forgive, heaven would be empty. The solution to our sin and the way of forgiveness is found in scripture: "Repent ye therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out when the time of refreshing shall come to the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ which before was preached

unto you” (Acts 3:19-20).

To be forgiven, we must repent and turn from our sins. As Charles Spurgeon said, “You and your sins must part, or you and God cannot be friends.”

When we do that, our sins will be “blotted” out. The word “blotted” goes back to the time when ink had no acid in it. Modern ink has acid in it and thus bites into the paper. That’s why to erase it you almost have to rub a hole in the paper. But ancient ink was not that way; it had no acid in it. It just laid on top of the page and dried.

Paper was very valuable in those days, so if you made a mistake you didn’t wad it up and throw it away; it was used again and again. All that was needed to remove the old ink was to moisten it by wiping a wet sponge across the page. The page would then be as good as new. The word “blotted” describes the process of wiping old pages clean and making them new again. It pictures for us just how complete God’s forgiveness and cleansing are.

That’s the great need of our life. Not just to turn over a new leaf but to have the old leaves wiped clean. And the good news about sin is that Jesus came to rub it out, not to rub it in, and God’s eraser leaves no smudges. With God, there are no throw-away people.

But let me remind you that while God blots out our sins, He does not blot out the memory of them. When He forgives He forgets, but oftentimes we don’t...and Satan doesn’t. If, after you have confessed and forsaken your sins they’re ever brought up again, God is not responsible. Satan is the one who does that to rob you of peace and joy.

So, we not only must receive God’s forgiveness, but we must learn to forgive ourselves. We must not go on punishing ourselves when Christ has already taken our punishment. If He died for our forgiveness then we

ought to forgive ourselves and not continue to punish ourselves.

A priest heard a confession from a woman who claimed to hear from God. He was skeptical, but she insisted that the Lord spoke directly to her. So he said to her, “The next time you speak to the Lord, ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in the seminary.” She said she would.

The next week she was back. The priest asked if she had done as he requested. She said she had. He said, “And what did the Lord say?” She replied, “He said, ‘I forgot.’”

Listen to the promise of scripture. “I, even I, am he that blotteth thy transgressions for mine own sake and will not remember thy sins” (Isaiah 43:25).

There is a difference between guilt and feeling guilty. A man can commit a crime and feel no guilt. The court encounters that every day. But you can also feel guilty without being guilty. Psychiatrists and counselors encounter that every day. You must seek and find the forgiveness of God and then forgive yourself. If you need to do something to visualize your forgiveness, put a small grave in the flower bed and visit it occasionally and visualize that the old man is dead and buried. When the enemy comes back, visit the grave and then let the memory of past sins be an occasion for thanking God for his forgiveness. Move quickly from the memory of past sins to a gratitude for forgiven sin, and it will slowly pass away.

If God forgives us and then forgets, who are we to remember?

Forgiveness is free, but it is never cheap. If you break a precious heirloom and I forgive you, I bear the loss and you go free. If you ruin my reputation and I forgive you, I bear the loss and you go free. It's costly to me, but not

to you. Sin and forgiveness cost Jesus His life. But it comes to us as grace, the unmerited favor of God.

If we have experienced God's forgiveness, we must in turn forgive other people who have hurt us. The Lord taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12). When you pray that you are praying either a blessing or a curse on yourself. If I forgive, I pray a blessing on myself. If I don't forgive, I'm praying a curse on myself. A newspaper article recently called Iraq "The Land of Long Memories and Deep Grudges." That should never be true of us. Life is too short to hate. Forgive everyone everything.

If your life has grown stale, you can experience God's forgiveness. Grace is available at the same place this woman told about in the book of Luke found it, at the feet of Jesus. Open your heart to Him. Repent of your sin and turn to Him, and a time of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord.

Chapter 7

The Conquest of Fear

Revelation 1:17-18

The late Ann Landers, who wrote an advice column for over three decades, reported that she received over 10,000 letters a week, with more mail concerning one particular difficulty than any other. What was it? Sex? No. Children? No. Finances? No. It was fear.

