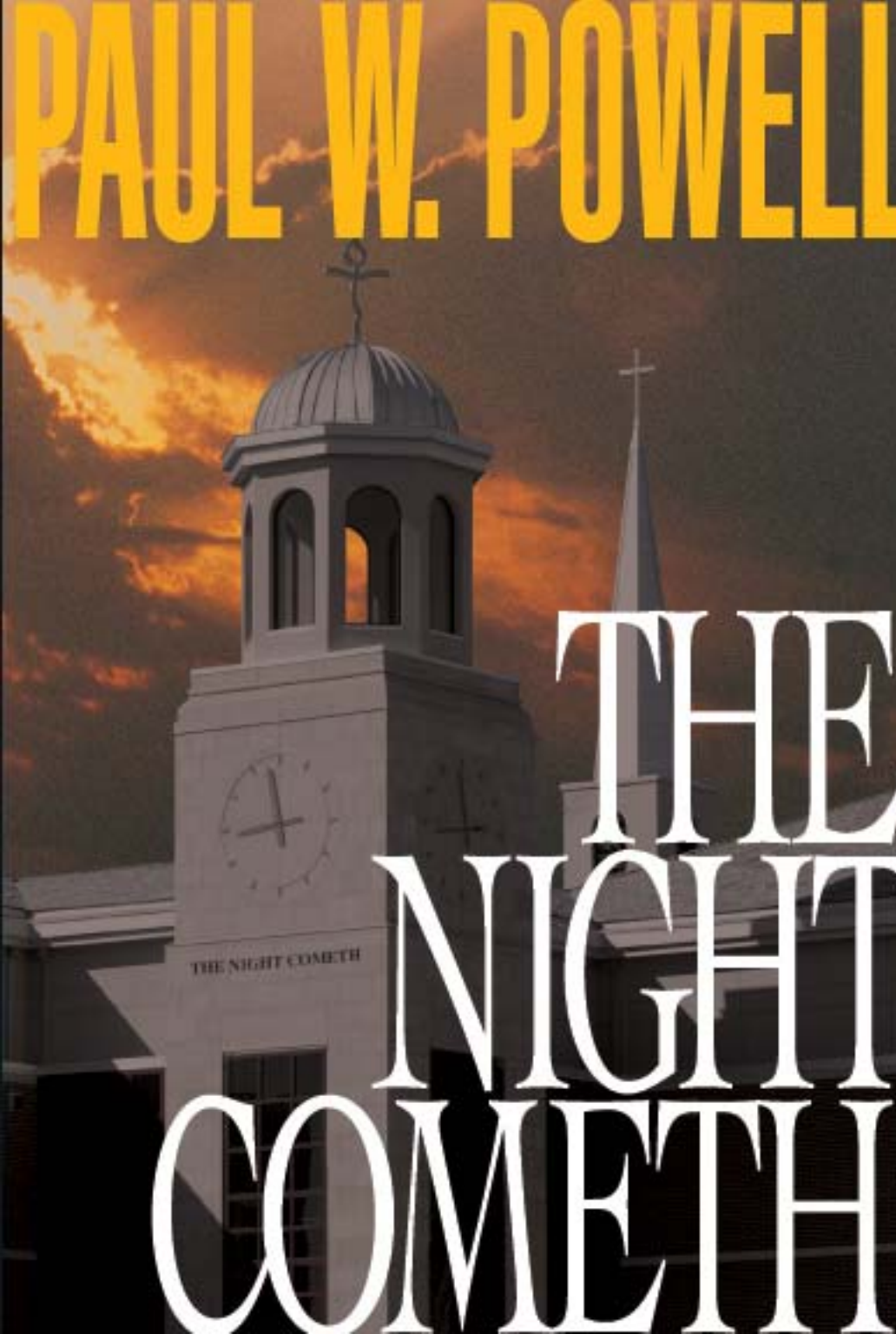


PAUL W. POWELL

A photograph of a church building, likely a cathedral or large church, featuring a prominent clock tower with a dome and a cross on top. The sky is a dramatic sunset with orange and yellow clouds. The church's architecture is classical, with a steeple visible in the background. The title 'THE NIGHT COMETH' is overlaid in large white serif font on the right side of the image.

THE
NIGHT
COMETH

THE NIGHT COMETH

PAUL W. POWELL

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*Dedicated To
Fritz and Shirley Smith
My favorite evangelistic musicians,
My dear friends.*

Acknowledgment:
Our appreciation to Joe and Joyce Cline
for providing the funds to
make the printing of this
book possible.

In honor and memory
of our children -
Lan, Syd and Dina (1961 - 1965)

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Introduction

During India's mutiny against Great Britain in 1857-58, British soldiers were camped outside the city of Delhi when the British commander gave the order for his men to attack the city. Medical men began to move among the troops to determine who among them was fit for battle. A young soldier lay wounded, and as the medic looked at him, he pleaded, "Sir, please don't declare me unfit for battle. It's just a fever, and the sound of the bugle will make me well."

Listen! If you listen carefully, you can hear God's bugle sounding right now. At this moment it's playing reveille. But soon the day will end, the sun will set, and taps will signal "lights out."

There is always a note of urgency about reveille, the morning bugle call that awakens an army and summons it to duty. That same note of urgency characterized Jesus, his apostles, and the early church. And wherever the work of God has gone forward, there too you will find people who work with a sense of urgency.

Early pioneer preachers who evangelized throughout our state of Texas "honeycombed" it with New Testament churches, turned it into a Baptist stronghold, and labored with a sense of passionate urgency. That's why they did such a remarkable job. Z. N. Morrell, who by all accounts was the greatest pioneer preacher to come to Texas, envisioned Texas as a great Baptist stronghold from the moment he crossed the Sabine River. Upon visiting Nacogdoches during his first trip to Texas, he recorded in his book, *Fruits and Flowers of the Wilderness*: "My very soul burned within me to preach Jesus." The text of his sermon was Isaiah 35:1: "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose."

Morrell confessed at the conclusion of that stirring and impromptu sermon: "My soul was full to overflowing, and at that moment I believed that text." This became the golden text of his life and the persistent faith and expectation of his ministry in Texas.

Other great preachers like James Huckins, William Tyron, and R. E. B. Baylor, who shared his passionate urgency, followed Morrell. In 1848, Rufus Burleson, who was twice president of Baylor University, came to Texas. He did not come to be an educator; he instead came to preach. The salvation of the frontier state

had occupied his mind since his college days, and he set out to win the new state of Texas over to Christ.

According to his biographer, Harry Haynes, when Morrell graduated from seminary in Covington, Kentucky, "While his classmates were consecrating themselves to various mission fields, he raised his boyish face toward heaven, stretched out both his arms toward the west, and exclaimed, "This day I consecrate my life to Texas.'" When he landed at Galveston in January 1848, he dropped to his knees in the sand and prayed, "O God, give me Texas for Jesus, or I die."

But what has happened to us today? Where is that kind of passion and urgency that once marked us? I fear we are resting on our laurels, and we are at ease in Zion. The tower of the new Baugh-Reynolds Campus at Truett Seminary holds a beautiful clock inscribed with the words "The night cometh." Those words should remind us that time is passing, the lost are dying, and churches are hurting.

We must recapture that sense of urgency, or Texas will be lost again. Already we are becoming more and more pagan-like with each passing day. It is not the aggressiveness of the enemy that holds us back, but rather our own passivity and indifference.

Our day of opportunity is quickly passing, and the night is coming. Soon, we will hear God's angel playing taps:

*Day is done,
Gone the sun,
From the hills,
From the lakes,
From the skies.
All is well,
Safely rest,
God is nigh.*

God is nigh, but so is the night. *That's why we must hurry before sundown.*

Paul W. Powell
September 2002
George W. Truett Theological Seminary
Baylor University
Waco, Texas

1

The Night Cometh

John 9:4

In his famous “I Have A Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now.”

Jesus lived his whole life with a sense of the fierce urgency of *now*. He knew that his time on earth was limited, and his days here were numbered. In a short time he would have to return to the Father (John 12:8, 16:17, 28). Whatever he was to do or whatever was to be done for him had to be done while the opportunity presented itself. It must be done immediately.

That’s why he said, “We must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4).

He was about to cure a blind man on the Sabbath day, and he knew it would incur the wrath of the rigid, Sabbath-keeping Pharisees. But that didn’t matter. He had to do it then, while the opportunity was there, for it might not come again.

In the King James Version, Jesus says, “*I* must do the works of him that sent me...”. However, all other translations say, “*We* must work the works of him that sent me...”. His sense of urgency must also be our sense of urgency.

His earlier followers expressed that same urgency when they wrote, “Behold, today is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 6:2). And, “Wherefore the Holy Ghost saith, to-

day if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts..." (Hebrews 3:7-8).

The call of scripture is ever and always one of urgency. Every page of the Bible says "today." Every tick of the clock says "today." Every beat of your heart says "today." Every obituary column in the newspaper says "today." All of God's creation seems to cry out, "Behold, today is the day of salvation."

We too need to live and labor and love with that sense of urgency. Life is short. Death is sure. Time is passing. The lost are perishing. To presume on the future is dangerous (James 4:13-17). We must act now. We must work the works of him that sent Jesus while it is day - we must, for the night cometh when no man can work.

This word from our Lord reminds us of the urgency of acting on God's time. Time will pass, we will die, and opportunities will disappear. If we delay, if we postpone, then we may just never get around to it. In his famous sermon, "Come Before Winter," Clarence McCartney speaks of things that must be done when the opportunity arises. There are doors of opportunity that swing open for us, and if we do not enter, they close and will stay closed forever. There are tides in our lives, and if we do not ride them, the window of opportunity will soon ebb. There are voices speaking that a year from now, a season from now, will be silent, and they will speak no more. If we are going to do some things, then we must do them while the opportunity is with us, for it will soon be gone. We must not wait for a more convenient season.

There is, then, a note of urgency in all of life. We must do what needs to be done while we can, while there is an opportunity, for the privilege will soon pass away. Specifically, I think of three opportunities about which we must be urgent.

- Changing our lives.
- Expressing our love.
- Following the Lord.

Changing Our Lives - The Person I Was Meant To Be

First, there should be urgency about changing your life. In his book, *The Robe*, Lloyd Douglas writes of the famous encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus. Modern day children's stories and songs have made Zacchaeus an adorable little figure. But Zacchaeus was a thief—a dirty, rotten thief. Jesus called him down from the tree and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' home. About halfway through dinner, Douglas imagines that Zacchaeus goes out onto the balcony of his luxurious home and addresses the people. A multitude is outside waiting for Jesus to come out. Zacchaeus announces to the crowd, "I'm going to give back four times what I have taken from you." The law only demanded that he return twice the amount he had stolen, but he said, "I'm giving back four times what I have taken," and then added, "And I'm going to give half of what I own to the poor." He then turned around and walked back into his house.

Douglas then portrays Jesus as asking him, "Zacchaeus, what made you do that?" And Zacchaeus responded, "Master, when I look into your eyes, I see mirrored there the Zacchaeus I was always intended to be."

We cannot, of course, actually look into the eyes of Jesus as Zacchaeus supposedly did, but we would do well to occasionally look at ourselves in the mirror and ask, "Am I the kind of person I was intended to be? Am I doing what I ought to do? Am I pleased with who I am?"

If we are not happy about whom we are, then we need to give ourselves over to change. The good news of the gospel is that no man has to stay the way he is. By God's grace, we can change. If our God can't change us, then what's the use of having a God?

Our character can be amended and improved, but not just any time we may wish to: there is an opportune time. There is a time in our lives when we can best change and best become the people we want to be and should be. If we let that time pass, change becomes increasingly difficult.

While our seminary campus was under construction, I

drove by it every day on my way home from work. One afternoon I saw a group of laborers feverishly working to finish pouring the front sidewalk. Several hours later on my evening walk around the campus, I passed by that same sidewalk. It had become as hard as a rock. But on one corner of the walkway, I saw that a student had scribbled some initials and the date. Concrete is that way when it is freshly poured: it is so soft that a dog might trot across it or a bird might light on it and leave prints. But in time, concrete will harden so that even an elephant could walk across it without leaving the slightest impression.

It is the same with our own characters. There are times in our lives when we can be easily molded and shaped. But when those times pass, we become hard and calloused so that nothing can penetrate. There are times when, if we're going to change, we must change then or we will forever be as we are.