A famous psychologist called fear the most devastating disease known to mankind, and G. K. Chesterton, the brilliant British writer, noted that if he were able to preach one sermon and one only, it would be on fear.

Fear is to be reckoned with by all of us – young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, all ages and all classes. We have fears of all kinds – fear of the dark, fear of heights, fear of sickness, fear of poverty, fear of others, fear of the past, the present, and the future.

Oren Arnold expressed my feelings best when he said, “Sometimes when I get in a nervous dither over such current problems as inflation, war, taxes, crime, pollution, political intrigue, urban sprawl, population, and whatever, I find myself yearning for 1933, when all we had to fear was fear itself.” Art Sampson, speaking of our many fears, said, “My great-grandfather rode a horse, but wouldn’t go near a train. Grandpa rode on trains, but was afraid of automobiles. Pop drove a car and was afraid to fly. I love to fly, but I’m afraid of a horse.”

Speaking of flying, I have always been nervous about

flying in small planes. When a friend of mine who was a pilot learned this, he said, “Where is your faith? Didn’t Jesus say he would be with you always?” I responded, “No. No. What He said was, ‘Lo (Low), I am with you always.’” My friend responded, “There’s no reason to be afraid, you aren’t going to die before your time.” I said, “I know that, but I may get up there and it is the pilot’s time.”

The truth is, according to a 1989 study, a person could take one domestic flight every single day for an average of 29,000 years before he would succumb to a fatal crash. To put it another way, even an exceptionally safe driver is 30 times more likely to be killed going across the country than a jet passenger making the same trip. (“Fly Without Fear,” *Reader’s Digest*, December 1989, p. 90). But knowing that doesn’t help me. I fly, but I still have white knuckles every time the plane takes off.

The Bible is the one book which gives us an answer to our fears. There are two words that stand out in the Bible like mountain peaks – they are the words “fear not.” Three hundred and sixty-five times in the scriptures, they are spoken to God’s people. That’s one time for every day of the year.

With those words God confronted Abraham, “Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (Genesis 15:1). With those words, he spoke to Isaac in his lonely task of digging wells in the wilderness. With those words, he comforted Jacob when his son Joseph was lost in Egypt. With those words, he challenged the Israelites at the Red Sea. And Moses said to the people, “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will show to you today” (Exodus 14:13).

Those two words stand out in the New Testament as part of our great Christian inheritance. It is both the

mission and the message of Jesus to deliver mankind from slavery to fear. In Jesus' greatest statement about the conquest of fear, He said, "Fear not; I am the first and the last; I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore; . . . and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:17-18).

There are three supreme issues which concern mankind – life, death, and eternity. In this statement, Jesus gives us an all-encompassing statement concerning these three vital matters.

- He tells us not to be afraid of life.
- He tells us not to be afraid of death.
- He tells us not to be afraid of eternity.

Cold Feet and Hot Water

First, Jesus tells us not to be afraid of life. Are people afraid of life? Apparently so. Over 30,000 people commit suicide in America every year. Suicide is always a tragedy for everyone it touches. Not only does it leave the person dead, but it leaves a family and friends to grieve over the loss, and it often leaves them with a mixture of anger, guilt, and shame. They are angry at the person for leaving them. They ask, "Why did he have to do this to us? He didn't have to die." And it leaves them with guilt. They ask, "Is it our fault? Could we have done anything to prevent this? Were there signs we should have seen?"

Regardless of the circumstances, suicide is an irrational act of a person who is momentarily so overwhelmed by the circumstances of his life that he sees no way out. In that moment, he is more afraid of life than of death.

Life can be overwhelming in lots of ways to a lesser degree. A few years ago (in 2005) everyone in America was talking about Jennifer Wilcox, the runaway bride.

This 32-year-old from Duluth, Georgia, had planned a lavish wedding – 14 bridesmaids, 14 groomsmen, and 600 invited guests. On Tuesday evening before the wedding, she went for a jog and never returned home. When her fiancé and family found her car keys, identification, money, and engagement ring, they assumed the worst. They notified the police and a nationwide missing person's search ensued. The family offered a \$100,000 reward for her safe return or for information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of those they believed kidnapped her. All of America followed this story as it was featured on every newscast and in every newspaper.