In Jesus' day it was rumored that during certain seasons of the year, an angel came down to the pool of Bethesda and stirred the water. Whoever was the first to step into the water after the angel had stirred it was made whole from whatever disease he had. (John 5:1-4)

Daily, there lay a great multitude of impotent folks, or blind, or halt, or withered, waiting for the motion of the water. When the water moved, they had to be ready. When the angel moved, they had to move. When the angel stirred, they had to act.

So there are moments when the pool of life is troubled by the angel of opportunity. Then a man, if he will, can go down and be made whole. But if he waits until the waters are still, it is too late – the opportunity is gone.

These are precious and critical moments in the history of the soul. This is the hour of opportunity, for now the chains of habit can be broken, but if we wait we may be bound forever. You can build a bonfire anytime you please, but the fine fire of the spirit is a different thing altogether. God has his moment! That's why we must work the works of him that

sent us while it is day (while we can) for the night cometh when no man shall work.

Expressing Our Love – O, That I Had You For Five Minutes By My Side

Second, there must be urgency about expressing our love. Jesus went to the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead, to have supper with him and his family. As Martha served the meal, Mary took a vial of very costly perfume and began to anoint the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair. The entire house was filled with the sweet aroma from the ointment.

When Judas saw this, he was incensed, suggesting that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Judas was a pathetic soul, the kind of man who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. He did not care for the poor because he was a petty thief who pilfered from the moneybags that he kept. He thought of no one but himself.

Jesus' response was remarkable. He told the group to leave Mary alone, for perhaps without even knowing it, she was anointing him for death and burial, which would soon come. Then he said, "For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always" (John 12:1-8).

What Jesus said of himself is true of every friend and every loved one we have. You can write beneath each picture somewhere, "Me ye have not always." Write it beneath the picture of your husband. Write it beneath the picture of your wife. Write it beneath the picture of your parents. Write it beneath the picture of your friend. Perhaps write it beneath the picture of your child. The poor would always be there, but Jesus would not always be there. Neither will our loved ones.

Please remember that the loved one sitting next to you today, those nearest and dearest to you in your family, those perhaps in some distant place, will not be with you always. Whatever you need to say to them, whatever you want to do for them, *do it now*. Do it while the opportunity exists, for the

night cometh when no man shall work.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus and his disciples went to the garden of Gethsemane to prepare for his coming passion. He took Peter, James and John to the interior of the garden with him and asked them to watch and pray. Then he went alone in the garden to talk with God.

He returned to find all three men asleep. He awakened them asking, "Couldn't you watch with me just one hour?"

He then went back to the garden to pray a second time. When he returned for the second time, he found them asleep once more. He went into the garden to pray a third time, and when he came back, they were yet again asleep. This time, he didn't awaken them. He simply said softly, "Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matthew 26:36-45).

The opportunity to watch and pray with Jesus and for Jesus was gone. In time, these disciples would be able to do other things for Jesus, but not watch and pray. James would become the first martyr among the apostles. John would be exiled to the isle of Patmos. Peter would be crucified – upside down – for his Lord. There were other things the disciples could do for Jesus, but beyond that moment, they would never again have the opportunity to watch and pray with him. It is the same with us and with our loved ones.

(Among the saddest passages in the English language were written by Thomas Carlyle concerning his wife, Jane.) For forty years she was a loving and devoted wife. She encouraged and helped him in every way, but Carlyle was a testy old man who never expressed to her the kind of love he felt for her. When she died suddenly, he wrote these sad words, "O, that I had you for five minutes by my side that I might tell you I always loved you. She never knew it. Never."

It is too late for Carlyle and his wife, but it's not too late for you and yours. Don't miss the opportunity. Express love while you can.

My father and I never had a close relationship. He was a

good, honest, hard-working, patriotic man, but he never had time for me. To my recollection, he never touched me in love, never spoke a word of encouragement, or told me he loved me until the night before he died. Sometime after his death, I was elected president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. When I called my mother to tell her the news, she said, "Your dad always said, 'One day that boy will be running that thing.'" I hung up the phone, and the thought came to me, *I wonder why he never told me that*. It would have meant the world to me.

The outstanding Christian author, John Powell, relates the account of his father's death. He was weeping, and as one of the nurses tried to console him, he told her, "I'm not weeping because my father died (the man was in great pain and death was a release). I cry because he never told me he loved me."

It is too late for John Powell and his father as well as for my father and me, but it's not yet too late for you and yours. Express your love while you can.

Hear me now: you are dealing with your loved ones as if you will have them always with you. But heed a solemn warning from Carlyle: "Cherish what is dearest while you have it near to you and wait not until it is far away. Blind and deaf that we are, O think, if thou yet love anybody living, wait not till death sweep down the paltry little dust clouds and dissidences of the moment, and all be made at last so mournfully clear and beautiful when it is too late." Don't dare say, "When I have a convenient season, I will do it." Act now – respond now – for the night cometh when no man shall work. It may be now or never, not only to change your character, but also to express your love.

Following the Lord – Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

Finally, there needs to be a sense of urgency about turning to Christ.

I wish I could have been there when Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee and saw Peter, Andrew, James, and John washing their nets and said to them, "Come, follow me."

There must have been a note, not only of love and authority, but of immediacy and urgency in his voice, for we are told that “straightway” they followed him (Matthew 4:19-20).

I wish I could have been there the day Jesus walked by Matthew as he was sitting at the receipt of customs and said to him, “Come and follow me,” because he arose and followed him.

There’s always that note of urgency in the call of our Lord. The barker at the old-time circus calls out, “Hurry, hurry, hurry,” attracting attention to some trivial show. It seems as though I can hear the voice of God calling to us to hurry – not to some passing show, but to the main event, *time and eternity*. God calls us to himself now, and the call of the Lord to your heart and mine is always, “today.” It is, “Come now, or perhaps never.”

A call is urgent for two reasons. One reason is the uncertainty of life. David said to his friend Jonathan, “There is but a step between me and death.” So it is with all of us — just a step — a short step. And the uncertainty of life means that there is urgency in the call of Christ.

There is also urgency also because of the disposition of the human heart to change. There are times when we are more responsive, times when we are more likely to change. If we do not change then, if we do not come to Christ then, the disposition of our heart may be such that we will never do it again.

Reverend James Redding, an African-American pastor from Cleveland, Ohio, years ago established Helping Hand Halfway Home, Inc., with the mission of rehabilitating ex-convicts. Through his experience, James Redding has become convinced that, except for a small core of chronic incorrigibles, every lawbreaker has a “redemption point,” a time when he recognizes the futility of his crime and hungers for escape. “If you don’t throw him a life preserver when he is reaching for it,” Redding said, “he will fall back into a sea of sin that will surely drown him.”

There is a redemption point in every person’s life, and we

must act when the opportunity to change comes.

If the walls of the church building could talk, if the pews on which you sit could speak, they would tell the story of young men and young ladies, fathers and mothers, who at one time sat right where you sit and were *almost persuaded*. But today, they are a long way from God because something inside them changed when they said *no* to him. That's why the call of the scripture is always, "Come now. Come now."

So don't ever say to that inner voice of the Holy Spirit as Felix did in Acts: "Go Thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for Thee" (Acts 24:24-25). In truth, that convenient season may never come.

Several years ago, I preached a revival meeting at the First Baptist Church of Oxford, Mississippi. As one of the deacons took me to the airport following the last service, he shared his testimony with me. He had joined the church when he was nine years old because some of his friends joined and because his grandmother encouraged him to, but he did not commit his life to Christ. He did the right thing, but for the wrong reason.

He had joined the church but was not saved. He hid behind church membership for years. Gradually, his heart became aware that he was not saved. The conviction grew stronger and stronger. He said, "One Saturday, it was as if God said to me, 'Jim, it's now or never. Trust me now or I'm going to stop fooling with you and go to someone who will respond.'"

Jim said he promised the Lord that tomorrow (the next day was Sunday), he would make his profession of faith public. That evening, he said that he had the most peaceful night of sleep he had had in months.

Early the next morning, Jim said that God woke him up and said to his heart, "Jim, this is tomorrow."

Some of you have been saying, "One of these days, perhaps tomorrow, I'll come to Christ." This is tomorrow for you. God is always saying, "Today! Come now!" Don't dare say to the spirit of God, "Go Thy way for this time; when I

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have a more convenient season, I will call for Thee." You have no assurance that time will ever come. Opportunities are fleeting; they do not last forever. Open doors will ultimately close. The road marked tomorrow leads to the town called nowhere. Neglected opportunities result in lost opportunities. Come to Jesus now.

2

Every Person's Life is a Plan of God

Jeremiah 1:4-8

The prophets of the Old Testament often spoke of their messages as a “burden” from the Lord. Perhaps it was the gravity of their messages and the weight of delivering it to people who didn’t want to hear those messages that made them such a burden. I’m not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I have a burden for the Lord. It is a burden involving two things — revival in the American church and more workers to answer God’s call to Christian ministry.

The need for revival is obvious. Most churches are so sterile and arthritic that even God has trouble breaking through. The people in these churches are content to sit and sing “Just As I Am” to one another Sunday after Sunday.

The need for workers is just as real, although not as obvious. Eleven percent of our Texas churches are without a pastor at any given time. With 5,000 churches and 1,200 missions, a pastoral replacement of five to seven hundred is needed continually.

I can’t believe that God would have a flock of sheep but no shepherd to tend them. So why do we have such a shortage of ministers in our churches today? Because some are always retiring, others die, still others quit the ministry for secular jobs, and several hundred are forcefully terminated each year. When you add to those who have been tossed out, those who are washed out, burned out, and found out, it’s

easy to see why we have such a great need. But, aside from these reasons, many simply are not responding to God's call!

The answer to this need is prayer. The scriptures say, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). America's healing awaits the church's kneeling.

Jesus said, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). "Send" is a very strong word in the original language, meaning "to hurl, to throw with great force." It is the same word used in the gospels when Jesus cast demons out of people. Jesus was saying that we should pray that there would come such an irresistible compulsion that men and women could not help but preach and teach.

If we will pray, I believe that God will move into our churches, bringing revival to the hearts of people to call out the called. He has promised that he would. He will send revival and he will send out laborers.

The call of Jeremiah teaches us about God's call to our lives. Jeremiah writes that the word of the Lord came to him, saying:

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, 'Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.' But the Lord said unto me, 'Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee,' saith the Lord. (Jeremiah 1: 4-8)

Jeremiah's experience teaches us that God has a plan for every life. It reminds us that:

- He shapes us for his purposes (v. 5).
- He speaks to us through his providence (v. 4).

- He sustains us with his presence (vs. 6-8).

We Had Better Get Ready For It

First of all, God shapes us for his purposes. The Lord told Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." In Hebrew, the word "formed" would be translated as "to mold, to shape, to fashion." It describes the work of a potter as he works a piece of clay until it is soft and pliable; then he shapes it into the kind of vessel he wants it to be.

This is the same word used in the creation story where "God formed man out of the dust of the earth" (Genesis 2:7). In the garden, God took a lump of clay and shaped it into the lifeless statue he called Adam. Can you see it in your mind's eye: a red clay statue standing in the garden baking in Eden's sun? Then God breathed into it the breath of life and man became a living soul.

In the same way that God shaped Adam in the garden, he shaped Jeremiah, and he shaped you and me. In some mysterious way that I can't explain, God was involved in our creation also, and he shaped us for a purpose.

Early in his life, Abraham Lincoln and William F. Berry were partners in a frontier general store. Business was not going well, and it looked as though it would not survive financially. Lincoln stood on the porch with his partner one day discussing their plight, and he said:

"You know, I wouldn't mind so much losing the business if I could just do what I wanted to do. I want to study law. I wouldn't mind it if we could sell everything, pay all our bills, and have enough money left over to buy 'Blackstone's Commentary on English Law.' But I guess I can't."

As they stood talking, a wagon came down the road and pulled up close to the store porch. The man looked at Lincoln and said, "I'm trying to move my family west and am out of money. I've got a good barrel on here that I could sell for fifty cents."

Lincoln's eyes looked over the wagon and saw the man's wife staring at him pleadingly, her face thin and emaciated. Lincoln reached into his pocket and took out, according to him, "the last fifty cents I had" and said, "I reckon I could use a good barrel."

For the remainder of the day, the barrel sat on the front porch of the store, and his partner chided him about it. Later in the evening Lincoln walked over to the barrel, looked down into it, and saw something at the bottom — papers he hadn't noticed before. His long arms reached down into the barrel, and he moved them around until he hit something solid. He pulled out a book and stood petrified; it was the *Commentary on English Law* by Blackstone.

Lincoln said: "I stood there holding the book, looking up toward the heavens and there came a deep impression on me that God had something for me to do and was showing me now I had to get ready for it. Why this miracle otherwise?" (Angel, C. Roy. *Iron Shoes*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 31-32).

There is a lot of discussion today about genetic engineering: parents being able to determine the sex, intelligence, color of eyes, hair, and height of their children. The truth is, God was the original genetic engineer. None of us are here by accident. Our birth did not catch God by surprise. In ways beyond our understanding, he was involved in shaping each of us, and he had a purpose in mind when he did.

This doesn't mean he wants everyone to become a preacher or missionary. He needs Christian doctors, teachers, lawyers, and business people. But it does mean that every life has meaning and purpose. He has a plan for your life. He shaped you for a purpose, and you need to discover what that purpose is.

BB Guns and Ballistic Missiles

Second, God speaks to us through his providence. Jeremiah said, "The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; before you were

born I sanctified you; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (vv. 4,5).

When translated, the Hebrew word for “knew” implies a personal, intimate knowledge —the Lord did not just know about Jeremiah. God knew him intimately. He knew his strengths and his weaknesses, his abilities and disabilities, his fears and phobias. And based on that foreknowledge, he set him apart and appointed him as a prophet.

How did God speak to Jeremiah? He does not tell us. Jeremiah simply relates what God did. God has always spoken in a variety of ways. He spoke to Moses through a burning bush. He spoke to Gideon through an angel. He spoke to Isaiah through a national crisis, “In the year king Uzziah died...I heard the voice of the Lord.” He spoke to Simon Peter through a vision. He spoke to the apostle Paul through a blinding light and a thunderous voice. And he spoke to Samuel with a whisper.

He spoke to me in the recesses of my heart. I grew up in a non-churchgoing family. We lived in the shadow of two churches, but never attended either one. Never! When I was fourteen, at the invitation of a friend, I attended Sunday school. I learned that the church had a basketball team and a softball team. I loved sports, so I was willing to take the religion to get the recreation. But I found something better than both — I found redemption through Christ.

At the age of seventeen, I was called to preach. I remember it as though it were yesterday. I was sitting in church one Sunday morning when I had a deep impression that God wanted me to preach. I was about the least likely candidate for the ministry you could ever imagine, and this was the furthest thing from my mind. But, I could not escape that impression. That afternoon, I knelt by my bedside and said, “Lord, if I have the same impression again, I will yield my life to preaching the gospel.” The invitation had hardly begun that night when the same conviction came to me. That night, I said yes to what I believed to be the will of God. I saw no blinding light; I heard no voices in the night; I saw no an-

gels in flight — just the inner conviction that this was what God wanted me to do in life.

That was 50 years ago. In these years, I have doubted many things, but I have never doubted that God called me to preach. That was his will for my life. That's what he shaped me to do.

He called George W. Truett through the church in solemn assembly. George Truett is the greatest pastor-preacher to ever come out of Texas, and maybe all of America.

At the age of 23, he was called upon by the venerable B. H. Carroll to help save Baylor University from financial ruin. In 18 months, he and Carroll had raised \$93,000 and virtually secured the future of Baylor. Then, at the age of 26, he enrolled as a freshman student at Baylor. At the age of 30, without his consent, the First Baptist Church of Dallas unanimously elected him as pastor. He served at the church for 47 years. In those years, the church grew from 715 members to 7,454 members. He filled a 4,000-seat auditorium Sunday after Sunday, and averaged 115 baptisms and 412 new members a year (over 10 each Sunday) over the course of those 47 years. His fame spread until he became one of the most sought-after speakers in the world.

Truett grew up in the hills of North Carolina and was converted in a revival meeting at the age of 19. A few nights after Truett's conversion, the pastor, after the visiting preacher's sermon, turned to Truett and said, "Brother George, won't you exhort these hesitating people to turn to Christ for his great salvation and service?"

Taken by surprise and with fear and trembling, Truett rose to his feet and offered his first public exhortation for people to come to Christ. He said that "From that hour on, wherever I went, godly men and women would call me aside and searchingly say to me, 'Oughten you to give your life to preaching the glorious gospel of Christ?'"

But Truett wanted to be a lawyer – his dream from his earliest recollections. So, all his plans pointed toward that calling.

In time, his family moved to Whitewright, Texas, and

Truett was chosen to be superintendent of the Baptist Sunday School. He occasionally conducted services, but always made it a point to stand in front of the pulpit because he felt himself utterly unfit to be there. After all, his ambition was to be a lawyer.

In their village church, they held the old Saturday meeting. When he arrived on a certain Saturday, he noticed the attendance was unusually large. After the church had conducted its business and the minister preached his sermon, one of the elder deacons rose and began to talk deliberately and very solemnly. He said:

There is such a thing as a church duty when the whole church must act. There is such a thing as an individual duty when an individual, detached from every other individual, must face duty for himself, but it is my deep conviction, and yours — for we have talked much with one another — that this church has a church duty to perform, and that we have waited late and long to get about it. I move, that this church call a presbytery to ordain Brother George W. Truett to the full work of gospel ministry.

The motion was promptly seconded, and Truett immediately jumped to his feet in protest. He was appalled at their actions and pled with them to wait six months before taking a vote.

Then, one after another, tears ran down the cheeks of the people, and they said:

Brother George, we have a deep conviction that you ought to be preaching. We won't wait six hours; we are called to do this thing now, and we are going ahead with it. We are moved by a deep conviction that this is the will of God. We dare not wait. We must follow our convictions.

That afternoon George talked with his mother about what he should do. She said:

Son, these are praying people, they are God's people. And you saw how they felt. They felt that they couldn't —

even in the face of your plea, your protest, your exhortation to delay — they couldn't delay. It was the whole church in solemn conference assembled.

Truett said he did not sleep much that night, and the next morning was examined before the whole church. He told them the story of his conversion, of his ambition to be a lawyer but that he was now willing to yield without debate or further delay to the will of God.

In later years, he said:

I hasten to add that if I had a thousand lives given me, and the Master should say, 'You wanted the first one to be a lawyer, but I wanted your first life to be that of a preacher; now you make your own choice,' I would not hesitate one moment to give my whole thousand lives to Christ and his glorious gospel ministry.

(James, P.W. *George W. Truett*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1939, 48-50).

I don't know how God will speak to you; I just know he will. Don't try to hold God to one way of speaking. He knows what he's doing. We wouldn't hunt an elephant with a BB gun, nor would we hunt a sparrow with a ballistic missile. We choose the caliber of ammunition and the size of gun based on the game we are after.

God is at least as smart as we are. He knew it would take a thunderous voice and a blinding light to get the hardened apostle Paul, but he also knew it would take only a whisper to get young and tender Samuel. Just so, he knows what it takes to get our attention, and he speaks in a way that we can understand and hear his call.

I Will! I Won't! I Can't!

Third, God sustains us with his presence (Jeremiah 1:6-8). The work of the prophet was a hard and thankless task, and Jeremiah had a deep sense of inadequacy. So, when God called him to be a prophet he was reluctant to accept the call. He responded, "Ah, Lord, I cannot speak: for I am a child."

When God called Isaiah, he said, "I will"; when he called

Moses, he said, "I won't"; when he called Jeremiah, he said, "I can't."

This shouldn't surprise us. Many of God's servants were hesitant to accept his call. When God called Moses, he excused himself, saying that he had a speech impediment. When God called Gideon, he excused himself by saying that he was the smallest member of the poorest family of the most insignificant tribe of Israel (Judges 6:15).

God reproved Jeremiah: "Say not 'I am a child' for thou shalt go to all that I send thee and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces; for I am with thee, thus saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 1:7-8).

Three truths emerge from God's reproof. First, never minimize the voice of God to a child, no matter how unpromising they may appear. As Joe Blinco said, "God has an extraordinary habit of laying his hands on the wrong man." And the apostle Paul said, "Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called" (I Corinthians 1:26).

Joseph was only 17 when the Lord sent him to Egypt to be the savior of Israel. David was 14 when he was anointed king of Israel. Samuel was 12 when he was called to be a prophet. Daniel was 14 when he was taken to Babylon to represent God in a foreign court. And Jesus was 12 when he became aware for the first time that, "I must be about my father's business."

But don't forget God's call can also come late in life. Moses was 80 when God sent him to Egypt to deliver the children of Israel from bondage. Caleb was 85 when God said to him, "I've got a mountain for you to climb." And I was 67 when God said, "I've got a seminary for you to run."

I should note that, sometimes, a child or a young person might need the help of older, more mature saints to know the voice of God. When God first spoke to little Samuel, he thought it was Eli, the priest, calling him. Three times God spoke, and each time Samuel thought it was Eli. The Lord had not yet revealed himself to Samuel, so he did not recognize that it was God who was speaking to him.

But the older, wiser Eli did understand the situation and told him that if he heard the voice again, he should say, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth" (I Samuel 3:9). When God spoke again, Samuel answered, and God called him to the ministry.

Just as Samuel needed help in recognizing the voice of God, and as Truett needed help in recognizing the call of God, so people may need our help today.

Second of all, never yield to your fears. One of life's most debilitating emotions, fear can paralyze you into inactivity. If God calls you to a task, he will enable you to perform it, so don't worry about weakness. It is weakness that God is looking for. If he can find someone like Jeremiah who has a sense of his own inadequacy, the Lord can do the rest. It's not ability that God is looking for, but *availability* and *dependability*.

As someone once said, "God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called." I was one of the most unlikely candidates for the ministry there ever was. My poor educational and economic background left me with a tremendous inferiority complex. If I had yielded to my fear, I would never have been a preacher, for speaking publicly frightened me to death, and even after 50 years of doing it, I still get sweaty palms. If I had given into my fears, I would have never accepted the presidency of the Annuity Board, for I was not a financier. I was just a small-town pastor. And if I had succumbed to my fears, I'd never have become dean of Truett Seminary. I'm not an educator. I don't have an earned doctor's degree. I'm not even a registered nurse! But, I tried to put my faith in God and not myself and said *yes*. That's all God wants from any of us.

Third, don't expect God to buy your excuses.

Believe me when I say, that if I had planned my own life I would have cheated myself, and so will you. George W. Truett was right when he said: "To find the will of God is life's greatest discovery; to do the will of God is life's greatest accomplishment."

Richard Ellis was an early Texas Baptist layman. he was in attended at a service where Judge R.E.B. Baylor, for whom

Baylor University was named, was preaching. Baylor was a district judge and later Texas Supreme Court Justice of the new republic. On his circuit, he held court by day and preached by night. At the close of one such service, Baylor called on Ellis to pray, and he did so with such feeling and pathos that Baylor immediately left the pulpit, went to him, took him by the hand, and with tears in his eyes, said, "Why do you not preach?" Ellis immediately commenced weeping and said, "I ran away from Virginia to keep from preaching." Then Judge Baylor replied, "You have been running away long enough from the Master: obey the divine impression you have, take up the cross and preach Jesus to a lost and ruined world." Ellis accepted this challenge and became one of Texas' most effective preachers (McBeth, Leon. *Texas Baptist Sesquicentennial History*. Dallas, Texas: Baptistway Press, 1993, 21).

Will you then sing with me?

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!

Thou art the Potter, I am the clay!

Mould me and make me, after thy will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still.

3

Pathway To Blessings

II Chronicles 7:14

There is a sickness in America today, a sickness of the spirit and the soul. The symptoms can be seen everywhere: alcoholism, violence, illegitimacy, divorce, drug abuse, officials who betray public trust, suicide, and crime. I won't bore you with statistics. You are confronted with them at every turn.

If the sickness is spiritual, the remedy must be spiritual. A new president or an upturn in the economy can't cure that which ails us. Our hope does not reside in the White House, but the church house. The change we need is on Main Street, not Wall Street. We are rapidly coming to a time where our options are either Pentecost or holocaust. We must have revival for survival, *but how can this be?*

The scriptures give us the divine prescription for the healing of our land. The Lord said:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins and will heal their land (II Chronicles 7:14).

These words were first spoken in connection with the dedication of the magnificent temple of God built by King Solomon. When the temple was completed, Solomon assembled Israel with the purpose of dedicating it. Sacrifices were placed on the altar, and after a brief oration on the faithfulness of God, Solomon offered a lengthy prayer of dedication.