Four days after she disappeared, she called her fiancé from a Seven-Eleven store in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and said she had been kidnapped. He managed to keep her on the phone long enough for authorities to trace the call. When they found her and got to the truth, they learned that she had not been kidnapped, but rather had bought a cross-country bus ticket and left home on her own. The pressure of the wedding had gotten to her, and she just ran away. She went first to Las Vegas and then to Albuquerque. She pretended to be kidnapped just to save face. The experience left her embarrassed and the nation angered.

One reporter accused her of having “faulty mental hinges.” Another wrote that “Her cold feet may have gotten her in hot water.”

Scorn her or pity her, but she is not the first or the last bride to get cold feet about the responsibility of marriage. In fact, it might be good if more brides and grooms approached marriage with more apprehension.

Fulton Oursler, American journalist and author (1893-1952) said, “We crucify ourselves between two thieves: regret for yesterday and fear of tomorrow.” Fear makes

us wonder, ‘Will I be able to handle life? Can I stand up to the responsibilities life puts on me?’

Even Moses trembled before the mighty responsibilities of life when the Lord called him to go to Egypt and tell the Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go. Moses responded, “O, my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of slow tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

Solomon, when he was appointed king by the Lord, shrank from his vast responsibilities, saying, “And now, O Lord, my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: And I am but a little child; I know not how to go out and come in” (I Kings 3:7).

Jeremiah felt that same sense of inadequacy when the Lord appointed him as a prophet. He responded saying, “I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jeremiah 1:6).

Who among us has not felt that way at times? Even the apostle Paul, as he recounted the pressures of missionary service, said, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16).

No one is completely free from fear as long as he lives. The story goes, an American businessman named Wilson, tired of the Great Depression, rising taxes and increasing crime, sold his home and business in 1940 and moved to an island in the Pacific. Balmy and ringed with beautiful beaches, the island seemed like paradise. Its name? Iwo Jima. That little island, 5-1/2 by 2-1/2 miles, became the base for Japanese fighter planes attacking U.S. bombers and was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in World War II. Over 6,000 American men and 21,000 Japanese died on Iwo Jima (Bill Bryson, “Life’s Little Gambles,” *Reader’s Digest*, March 1988, p. 64). Wilson couldn’t escape danger, and neither can we.

When we are afraid of life, Jesus comes to us to say,

“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Hebrews 13:5). In our severest trials, He says to us, “...Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Savior” (Isaiah 43:1-3).

Our confidence, then, in the face of fear should be that of David, “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee. . . in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me” (Psalm 56:3-4).

God is Fluffing Your Pillow

Second, Jesus tells us to be unafraid of death. The first human emotion mentioned in the Bible was fear...I think it was the fear of death. The Lord’s command to Adam and Eve in the garden was to not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil “for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

What happened when they disobeyed? They realized what they had done and hid themselves from the Lord. And when the Lord called Adam, he responded, “I was afraid...” (Genesis 3:10).

Afraid of what? Afraid to die – even before anyone had experienced it, it was frightening. But that was only the beginning. Since that time, death has reigned supreme. The apostle Paul writes, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passes unto all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Death always looms before us. Nearing the end of his 89-year lifetime, Michelangelo wrote, “I have reached the

24th hour of my day. And ...no project arises in my brain which has not the figure of death graven upon it.”

Death is life’s foremost certainly (Romans 5:12). And although it comes to some in the bloom of their youth and delays its coming until some pass the century mark, it eventually comes to all. The scriptures say “It is appointed unto men once to die and after that, the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

Let’s assume that you will live to be 80. Instead of letting your life be represented by twenty-four hours, let’s assume it is 16 waking hours from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., i.e., your life begins at 6:00 a.m. and ends at 10:00 p.m.