God responded to the dedication with a marvelous manifestation of his power. Fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifices as his glory filled the house. It was a high and holy hour in the spiritual life of Israel. The people were then sent away rejoicing.

Sometime later God appeared to Solomon and reaffirmed the promise he had made earlier. However, he revealed at the time that his promises were conditional — contingent on Israel's faithfulness. That's when he spoke the following words. As we read them, we must realize that God's desire and demands of his people are the same today.

Notice who these words are addressed to: "If my people which are called by my name..." They are not addressed to the entire world. They are not addressed to unbelievers or evildoers. They are not addressed to Congress. They are to us — to God's people.

Revival does not hinge as much on our circumstances or our culture as it does on our commitment as the people of God. Our problem is not the indifference of sinners, but the carnality of saints. The thing that holds us back is not the strength of the enemy, but the weakness of the church. Until we who bear his name get right, how can we expect the world to be right? As Peter said, "The time has come when judgment must begin at the house of God."

D. L. Moody called this verse "the pathway to blessings." Do you feel a need for healing in your own soul? In your home? In your church? In your school? In your community? In our nation as a whole? Here, then, is the formula.

It takes only a few people to make a difference. Sodom and Gomorrah perished for a lack of 10 righteous men. A few people can make a difference in any church, any school, or any community.

These verses tell us why revival tarries and establish for us the pathway to spiritual healing. If we are to know the full blessings of God, we must do four things:

- We must humble ourselves.
- We must pray.

- We must seek God's face.
- We must turn from our wicked ways.

Let the Air Out

The first step on the pathway to blessings is *humility*. Translated, the Hebrew word for "humility" means, "to bend the knee, to bow before." To humble us is to bow before God in recognition of our need for and dependency on him. This is always the first step toward God's blessings – and yet it is one of the hardest.

No virtue is more difficult than humility. It's like your shirt. It's the first thing on and the last thing off. Nothing dies harder than pride and self-sufficiency. The greatest "ism" confronting the church today is not liberalism, not materialism, nor hedonism, nor fundamentalism. It is *egotism*. It is only as we humble ourselves that God will lift us up and bless us. If we are busy building the kingdom of John or Paul or Bill instead of the kingdom of God, he will not bless us.

F. B. Meyer said, "I used to think that God's gifts were on a shelf, one above the other; and the taller we grew in Christian character, the more easily we could reach them. I now find that God's gifts are on shelves, one beneath the other; and it is not a question of growing taller, but of stooping lower."

In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the Lord teaches us the importance of humility. Luke records, "And he spake this parable unto certain men which trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." Pride always expresses itself in two directions — upward toward God and outward toward man. It makes us strut before God and look down our nose at others. Feelings of self-sufficiency and superiority always betray a proud spirit.

Then Jesus contrasted the attitudes of the two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed within himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice a

week, and I give tithes of all that I possess.”

What audacity! He was actually saying, “God, I thank thee for me. I know you must get discouraged when you look around and see the way other men are. But, cheer up, God! Look at me!”

The publican, by contrast, would not so much as lift his eyes up toward the heaven, but smote his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Then Jesus evaluated the attitudes and acts of these two men by saying, “I tell you, this man (the publican) went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalted himself shall be abased; he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:14). The Pharisee went down to his house dignified. The publican went to his house justified. It was humility that made the difference.

Dr. Everett King tells of a large trailer truck that got stuck beneath the overhead girders of an underpass in Oklahoma. The traffic was stalled while the highway experts worked for hours to release the truck. Tractors pushed and pulled with all their might to free the truck, but nothing worked. Finally, a little boy, who was eagerly watching, asked this simple question: “Why don’t you let the air out of the tires of the trailer?” The air was let out, and the truck was released.

An inflated ego always keeps us from getting through to God. We justify ourselves when we should judge ourselves. If we learned humility, it might spare us humiliation. A humble spirit is the pathway to blessings – and to healing.

The Slender Nerve

The second step on the pathway to blessings is prayer. Translated, the Hebrew word “pray” means “to intercede, to entreat, to make supplication.” Prayer is the secret of every great spiritual life. Watching Jesus, the disciples concluded that prayer was the secret of his great life. Thus, they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They never asked the Lord to teach them to preach, as important as his preaching was; they never asked the Lord to teach them to heal, as spectacular as

his miracles were; they never asked him to teach them to interpret scripture, as insightful as his interpretations were. But they did ask him to teach them to pray, for they realized that it was the secret to his great life. As someone once said, "God has had only one son who lived without sin. He has had no sons who lived without prayer."

Prayer is not only the secret to great life; it's the secret to a great church. The early church was a church at prayer. They prayed for boldness and for wholeness. They prayed for revival and for survival. They prayed for freedom and for forgiveness. They prayed for their enemies as well as for their friends.

The early church was continually exerting the privilege of prayer, but the modern church has all but abandoned it. We are better known for our big bands, our loud music, and our slick promotion than we are for our quiet hearts.

The church will not get on its feet until it first gets on its knees. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, noted preacher of the past century, described the weekly prayer meeting as "the heating apparatus of the church." The prayer level is always the power level of the church. But in many churches today, the heating apparatus is never turned on. That's why some churches are so cold that you could ice-skate down the aisles.

On one occasion, John R. Mott said that in his early college days, he had grave doubts as to the effectiveness of prayer. He found it difficult to believe that prayer could change persons or things. To remove the doubts that oppressed his mind, he decided to read some books on the subject: he read 43 books. Although he found these helpful and sometimes inspiring, they did not resolve his doubts. His doubts were settled only as he abandoned the wearisome discussion of prayer and actually began to pray.

The main fault with our prayer life is precisely that — we don't pray. James said, "You have not because you ask not." There are some things God simply will not give us until we want them badly enough to ask for them. But when we do pray, things begin to happen. As Spurgeon said, "Prayer is

the slender nerve that moveth the muscle of omnipotence." Prayer is the life and the breath of the Christian and the road to blessings. There can be no coming to God, and there can be no personal spiritual life without prayer. Either we meet God in prayer, or we do not meet him at all.

If you can beat the devil in the matter of regular daily prayer, you can beat him anywhere. If he can beat you there, he can possibly beat you anywhere.

Forget the Second Blessing

The third step in the pathway to blessings is worship. We must seek the face of God. The scriptures do not say, "If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek legislative reforms...then I will hear from heaven." We must again seek the face of God. In Hebrew, "seek" means literally "to search, to make inquiry, to desire." It is a general word used in the scripture to describe Joseph as he tries to find his brothers in the field (Gen. 37:15); Pharaoh trying to find Moses, a fugitive from justice, after he killed the Egyptian (Ex. 2:15); and Saul as he tries to find his lost animals (I Samuel 10:14).

In the same way that Joseph sought his brothers, in the same way Pharaoh sought Moses, and in the same way Saul sought his lost animals, we are to seek God's face in fellowship, obedience, and worship.

I have been part of what I believe to be two real revivals in my day. The first of these came in the fifth year of my third pastorate. My heart had yearned for some time for God to do something in my life and church that could not be explained by organization or manipulation. Then it happened. For some inexplicable reason there came over our services the profound conviction power of the Holy Spirit. It resulted from nothing new or unusual that we did. It was the same congregation worshipping, with the same pastor preaching and the same choir singing. But something was different. There was new conviction in the hearts of the people. There were often tears in the congregation. There were new commitments made, and

unsaved people were drawn to the church. It became evident to all who were there that God was present in his church in a special way. It was a glorious experience!

The second experience came in the fourth year of my fourth pastorate. I had been meeting with a group of men for a Friday prayer lunch for two years. We had been praying expressly for revival. It came one Sunday morning when I was in Houston, Texas, closing out a revival meeting. I wasn't even there to take credit for it. And to top it off, my guest preacher of the day was a layman. He was an executive in The Gideons International organization. As usual, he talked about their Bibles and then gave his testimony.

At the close of the service, instead of giving the traditional invitation, our guest simply asked those who would receive Christ or would commit their lives to him to stand where they were. There was no music, no coming forward, no decision cards. More than 60 people stood. I returned home that afternoon to preach the evening worship service, and it was electrifying. The moment I stepped into the sanctuary, I knew something was different. There was new enthusiasm in the singing. There was new joy on the faces of the people. There was new conviction in my preaching. And when I gave the invitation, seven people came forward to make public their commitments of their lives to Christ.

The next day, the lay speaker called me from Memphis, Tennessee. He almost apologetically told me that he had never experienced anything like it before in his life, and he couldn't explain it. He said he had given that same testimony hundreds of times and nothing much had ever happened. He had never given an invitation like that before and didn't know why he did that day. His explanation, and mine, was that it was the sovereign work of God.

In the following weeks, I saw the mightiest outpouring of the Holy Spirit I have ever seen in a church. Literally, hundreds of people came to know Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The one common denominator in both of those fresh out-

pourings of God's Spirit was a real hunger, a longing on the part of one or more people to see God work.

God's initial preparation for blessings always begins in the heart of one or more people who hunger for God's renewed presence and power. They seek him, not for his gifts or his blessings, but for himself. They long to see him more clearly, follow him more nearly, and love him more dearly.

Jesus told us that we should seek first the kingdom of God. What is first to you? Everything can't be. In him, all the fullness of God dwells.

David, a man after God's own heart, expressed what ought to be the longing of each of us when he wrote:

As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God (Ps. 42:1) Oh, God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is...(Psalms 63:1).

Isaiah reminds us of the pathway when he writes:

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

The Sin Within

The fourth step on the pathway to blessings is repentance. "We must turn from our wicked ways." The Hebrew word for "wicked" used here is a strong word – the same word used to describe the men of Sodom who were destroyed by fire and brimstone (Genesis 13:13). It is also the word used to describe the offense of idolatry for which the Israelites were to be stoned to death and which eventually led to Israel's conquest by the Assyrians (Deuteronomy 29:17, II Kings 17:22-23).

To have the blessing of God upon us, we must turn from "our" wicked ways. This is the most difficult and most unlikely step for us to take because we do not think of ourselves

as wicked. We know there are wicked people in the world, but they are “out there” somewhere, not “in here.” They are in prison or bars, in brothels, in crack houses, and in casinos. But surely they are not in the church. We do not see ourselves as wicked.

Moreover, sin does not weigh heavy on us. We have become sophisticated, urbane, and erudite. Earl Wilson defined sophistication as “the ability to do anything without feeling guilty.”

Spurgeon expressed it succinctly: “You and your sins must part, or you and God cannot be friends.” And Solomon wrote, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

If we want forgiveness, we must be willing to say, “I am wrong. I have sinned. I have failed. I need help!” In her book *I’ll Cry Tomorrow*, Lillian Roth tells us that she never solved her alcoholism problem until she was willing to admit that *she needed help*. God does not forgive excuses; he forgives sins – but they must be confessed and forsaken. When you come to the point where you are willing to confess, you’ll discover that God is willing to bless.

Charles G. Finney said: “If you want revival, take a piece of paper and list your sins on it. Write them down one by one. Then, just as a merchant goes over his books, confess them and forsake them.”

We need to take an audit of our lives, and when we do, we will discover that we are bankrupt before God. In that position and with that awareness, we will find ourselves on the pathway to blessings.

4

It is Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

I learned the importance of timing the hard way when I took my first deep-sea fishing trip. Well, really, it was two trips rolled into one — my first and my last. I had taken three men on a preaching mission to Trinidad, West Indies. One of them suggested that we go deep-sea fishing. That's when I made my first mistake by saying "O.K."

My second mistake was to allow him to make the arrangements. He asked one of the missionaries to arrange our trip. The missionary said, "No problem. I can take care of that. There's a man in our community who asked me last week to help him dedicate his fishing boat. He'll take us."

For some reason, I thought you dedicated only new and big boats. In Trinidad, they dedicate old ones. In my mind, I could see a 35-foot cabin cruiser loaded with fishing gear. After all, this man was a professional fisherman, and that's how he made a living.

What a surprise! His boat was nothing more than a good-size lifeboat with an outboard motor. Six of us — my three men, the missionary, the boat owner, and I — climbed aboard the little boat and putted out into the Caribbean Sea. I noticed there was no fishing gear in sight, but I assumed he had some in a hidden compartment. We traveled well beyond some offshore drilling rigs and dropped anchor. When we asked for the fishing gear, all he had was some fishing line with sinkers and hooks attached. So, we baited the hooks, wrapped the string around our index fingers, and dropped

them overboard.

That was the only time I've ever fished praying that nothing would seize my line. As I leaned over the edge of the rocking boat, I became sicker and sicker. We had brought a pound box of saltine crackers, and within 30 minutes, I had eaten one fourth of them by myself. But nothing helped. I just felt worse and worse.

Finally, I suggested, "Maybe the fish aren't biting, and we ought to go in." No one responded. I had on a pair of black and white wing tip shoes. Trinidad is a poor country, and obviously this fisherman was a poor man. So I said to him, "If you'll take me to shore, I'll give you these shoes." With a longing look in his eye, he said, "My friend, I'm sorry, but the tide is out."

I hadn't realized it, but when we left the shore, the tide was in, and the water was deep. Now, the tide was out, and we couldn't get back in. We would stick in the mud. Finally, I said, "Just take me close, and I'll walk the rest of the way." I had never walked on water before, but this seemed to be as good a time as any to try. He agreed, and when we got close to the shore, I pulled off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and jumped over into the mud to pull the boat ashore. I was never so happy to have mud squeezed between my toes in all my life.

I learned that day that if you are going deep-sea fishing, you had best know something about tides. Otherwise, you may find yourself stranded at sea, unable to return to shore.

In all of life, there are tides — a right time, and best time, an opportune time, to do something. Brutus says this in Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life,
Is bound in shallows and miseries.

The scriptures speak of this when they say:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to

die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to deep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

This has long been a puzzling passage. Some have seen them as teaching a fatalistic view of life — that everything in life is fixed, set, and nothing can be done to change it. We are helpless victims of what is going to happen.

There is some fatalism in all of us. Following a near brush with death, how many times have you heard a person say: “I guess it was just not my time”? I’ve always been nervous about flying in small airplanes. When I expressed my fears to a pilot friend, he said, “Not to worry. You won’t die until your time.” I replied, “Yes, but I may get up there, and it’s the pilot’s time.” But we know that we do not live in such a rigid, fixed universe that we are helpless victims of it.

There may very well be a time set for us to die. We can hasten that time: just drive too fast, eat too much, or exercise too little. But what the scriptures teach me is that the God of the Bible is a God of order and design. And in his plan, there is a right time, a best time, and an opportune time to do something.

A farmer knows there is a best time, a right time, an opportune time to plant. A general knows there is a best time, a right time, and an opportune time to attack. An investor knows there is a best time, a right time, an opportune time to buy or sell.

As it is with farming, fighting, and finance, so it is with spirituality. So, what time is it spiritually? The scriptures tell us:

- It's time to look up and live.
- It's time to wake up and repent.
- It's time to grow up and serve.
- It's time to stand up and be counted.

My Hand and My Heart

First of all, it's time to look up and live. The scriptures remind us: "Behold, now is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2). But how can a person be saved? The Lord says, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 45:22). By looking in faith to the Lord, we become saved. Jesus puts it this way: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

The illustration Jesus used refers to the children of Israel as they traveled through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. They rebelled against God and against Moses, and the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people. When the people were bitten, they died.

The people then repented and asked for mercy. The Lord, hearing their cry, told Moses to make a serpent of brass and set it on a pole in the center of the village. When those people who were bitten looked up at the serpent, they lived (Numbers 21:9).

There was nothing magical about the serpent of brass: it was only a sign, a symbol. It was God who saved them. Salvation came when the people trusted the Lord and responded in faith to do what he told them to do. They were saved when they looked "up," looked "to," and looked "upon" God's provision in faith and trust.

Translated from the Greek, "lifted up" is used two ways in scripture. It refers to Jesus' crucifixion, his being lifted up on the cross (John 8:28, 12:32), as well as his exultation, being lifted up into glory at his ascension (Acts 2:33, 5:31; Philippians 2:9).

Both "liftings" are a part of our redemption. We must look

to the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord to be saved. When we look to him in faith and trust, as the children of Israel did unto the bronze serpent, we too can be saved.

The ground around Calvary is level: we all come to God the same way, whether we are a king or a commoner, a prince or a pauper. We must look to Christ for salvation. That was the experience of General Sam Houston — hero of Texas independence, first president of the Republic of Texas, the state's first senator, one-time governor of Texas, and Sam Houston the great sinner.

Early in his life, he had been governor of the state of Tennessee. After a failed marriage, he resigned in despair and went to live among the Indians with a Cherokee woman. After moving to Texas, he married Margaret Lea, the daughter of a Baptist preacher from Alabama. Margaret exerted great influence on his life and in time brought him to a faith in Christ. During his early years in the United States Senate, out of respect for his wife, he began attending East Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., where Rev. George Whitfield Samson also exercised a great influence on him: *Sam Houston became a believer*.

On October 19, 1854, at the age of 63, Houston came forward at the Independence Baptist Church of Independence, Texas, took the hand of Pastor Rufus Burleson, and said to him: "Pastor, today I give you my hand, and with it, I give my heart to the Lord."

A few weeks later, on November 19, 1854, Houston was baptized in the chilly waters of Rocky Creek. As he emerged from the water, someone remarked: "Well, General, I hear your sins were washed away." To that, the Senator retorted, "I hope so, but if they were, the Lord help the fish down below" (James, Marquis. *The Raven: A Biography of Sam Houston*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 385).

General Sam looked up and lived, and so can you. Isn't it time for you to do what he did? Shouldn't you say, "Pastor, today I give you my hand, and with it give my heart to the Lord." The scriptures warn: "The Holy Ghost saith, 'Today, if

ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts...'"(Hebrews 3:15). Do you hear His voice today? Will you say, "yes" to him now?

Lulled to Sleep

Second, it is time to wake up and repent. As Paul wrote:

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: For now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent; the day is at hand. Let us, therefore, cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light (Romans 13:11-12).

First century Rome was a place of moral and spiritual darkness. Unfortunately, the Christians there had adopted the philosophy, "When in Rome, do as the Romans." They had been lulled to sleep by the sin around them and were living like the pagans. Strife, envy, dishonesty, adultery, lying, and a lack of moral restraint characterized their lives. They were in desperate need of a spiritual wake-up call. Paul sounds God's alarm clock to awaken them from their spiritual slumber.

In doing so, Paul speaks of "putting off the works of darkness" and "putting on the armor of light." "The works of darkness" refers to the immorality that characterized their unregenerate lives. "The armor of light" refers to living lives consistent with loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. The analogy of changing clothes is a way of calling them to change their ways – that is, to repent.

Like the first century Romans, we are living in days of moral and spiritual darkness. We have been anesthetized by our culture. The sleep of sin is upon us, and we have put out the "Do not disturb" sign. It's time for God's people to wake up: it's time to repent.

But how do we do that? What does this mean in practical terms? Look again at Sam Houston. He represents a flesh-and-blood example of what we must do. Early in his life, Houston became notorious for his drinking. When he lived among the Indians, he was known as "Big Drunk." (He was 6

feet, 6 inches tall.) Later, a political opponent referred to the Texan as “Big drunks big ranch” (Ibid., 363.). When he married Margaret Lea, he agreed not to drink excessively again, and he kept his word. But following his conversion, he abstained from liquor altogether and became a strong champion of temperance. His behavior illustrates putting off the “works of darkness” and putting on the “armor of light,” for intemperance has no place in the Christian life.

Prior to his conversion, Houston often punctuated his speech with vulgarity and profanity. Shortly after his baptism, he was riding with a friend when his mount stumbled. Without thinking, he blurted out: “God d— a stumbling horse!” He immediately dismounted, knelt in the dusty road, and prayed for forgiveness (Ibid., 386.). This serves as another example of putting off the “works of darkness” and putting on the “armor of light,” because profanity and vulgarity do not belong in Christian life.

Back in Washington, where Houston was serving as Texas’ senator, Dr. Samson, the pastor who had greatly influenced his decision to accept Christ, spent an hour in conversation with Houston. Upon leaving, Houston asked the pastor, “Brother Samson, is there anything I can do for you?”

The pastor briefly reflected, then recalled a quarrel Houston had with another member of the church while they both served on the same Senate Committee. The two Christians would be facing each other at the Communion table the next Sunday. Still holding Houston’s hand, the pastor said:

General, you know the alienation between you and Bro. W... You will meet at the Lord’s Supper next Sabbath; you ought not meet until that difficulty is settled. Now I wish you, after the service next Sunday, to let me bring you two together, and without a word of attempted justification on either side, I wish you to take him by the hand and say with all your heart that you will forgive and forget and bury the past, and that you wish him to do the same, and thereafter to meet you as a brother in Christ.

Prior to converting, Sam Houston possessed a violent,

uncontrolled temper, but Christ changed him. Dr. Sampson recounted what happened:

Fire began to glow in his eyes, his brow to knit, his teeth to clench, and his whole frame shook with the struggle of the old man within him; but in an instant, the man whose passion had been terrible, indeed ungovernable on so many a bloody battlefield, was changed from the lion into the lamb. He replied meekly, 'Brother Samson, I will do it.' And what he promised was done, and in an air of majestic frankness and nobleness of soul.

This illustrates putting off the "works of darkness" and putting on "the armor of light," because anger and bitterness are wrong for a Christian.

That's what needs to happen to us: we need to change our ways. For too long now, we have preached forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, and grace without a cross. The hour is late: it's time to wake up, shape up, and repent.

Phil Lineberger was raised in a housing project in Texarkana. Growing up, he was surrounded by drinking, profanity, fighting, and immorality. But his mother often said to her children, "We may have to live with them, but we don't have to live like them." Lineberger added this: "She taught us we didn't have to be dirty or disrespectful or destructive." It is the same with us: *we have to live in the world, but we don't have to live like the world.*

Both the Inner and Outer Life

Third, it's time to grow up and serve. The author of the book of Hebrews writes:

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. (Hebrews 5:12-13).

These words were written to reprove believers who had

failed to grow in their faith. By this time in their Christian lives, they should have been *disciplining* others – instead, they still needed someone to teach them the ABCs of Christianity.

During the 1999 football season Mike Ditka, then coach of the New Orleans Saints football team, made an obscene gesture to those fans attending a game. When he realized his mistake, he responded, “I’m learning that growing older does not mean you are getting smarter.” Nor does it mean you are becoming more mature. Maturity is not a matter of years, but rather a matter of attitude, spirit, and disposition. Maturity is becoming more like Jesus Christ.

The *normal* Christian life is to trust Christ as Savior. At that point, we are born again and become “babes in Christ.” We then need someone to teach us how to walk and talk as God’s children, but within a reasonable time period, we should grow to “the fullness of the stature of Christ” and begin to teach others.

Unfortunately, the *average* Christian’s life is not the *normal* Christian life. Infantile paralysis is the curse of the church today. Too many Christians have never grown in their faith, love, knowledge, devotion, and service. Years after converting, they remain babes in Christ.

So, what characterizes a baby? A baby thinks only of self and, if denied the desired thing, it will cause a fuss. Babies seek their own; their feelings are easily hurt; and they often feel jealousy. A baby lives to be served — it never serves. It cries, but never sings. It tries to talk, but never makes sense.

In one of my early pastorates, one of my members was a postman who walked a mail route. He developed an ingrown toenail on his big toe that became infected, so he was off work for a week or so. I knew about it, but his condition didn’t seem to be all that serious, so I didn’t call or visit him.

One morning, I received a telephone call from his wife who said that she was very upset. When I asked her why she was upset, she indicated that it was because I had not visited her husband during this time. I actually laughed, because I thought surely she must have been kidding. But she wasn’t

joking!

I learned that day just how significant a big toe could be to a baby Christian. If you demand a lot of attention, if your feelings are hurt when the pastor doesn't pay special attention to you, if your concern is always having your own way, if you fuss and complain and require pampering, *you need to grow up*. It's time to stop asking, "What can my church do for me?" and ask, "What can I do for my church...or for Christ through my church?"

The fact is, if God is our Father, over a reasonable time period, we should begin to develop a family resemblance. We should grow in two ways: (1) in our inner life of devotion and (2) in our outer life of service. Jesus lived his life in the shape of the cross — both upward and outward. It's time for us to do the same, to grow up.

Say It Now

Fourth, it's time to stand up and be counted. The apostle Paul wrote: "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time" (Colossians 4:5).

Paul had been urging Christians to pray that he would have an open door to preach the gospel while he was in prison. To my knowledge, the apostle Paul never encouraged us to pray for the lost. Rather, he encouraged us to pray for opportunities to witness, and when the opportunities come, to have the boldness to speak for Christ and speak with clarity so that the people could understand.

In scripture, an "open door" is synonymous with opportunity. So when Paul urged them to pray that he would have an open door to share the gospel, he reminds people that they must also seize their opportunities. He urged both them and us to "redeem the time." He meant that we must use *every* opportunity to walk with and witness for Christ.

We've become entirely too casual about both. It's high time we realized that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare for the souls of men.

It's told that Nikita Khrushchev once spoke before the

National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Questions for Khrushchev were written on cards and submitted to the moderator who then read them aloud. A question was asked of him: "You were one of Stalin's top aides while terrible atrocities were happening in your country (at the height of his power, Stalin was executing 40,000 people a month); where were you during this time?"

The crowd grew silent, and Khrushchev screamed, "Who wrote this question?" A pause ensued. Khrushchev repeated his question, but was once again met with silence. He then replied, "That is where I was."

Unfortunately, that's where most of God's people are: silent when they should be speaking out. It's time for us to stand up and be counted.

We sometimes sing in church:

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
 Ye soldiers of the cross;
 Lift high his royal banner,
 It must not suffer loss:
 From victory unto victory
 His army shall he lead,
 Till every foe is vanquished,
 And Christ is Lord indeed.

After the battle of the Alamo, General Sam Houston and the army made a strategic retreat to the swamps of San Jacinto to await the approaching forces of Santa Anna, Mexico's dictator. Houston's men began to grumble. They were itching for a fight, especially due to the massacres of Alamo and Goliad. They didn't understand the General's strategy. Houston said in those days that he feared his own men more than he feared Santa Anna because they were on the verge of mutiny, rushing headlong into another massacre. When the time was right, Houston ordered Deaf Smith to "Have the men burn Vince's Bridge."

"But that's the only way out of the swamp," protested Smith.

Houston replied: "I know. This day we will fight or die."

Four horses were shot from under Houston, and he suffered a crippling ankle wound, but it took only 18 minutes for the vastly outnumbered Texans to win the battle.

There comes a time when you have to take a stand – you can't retreat forever. I believe that time has come for us today: it's time to stand up and be counted.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was in a Birmingham prison, eight white ministers wrote him, encouraging him to cease his push toward integration. The ministers told King it was the wrong time, but he responded by saying, "It is never the wrong time to do right."

It is never the wrong time to repent. It is never the wrong time to serve. It is never the wrong time to witness. It is never the wrong time to be saved. In fact, God says the time has come for all four to happen.

5

Making The Most Of Your Salvation

Philippians 2:12-13

Someone has said that most people have a hundred acres of possibilities but only about a half acre under cultivation. That's true spiritually, intellectually, and physically.

The challenge of scripture is that we cultivate our spiritual lives to their full potential. The apostle Paul speaks of this when he writes, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

These words have been greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted through the years. Many people have interpreted them to teach salvation by works: that is, you do your best, and God will do the rest. You do your part, and then God will do His part. And, they say, we are to do this with fear and trembling as if there were, to the very end, a chance we might lose our salvation.

These words do not teach this at all. We are not being told to "work out" our salvation in the sense of earning it or arranging it. Notice the wording of the text carefully. We are neither told to work "for" our salvation, nor to work "toward" our salvation or to work "at" our salvation. We are told to work "out" our salvation.

Translated, the Greek verb for "work out" always expresses the idea of bringing something to a completion, that is, bringing it to its full potential. Here, we are told to culti-

vate, to develop, our salvation to its maximum. We must continue to work at it until we become everything God saved us to be.

What the apostle Paul is saying is essentially this: don't stop short of your potential. Don't be satisfied with simply squeezing into the doors of the kingdom of God. Go beyond your initial experience of conversion, and become all that God saved you to be. Beyond salvation, there is a vast new life that can be developed if you will work at it.

The Christian must continually strive in his daily life to work out his salvation; day-by-day, it must be more fully accomplished, more completely perfected. The great tragedy so many of us represent is that we never really move forward. Our lives are forever marked by the same faults and mistakes. We continue to be victims of the same habits and slaves of the same temptations. We remain guilty of the same disloyalties and the same failures. The truly Christian life cannot remain static, in the same place; it must continually progress.

Salvation is a germinal, not a terminal, experience. It is like a seed with infinite growth possibilities. A seed needs only to be planted, given the right conditions and sufficient time, and it will germinate and grow. Salvation is the same way: given the right care and sufficient time, it produces a life of joy, love, patience, peace, steadfastness, and hope.

While at salvation a person becomes new in Jesus Christ, they still, however, must deal with their old desires, old emotions, old weaknesses, and old sins. But the presence of Christ in them provides a wonderful potential. If they will work at it and cultivate their spiritual lives, they can be brought to maturity.

Reaching our full potential in Christ always involves both the human and the divine. We are saved by grace. But having been saved by grace, we are to work at becoming all God wants us to be (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 2:14, 3:5-8).

Think of your salvation like this: suppose a rich relative died and left you a farm as an inheritance. The farmland would have value in itself, but it would also represent great poten-

tial. If cultivated, planted, and fertilized, it could produce a valuable crop. If sown in coastal Bermuda, it could graze a herd of cattle. If subdivided into lots, it could become a housing subdivision. On the other hand, if you chose to do nothing with the farm, it would eventually become choked with weeds.

It would have been yours as a gift, but its productivity would depend on your work and labor. Salvation is the same way: it comes to us as a gift from God, but we must work to bring it to its full potential.

This reminds me of the story of a preacher who was taking an early morning walk when he saw his neighbor working in his garden. He paused to say, "George, that's a beautiful garden that you and the Lord have."

"Yes, pastor," George replied, "but you should have seen it when the Lord had it by himself."

God grows no gardens by himself. He grows them in cooperation with us. He gives life to the seed, nourishment to the soil, and warmth to the sun, but he expects us to prepare the soil and plant the seeds. In cooperation with God, we can grow beautiful, fruitful gardens. And in cooperation with God, we can develop our lives into the beautiful Christ-likeness they should have.

We are cautioned to work out our salvation "with fear and trembling" – not fear that we might lose it, but that we might not develop it to its full potential. It is fear that we might disappoint Christ. The tragedy of uncultivated lives and undeveloped potential can be seen everywhere because we are too casual and nonchalant about our salvation. We need a greater intensity in our spiritual developments. We need a sense of urgency in going beyond conversion to complete our maturity in Christ.

Lest we believe we are lifting ourselves up by our bootstraps, Paul reminds us that it is "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure." Here, "worketh" means to energize. "Will" refers to our desires, and "do" means ability. This verse says that it is God who gives

us both the desire and the ability to accomplish His purpose for our lives. And it is His Spirit within us that energizes us and enables us to become all that God wants us to be.

A.J. Gordon, a well-known preacher of another generation, went to a World's Fair. From a distance, he saw a man dressed in a brilliant golden suit pumping water with an old hand pump. The water was gushing out. Reflecting on the scene, Dr. Gordon said, "That man is really pumping that water." However, when he moved closer, he discovered that instead of being a real man, a wooden figure was attached to a water pump that was activated by electrical power. The man was not pumping the water. The water was pumping the "man"!

This was the secret of the New Testament church. When we see what they accomplished, the lives they touched, the changes they wrought, we say, "They were really pumping out the power of God." However, when we look more closely, we discover that the power of God was actually pumping them.

It's the same with us. We are saved by grace; we are kept by grace; and we are enabled by God's grace to fulfill His glorious purpose for our lives.

So, our spiritual growth is a cooperative effort. God gives us salvation and then joins with us in bringing that salvation to its fulfillment.

It comes down to this — you can't go on forever just being a "good egg." You've got to either hatch or rot. The challenge issued by the apostle Paul is, "Hatch, brother, hatch!" Keep working until you reach your fullest potential in Jesus Christ. And remember all the while that God is working within you.

Having given us this general admonition, the apostle Paul gets down to specifics. He names three things that are a part of complete spiritual development:

- A sweet spirit.
- A shining character.
- A steadfast witness.

If we are to bring our salvation to its full potential, we must strive to cultivate all three in our lives.

Standing At The Complaint Counter

First, we must cultivate a sweet spirit. The scriptures say, "Do all things without murmurings and disputings" (Philippians 2:14). Translated, "murmurings" refers to a Baptist church business meeting – and actually a translation of the Greek word, which means "to mutter, to grumble." It refers to the undertone of complaint that one sometimes hears in the lobbies of our churches when certain cliques speak among themselves.

The word "disputings" is the translation of a Greek word meaning "to argue, to quarrel, to wrangle." Muttering is less public, more secretive. Disputing is open and vocal.

Today, Christians engage in muttering and disputing far too often. Criticism is not one of the gifts of the Spirit. If you want to bring your salvation to its full potential, develop a sweet spirit. A.J. Gordon once classified some obstreperous church members as "figure-heads, sore-heads, and dead-heads." Vance Havner said that he might have added to the list "hot-heads," who are always in abundance.

A church recently fired a friend of mine. When I asked him what had happened, he said, "Paul, I made a big mistake. I made the Christians mad." Christians can be pretty vicious at times. Some become Christian cannibals, meaning that they eat and devour one another.

If you want to bring your salvation to its full potential, you can't go through life standing at the complaint counter or drawing battle lines. Christian growth does not flourish in an atmosphere of complaining or in a church at civil war. You've got to develop a sweet spirit like Christ.

It is interesting that there are two stories found in Luke where someone asked Jesus to issue a rebuke or correction to a third person. In each case, Jesus addresses his correction to the complainant himself. One instance was when a man complained to Jesus about his brother's refusal to divide the fam-

ily inheritance. Jesus said, “Who made me a judge or a divider over you?” (Luke 12:14). He then warned the complainant about his own covetousness.

The other instance was when Martha complained to Jesus that Mary had refused to help with the housework, and Jesus cautioned Martha about fretting and fussing about so many “things.”

These two examples indicate that clearly, in many instances — even in most instances — complaints against others usually indicate that something is wrong with the complainant’s basic attitude.

The next time you are tempted to complain about someone else or to criticize someone else’s actions — *stop!* Stop and take a good, hard, analyzing look at your own attitudes. If you do this with the kind of honesty that the Holy Spirit provides, you will most often find the problem is not the other person, but a problem in your own heart.

As Jesus said:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, ‘Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?’ Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5).

Some Christians remind me of a man at a monastery who took an oath of silence. As he made application, the director of the monastery shared with him the rules. “You may not speak one word for one full year. You may pray, read the Bible, and meditate, but you may not speak. At the end of the year, we will have a conference to see how you are progressing.”

The man agreed to abide by the rules and entered the monastery. For the first year, he did not say a word. All he did was read the Bible, pray, and meditate. At the end of the year, the leader called him in for his conference. He said, “Before you say anything, let me explain the rules of the conference. You may speak only two words – that’s all. So choose

your words carefully. Now, what do you want to say?" The man thought for a moment and said, "Bed hard."

The leader of the monastery said, "I'm sorry to hear you say that. It indicates that you haven't made satisfactory progress. I think you need another year of silence. Let me remind you again of the rules. You cannot speak a word aloud for an entire year. You may only read the Bible, pray, and meditate. Then, at the end of the year, we will have another conference and determine the progress you have made. Do you want to stay?"

The man nodded his head and spent the next year in complete silence. He didn't say a word to anyone. All he did was pray, read the Bible, and meditate. At the end of the second year, the leader called him in for another conference. He said, "Alright, let's see how you are doing. But first, let me remind you of the rules. You can speak only two words, so choose them very carefully. Now, what do you want to say?" The man thought for a moment and then replied, "Food bad."

The leader was perplexed. He said to the man, "You have not made the progress you should. If you would like, you may stay one more year, but I remind you that the rules are the same. You cannot speak a word to anyone. You may only pray, read the Bible, and meditate. Do you wish to stay?"

The man nodded his head affirmatively, so for the third year he never said a word. All he did was pray, read the Bible, and meditate. At the end of his third year, he was called in for his final conference. The leader began, "This is the third time we have been together. The rules are the same. You may speak only two words, and by them I will judge your spiritual progress. So, choose your words carefully. Now, what do you want to say?"

The man said, "I quit."

The leader replied, "I think you might as well. All you've done is complain since you've been here."

Some Christians are like that: all they do is complain. British columnist Bernard Levin, commenting on the taste of two music critics, said: "If this pair had been present at the miracle

of the loaves and the fishes, one of them would have complained that there was no lemon to go on the fish, and the other would have demanded more butter for the bread" (Fingleton, David. *The Authorized Biography of Kiri Te Kanawa. Reader's Digest* (Athenum), 1985, 70).

It doesn't take a lot of musical talent to always be "harping" about something. It doesn't take much size to criticize. And I remind you, that the squeaky wheel doesn't always get the grease: sometimes it gets replaced.

Not Everybody Is Doing It

Second, we must cultivate a shining character. The scriptures say that we are to "...be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

He describes the unredeemed culture of his day as "a crooked and perverse nation." That is an equally apt description for our day. Our world is not in harmony with God: it is crosswise, cross-grained with his will and his intended purposes. In this kind of world, we are to be "blameless," "harmless," and "without rebuke." We are to be "shining lights" in a dark world.

"Harmless," the word that is translated here, expresses what the Christian is in himself. It literally means, "unmixed, unadulterated." For instance, it is used to describe wine that is pure and not mixed with water; it is used to describe metal that contains no alloy. When used to describe people, it implies absolute sincerity — motives and actions that are unmixed, clean, and pure.

Translated, the word "blameless" describes what a Christian is in the sight of God. It is the word generally used in connection with sacrifices. In that context, it meant spotless or unblemished, and therefore fit to be offered on the altar of God. The purity of the Christian must be such that it can ever stand the scrutiny of God.

The Christian must offer to the world the word of life:

that is to say, the word that gives life and brings life. The Christian missionary endeavor has two aspects. First, it is the offer of a message; it is the proclamation of the gospel in words that are clear and unmistakable.

Second, it is the witness of a life that is absolutely straight in a world that is warped, twisted, and distorted. It is the offer of light in a world that is dark. Christians are to be the lights in the world. The word which Paul uses for "light" is the same word used in the creation story of the sun and the moon, which God set in the firmaments of heaven to give light upon earth (Genesis. 1:14-18). We are to be like stars in the heavens to light the way for men. We are to be shining examples of Jesus Christ.

We are not here to learn to live in the dark, but to walk in the light and to be the light. We are not here to get along with evil, but to overcome evil with good. Christian living calls not only for preparation and expectation, but also for purification.

Iris Uri, at one time an addict and prostitute, who spent time in penal institutions, told of her salvation. She said she knelt on a sidewalk in Houston, Texas, and was saved. She said, "I knelt down a tramp and got up a lady." She said on an evangelistic trip to Australia: "Most Christians are so worldly that you'd have to backslide to have fellowship with them."

We often justify our conformity by saying, "Everybody is doing it." Two things need to be said about that. First of all, not everyone is doing anything. Not everyone drinks. Not everyone does drugs. Not everyone commits adultery. Not everyone uses profanity. Not everyone gets a divorce. It simply is not true that "everybody is doing it."

Second, it wouldn't make any difference if they were. If 50 million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing. If 51 percent of the people do wrong, it is still wrong. Right and wrong can never be determined by percentages. A thing is right because God says so; and a thing is wrong because God says so. If a thing was wrong yesterday, it is wrong to-

day, and if the world lasts for a thousand years, it will still be wrong. If a thing was right yesterday, it is right today – and it will be forever and eternally right. The behavior of people in no way affects the ultimate rightness or wrongness of a thing. To grow to be all Christ wants us to be, we must offer and demonstrate straightness in a twisted world and light in a dark world. His missionary endeavor is the bringing of the message and the demonstration of a life.

Man The Lighthouse, Kate

Third, we must cultivate a steadfast witness. We are to always be “holding forth the word of life” (Philippians 2:16). The words “holding forth” are a translation from the Greek word used in secular documents of offering wine to a guest. It means “to hold out so as to offer.” This should ever be the attitude and the posture of the saint, offering salvation to a lost and dying world.

Dr. Samuel M. Sweemer once declared of William Borden, son of the famous Borden dairy family, a saintly young missionary who gave his life for Christ in Egypt: “Borden kept the faith, but he did not keep it to himself.” That’s what we must do. Even the apostle Paul practiced what he preached. When he wrote these words, he was chained to a Roman soldier in prison. Since he was chained to them, that means they were chained to him – and he was busy winning them to Christ one-by-one. I suppose that’s what you would call a “chain reaction.”

These words are written to a church on the verge of civil war. Two ladies were disputing with one another, and it was affecting the church. Paul’s admonition was: “Forget about your murmurings and disputing, and get on with the business at hand. Your primary job is to lift up the word of life.”

Jacob Walker was a lighthouse keeper on Robbin’s Reef, off the rocky shore of New England. After years of faithfully minding the light, he became ill and died. His wife buried his body on the hillside above the shore on the mainland, in view of the lighthouse.

Later she applied for and received the appointment as keeper of the lighthouse. For 20 years, she carried on alone, and then a New York reporter went out to get her story. She told him this: "Every evening I stand in the door of the lighthouse and look across the water to the hillside where my husband's body is buried. And as I do," she said,

Always there is a message for me,

My husband's final words just three:

Mind the lighthouse, Kate; mind the lighthouse.

(Proclaim Magazine; Oct.-Dec. 1991.)

That's what we are to do. It is so easy to be distracted from our primary purpose. While the city of Constantinople – which fell to the Turks in 1495 – was besieged on the outside, on the inside Christian monks were debating the sex of angels, the color of the eyes of the Virgin Mary, and if a fly should fall into holy water, would the fly be sanctified or the water polluted. And while they played religious trivia, their city fell to Moslems. God, help us not to do the same thing in our day.

If we are to bring our salvation to its full potential, we must develop a sweet and gentle spirit like that of Jesus. We must shine as lights in this dark world, and we must ever be offering the word of life to lost and dying men.

6

How to Know When God is Speaking

Judges 6:17

Crucial to every Christian is how to know when God is speaking. We want to know who to marry, which job to take, which school to attend, which church to attend, and scores of other things.

Although learning to recognize the voice of God is essential, it's not easy. Knowing with certainty when God is speaking to them has often been difficult for God's people.

Gideon's life offers a glimpse into this struggle. The book of Judges, where this story is recorded, reads like a broken record. Its recurring theme is:

- The children of Israel fall into apostasy.
- God sends an enemy to chasten them.
- The people repent and cry to God for mercy.
- God sends a judge to deliver them from their oppression.

When the curtain rises on the story of Gideon, the children of Israel have been harassed by the Midianites for seven years. A nomadic people who lived east and southwest of the Dead Sea, the Midianites would sweep out of the desert, destroy the Israelites' crops during the harvest season, steal their livestock, then melt back into the desert. Prior to this time, the desert had provided an effective barrier against invaders – dependent on horses and donkeys – but the Midianites used domesticated camels. Because camels have large hooves, they

traveled easily on soft sand. In addition camels carried their own energy supply in their humps and could go for days, sometimes even weeks, without food or water.

Israel was poorly equipped for these raids. The tribal leaders' ability to unite the people was limited at best, and their efforts were being undercut by religious differences. Clearly, the nation needed a resolute man of faith and dynamic courage to lead them. Gideon was just the man.

Gideon was a humble farmer when the Lord appeared to him, telling him he had been selected as the person through whom the Lord would deliver Israel from its oppressors. Gideon responded: "Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."

The word "least" used by Gideon meant not only small in size, but also unimportant. Gideon felt as though he was the runt of the family, inferior to everyone else, and Manasseh was the weakest of the twelve tribes of Israel. Gideon was saying: "Lord, I'm the most insignificant member of one of the poorest families of the weakest clan in all of Israel. Surely you don't want me."

Isn't that exactly the way of the Lord? He takes the most insignificant person from the most unlikely family and the most unexpected circumstances and uses them for his purposes. And the response of God's servant is usually the same as Gideon's.

Moses exclaimed, "Lord, I cannot speak."

Isaiah said, "I'm a man of unclean lips."

Jeremiah said, "I am just a child."

All of God's servants have felt that same sense of inadequacy.

Gideon reminds me of the lad Leslie Weatherhead told about. The Methodist minister served as an air raid warden during the awful days of the London blitz during World War II. He was making his rounds one night following an unusually heavy attack and happened upon an eight-year-old boy sobbing amid the smoking ruins. Weatherhead asked the boy

if he were lost, and the boy nodded affirmatively. Then Weatherhead asked: "Where does your father live?"

The boy answered, "He is overseas in the service."

"What about your mother and brother and sisters?"

"I don't have any," he replied. "They have all been killed."

"Do you have any other family — uncles, aunts, grandparents?" The child shook his head "no."

Dr. Weatherhead then asked, "Who are you?"

And with that, the boy began to sob convulsively and responded: "Mr., I ain't nobody's nothing."

That was the way Gideon felt. He was a "nobody" and completely unqualified for the task. The Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with thee and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." That's always the key to success in God's work — God being with us and empowering us — but that was not enough for Gideon. He wanted a supernatural act performed in his presence to confirm that this was indeed the messenger of God. He wanted assurance that God was speaking to him. That's when he said, "If now, I have found grace in thy sight, show me a sign that thou talkest with me" (Judges 6:17).

Gideon put God to the test. He would put a fleece on the ground, and if the next day the ground was dry and the fleece was wet, he would know the Lord had spoken to him. Sure enough, the next morning the fleece was ringing wet with dew. This should have been enough to convince anyone — but not Gideon. Once again, he placed the fleece on the ground and asked the Lord to let the fleece be dry, and the ground wet. The next day it was so.

With confirmation, he mustered up an army and routed the Midianites. With the Midianites subdued, Israel lived peacefully the next 40 years, and Gideon died at a ripe old age.

To this day, Gideon's name is known and honored the world over: an organization that bears his name places Bibles in hospital rooms, hotel and motel rooms, and schools around the world. But before Gideon's name was revered and before he did his great work, he had to settle in his own mind that

this was God's will and that God was directing him. The struggle of Gideon to be certain that God was speaking to him is, in a sense, a struggle we all face. We're bound to ask how does God speak or how can I know his voice? There are at least four ways:

- God speaks through open doors.
- God speaks through common sense.
- God speaks through divine impressions.
- God speaks through inner peace.

No Automatic Door

First, God sometimes speaks to us through open doors of opportunity. The apostle Paul often spoke of the "open doors" God had given to him. These were opportunities he interpreted to be the will of God.

God spoke to David Livingston that way. Livingston was planning a trip to China and was preparing himself to minister to both the souls and bodies of the people in that great land. Then God stepped in and showed David his plan for him. The Opium War broke out in China, and the door to that country was closed. Just at this time, God sent Robert Moffett, who spent years as a missionary in Africa, into Livingston's life. It was Moffett who directed Livingston's attention to Africa, for after talking with Moffett in London, Livingston clearly saw the way that God would have him go and the work that he was to do. So Livingston went to Africa where he would give the rest of this life to exploration, emancipation, and evangelization.

Pete Marshall once coined the phrase "God's negatory influences." There are times when God uses circumstances like these to channel our lives toward his goals and purposes for us – and uses these events to speak to us.

Heed two words of caution about opportunities. One, not every opportunity is from the Lord. Saul, the rejected king of Israel, was hunting David, God's anointed, like a criminal. He would have killed David if he could have caught him. Twice in these biblical adventures, David could have killed

Saul and been rid of his enemy once and for all. But opportunity for David did not spell permission from God. He would not do it (I Samuel 24:6). Every opportunity is not from God – and some should not be taken.

Two, we must make some opportunities for ourselves. A young pastor said to me recently, “I will go to the seminary if the Lord opens the door.” I responded with: “Shove on the door. The door to the seminary is not an automatic door.” We don’t stand around waiting for God to do everything for us. Sometimes he doesn’t open the door until we move toward it.

Brains Were God’s Idea

The second recurring theme is this: God often speaks to us through our reason. Brains, after all, were God’s idea. I assume that he expects us to use them, even in discerning his will. He expects us to make our own choices in many things.

I’m persuaded that some Christians walk under a cloud of uncertainty, worrying about which profession to enter, which car they should drive, which school they should attend, where they should live and other such matters, when the Lord has set them free to follow their own personal inclination, guided only by their love for him and their fellow man. On the surface, it appears more spiritual to seek God’s lead than to proceed and do the obvious thing – but it is not.

If God gave you a watch, would you honor him more by asking him for the time of day or by consulting the watch? If God gave a sailor a compass, would the sailor please God more by kneeling in prayer, persuading God to show him which way to go or by steering by the compass?

In facing things that are not specifically commanded or forbidden in scripture, it is often God’s will that we be free to exercise our own intelligence to make choices. The shepherd will lead the sheep, but he does not wish to decide which turf the sheep shall nibble. God’s choice for us may not be one, but one of scores of possible choices.

Some Christians become so heavenly minded they are no

earthly good. They become ridiculous in their spirituality. Dr. Henry Ironside once needed a ride to a speaking engagement. He heard about a young man who might be able to drive him. He asked, "Would you take me, son?"

The young man replied: "Well sir, Dr. Ironside, I will have to pray about it."

Dr. Ironside said: "No, never mind. If you pray about it and God tells you to take me down there, and we get there and God tells you not to bring me back, I'll be stuck."

I am not disparaging prayer, but don't ever minimize the importance of your own ability to make intelligent choices. In my own life, most often I pray, opening my life to God, and then I make the best decision I can make. I don't just pray, and I don't just make a decision solely on my own. I open my life by prayer, giving him a chance to impress me, and then I make the best decision I can.

For example, when my last church called me to be their pastor, I found no clear impression from God as to what to do. Up until that time, I had always been very sure when God was leading me to a church. In fact, I sometimes knew before the pulpit committee knew. However, in this instance, there was no clear impression.

I agonized for days and weeks. On my face before God I prayed for a sign, an impression, but none came. My heart told me to stay where I was. I had many close friends there, and I loved the church, but my mind told me I needed to leave. For my sake, I needed a new start. So one day I said to the Lord, "Lord, I'm going to Tyler unless you put up a road block that even a blind man can see." The next day I received a telephone call from one of the leading businessmen in my church. He asked me to come by his office for a visit. He then asked, "What would it take to get you to stay in San Marcos?" I replied, "Nothing. Bob, I'm only seeking God's will."

He then asked, "What if we build you a new house?" I thanked him but said that would not affect my decision. But I left San Marcos wondering, "Lord, is this the road block I asked for?" The more I thought about it, the more I knew it

was not. God doesn't use bribes. So I resigned from the church at San Marcos and moved on to Tyler.

My first three months in Tyler were miserable. It had nothing to do with the church – it all had to do with me. I left my friends behind. I left the place I loved. I was simply homesick.

To make matters even worse, every week someone called or wrote encouraging me to return home. They knew the struggle I had endured in making my decision.

After three months, I decided to go back to San Marcos. The chairman of the pulpit committee was my best friend. He was one of those people who had often encouraged me to return. So, one Wednesday I made my decision and called him. He was not in. I called him repeatedly all afternoon without success. After our Wednesday evening service, I called him again and still couldn't reach him. It was the next morning before I finally made contact with him. I said, "Ronnie, I've made up my mind. I'm ready to come back to San Marcos if you still want me."

He said, "Oh, Paul, our committee met last night and invited a man to come before our church in view of a call."

As I replaced the phone receiver, the impression came clearly to my mind, "There's your roadblock — not in front of you to keep you from going, but behind you to keep you from going back." That settled the issue for me. I knew I was where God wanted me, and I have been happy ever since.

You must be careful, however, to think with your head and not with your heart. Your decisions must be rational and not emotional. If I had followed my emotions, I would have made a tragic mistake. Your heart will deceive you more often than your mind will.

Traffic Jam of Wills

Third, God sometimes speaks to us through divine impressions. E. Stanley Jones helps us at this point by saying:

When I was deciding on the question of my life's work, I received a letter from a college president, saying, 'It is the

will of the faculty, the will of the student body, the will of the townspeople, and we believe the will of God, that you should teach at this college.'

At the same time, I received a letter from a trusted friend saying, 'I believe it is the will of God that you should go into evangelistic work in America.'

Then a letter came from the Board of Missions, saying, 'It is our will to send you to India.'

Here is a perfect jam of wills! They were all second-hand, and I felt I had a right to first-hand knowledge in such a crisis. Not that I would despise opinions of friends in spiritual guidance, for God often guides through them, but obviously here they could not be depended on. So I took the letter from the board, went to my room, spread it out, and said, 'Now, Father, my life is not my own, and I must answer this. Lead me, and I will follow.'

Very clearly the inner voice said, 'It is India.'

'Alright,' I replied. 'That settles it — it is India.'

I rose from my knees and wrote at once, saying that I was ready. The inner voice did not fail me then. It has never failed me since. In many a crisis too intimate to spread on the pages of a book, I have looked to him to give me a clear lead. He has never failed to give me the lead sooner or later, and when he has given it, it has always turned out to be right. He has never let me down. I have let him down time and time again, but I find him utterly dependable. I'm sure that outside of that will, I cannot succeed; inside that will, I cannot fail.

Call it what you will – an “inner impression,” a “gut feeling” – God puts an “ought to” or an “ought not to” in us. He gives us an impression as to what we should do.

A Sense of Peace

Fourth, God speaks to us by giving us inner peace. In 1983, I had dinner with Dr. Forest Feezor, who was 91 years old at the time. He had once been pastor of the First Baptist Church of Waco and later Executive Director of the Baptist

General Convention of Texas. I asked him, if he had his life to live over, what he would do differently. He replied: "Really not much. I've always sought to live by the will of God, and when you do that there is not much you would change."

He then told me his life story. He grew up in a poor, uneducated family. In school, people began to say to him, "I believe God wants you to preach." He said he didn't even know what a call to preach was, but people said it so often that, one day, he decided to make a covenant with God. He said, "Lord, if a church asks me to preach, I will know you are calling me into the ministry."

A short time later, he was plowing when a layman from a neighboring church visited him. The wife of their pastor was ill, and he had been forced to resign from the church to care for her. The people wanted Forest Feezor to preach for them the following Sunday. Then, they asked him to preach again. Two weeks later they called him to be their pastor. Although he was unlicensed, unordained, and had never felt a call to preach, they wanted him as their pastor.

He went into a storeroom, got on his knees, and asked the Lord what to do. Then he said, "There came to me the greatest sense of peace I've ever felt in my life, and I knew God wanted me to preach."

That was the experience of the apostle Paul. In relating how the gospel was taken to Europe, he said, "I came to Troaz to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord; I had no rest in my spirit...so...went from thence into Macedonia" (II Corinthians 2:12-13). Obviously, Paul had been left to plan his own itinerary until then, but having no peace about his last decision, he turned to Europe to preach the gospel there for the first time. Paul's experience teaches us that God leads our stops as well as our steps. Sometimes he says *go*, and sometimes he says *no*.

That was my own experience. I was invited to be president of the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention by the selection committee in the summer of 1989. Feeling no leading in that direction, I declined their invitation.

The search committee asked for a second meeting and, I supposed, sensed indecision in me. One of them asked, "What would you do if we elected you anyway?"

I replied, "Well, I suppose I would pray about it some more, but if you want my answer now, it is no."

With that understanding, they took my name to the board, and I was unanimously elected president/CEO of the second largest religious pension board in the world. I spent the next two weeks in earnest prayer, but still had no clear sense of direction. So, I once again gave them a "no" answer.

The morning after I announced to my church that I was staying, I received a phone call from my boyhood pastor, John M. Wright. He said, "In my devotional time this morning, the Lord gave me a verse for you: 'You have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many.'"

I replied, "Oh, Brother Wright, don't tell me that. I've already told the Annuity Board no."

He said, "I'm not telling you what to do, just what the Lord gave me for you. Have a good day!" Click went the phone.

The next day, I was playing golf with a friend, and he asked, "How do you feel now that you've made your big decision?"

I replied, "Miserable, perfectly miserable."

I left the golf game, went home, called the chairman of the committee, and said, "If you still want me, I'll come." It was that lack of peace in staying that made me realize that it was God's will for me to go.

As I look back, I am fully persuaded that God was leading, although in this case it took a lack of peace to make me realize it. Perhaps it will be with you, as it has been with me, to know God's will for sure only as I looked through the rear-view mirror. Looking back, I can see clearly the hand of God. I sought his will, did what I believed he wanted me to do, and God led me.

I think I would sum the matter up this way: if you want to know God's leading, seek God, not his will. His will is not

something to be known apart from him. Get to know him, walk with him, talk with him, and somehow, somehow, he will guide your steps. He has promised that (Proverbs 2:8-9).

The Lord himself is a God of innovation. Think even briefly about the means and methods he uses to reveal himself to people: a burning bush, a pillar of fire and a cloud, a ladder stretching into heaven, a man's donkey, a fiery chariot, a strange vision, graffiti on a king's wall, angels and a baby born in Bethlehem.

Don't try to limit him to a single way. We must never make one experience normative for everyone. When he goes after a person, he speaks in whichever way necessary to communicate his will to that person, *but he does speak*. Your job and mine is simply to seek God in a deeper, more personal relationship. It is his responsibility to lead us and guide us. If we will do our part, we can be sure that he will do his.

Therefore, make the motto of your life: "Thy will, O Lord, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else." When you do, you will know when he speaks.

7

Feeding the Inner Man

Matthew 4:4

Two old friends chanced to meet on a street one day. One said to the other, "Friend, how is it with your soul?" His friend replied, "You know, I've been so busy lately, I'd almost forgotten that I had a soul."

That's a danger we all face. In the early 18th century, the Church of England was spiritually dead. Thomas Carlyle described the period as "soul extinct, stomach well alive."

He could just as easily have been describing our own age. Someone captured the essence of the age as follows:

In the average university today, we build a stadium to care for at least 50,000 people, ministering to their physical needs. We build classrooms to care for 5,000, ministering to their mental needs, and then we build a chapel to care for about 500, ministering to their spiritual needs. Somehow we have forgotten the fact that man is a spiritual being.

George Carlin characterized the paradox of our time when he said:

We have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider free-ways, but narrower viewpoints. We have bigger houses, but smaller families; more conveniences, but less time. We have more knowledge, but less wisdom. We have higher incomes, but lower morals; more leisure, but less fun. We can safely walk on the moon, but still can't safely walk down our own streets. We have cleaned up the air, but polluted our minds; we have conquered outer space, but neglected inner space.

We talk too much, listen too little, love too seldom, and

hate too often. We have learned to make a living but not a life; we've added years to life, but not life to our years.

The reason? We have not cultivated our spirits, nourished our souls, or cared for our inner lives.

In some ways, Monica Lewinski is representative of our age. After her association with Jenny Craig's weight control program, Barbara Walters asked her [on ABC's *The View* (3-00)], "We know what you're doing for the outside of Monica, but what are you doing for the inside of Monica?"

That's a question for all of us. What are you doing to cultivate your spirit, nourish your soul, and care for your inner life? Jesus addressed this when he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

When Jesus spoke these words, he was physically famished after 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. Satan tempted him to turn the desert stones into nourishing bread. Jesus knew that bread was the staff of life. He taught us to pray for it. But he also knew of a starvation far worse than having nothing to eat. So he told the devil that men will die if they try to survive on the foodstuffs of the world alone. We need inner braces for the outer pressures of life, for only the word that originates from God will nourish our souls.

The Hebrew prophet, Amos, predicted a similar condition: he foresaw a time when God would send a period of dearth and drought on sinful Israel, a famine that would make hunger and thirst seem nourishing. God would unleash, instead, a famine that would devastate his people at their very core – a famine of "hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11).

I believe that something similar has happened in our time. In the hustle and bustle of life, we must not fail to feed the inner man. We must return to God's Word in order to nourish our souls. It's not enough to own a Bible; we must read and heed it. According to researcher George Barna, 90% of American households have at least three copies of the Bible, yet two-thirds of us don't read it on a regular basis. More than one-

half can't name five of the Ten Commandments or the four Gospels. How can a sick and biblically illiterate society be healed if those who profess to have the answers similarly suffer from illiteracy and spiritual malnutrition? How can we teach or feed others when we ourselves need to be taught and fed? God supplies five needs that feed our souls:

- We need truth to live nobly.
- We need forgiveness to live joyfully.
- We need grace to live victoriously.
- We need love to live richly.
- We need hope to live eternally.

A Chunk of Granite

First, we need truth to live nobly. These are days of moral and spiritual confusion. It seems that anything goes and nothing stays. Old moral absolutes are considered obsolete.

Ted Turner, founder of CNN of the Turner Broadcasting Network, as well as the largest private landowner in the United States, espouses this philosophy. He is sometimes called "the mouth of the south," because he speaks his mind so freely. In a speech several years ago he said, "Christianity is for losers," and he called the Ten Commandments "obsolete" because there is no amendment procedure to them. In place of the Commandments, he proposed "Ten Voluntary