- *If you are 10 years old, it is now 8:00 a.m. and breakfast is over.*
- *If you are 20, it is 10:00 a.m.*
- *If you are 30, it is 12:00 noon.*
- *If you are 40, it is 2:00 p.m., and lunch has passed. Your life’s half over.*
- *If you are 50, it is 4:00 p.m.*
- *If you are 60, it is 6:00 p.m., and dinner is being served.*
- *If you are 70, it is 8:00 p.m., and the shadows have already fallen.*
- *If you are 80, it is 10:00 p.m., and God has pulled the covers back and is fluffing your pillow.*

With caution, you may postpone the last hour, but you cannot stop it. An Arab proverb says, “Death is the black camel which kneels at the gate of all.”

The scriptures tell us that the days of our years are threescore and ten, and if we are extra healthy we might live to be eighty, but then life is soon ended (Psalm 90:10-12). Theologian J. I. Packer has given good advice about this. He suggests: “Plan your life, budgeting for

seventy years...and understand that if your time proves shorter that will not be unfair deprivation, but rapid promotion.”

But, remember, Jesus is the Lord of life and of death. The writer of Hebrews writes,

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself (Christ) likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that hath the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The apostle Paul says of Jesus, “He must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet, and the last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (I Corinthians 15:25-26). Then after describing for us the victory over death we have in Jesus, the apostle Paul cries out, “O, death, where is thy sting? O, grave, where is they victory? . . . Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 15:55, 57).

The Lord is with His people when they die. Listen to the wonderful promise of scripture, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever” (Psalm 23). With the good shepherd by our side we do not need to be afraid of the valley of the shadow of death.

Death Has An Answer

Finally, the Lord tells us to not be afraid of eternity. A few weeks ago, I received a letter from a woman in Wisconsin whose daughter had been brutally murdered eleven years ago. Someone had shared with her one of my books, and she wrote to ask, “Do you know what heaven is like? Has anyone ever come back from there to tell us about it?”

Her question reveals the deep longings of the human heart to know about eternity. She wanted to know, “Does heaven have anything to say to us about life after death?”

I can understand her concern. If I am going someplace new, I like to talk to someone who has already been there. Or better yet, I am happy if that person will go with me and guide me so I can experience the best and, if possible, avoid the dangers.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. He has always been and always will be. He was dead, and He is alive. He has the keys of death and the grave, so He’s in control of both.

The late John Claypool closed one of his sermons by saying, “Back in 1955, Lue Ann and I spent the summer traveling through western Europe. One afternoon we drove into a village in the Swiss Alps that was well known as a base for mountain climbing. On the outskirts of that town was an impressive larger-than-life statue of an Alpine mountain guide. He had the little pointed hat on his head with a feather sticking up, a rope around his shoulders, and hob-nail boots on his feet. His finger was pointing toward the highest peak on the horizon, and his head was flung back over his shoulder as if he were calling to someone. Underneath in German was the inscription: “Follow me, I’ve been there before.”

It is comforting to know that I can trust Christ with my future because, in a sense, He has already been there. He already knows everything about it, and promises to lead me if only I will follow him. We don't know what the future holds, but He knows! And He promises to walk with us through it. And that's enough.

We can rest assured of this: Jesus stands at the graveside of every Christian and whispers in our ear, "This isn't all. I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). A little girl once wrote a simple, one-line note to me after a sermon. She said, "Thank God for Jesus!" To which I respond, "Amen!" He is our hope!

Winston Churchill, one of the most influential men of the twentieth century and prime minister of Great Britain during World War II, planned his own funeral service at Westminster Abbey in London. The service began with taps, what the military plays at the end of the day. When it's all over. You know the words: "Day is done. Gone the sun. From the hills, from the lakes, from the sky. All is well. Safely rest. God is nigh."

The service proceeded with hymns and scriptures that he had picked. Then, just when the service seemed to be over, the bugler began to play reveille, the bugle call that comes early in the morning to awaken and summon a soldier to duty: "You got to get up, you got to get up, you got to get up in the morning." It was his way of saying what God says—the last note of history is not taps, but reveille.

Back to the lady's letter, "Does heaven have anything to say to us about the life beyond?" Yes! Listen to the scriptures, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: from henceforth, yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their words do follow them'" (Revela-

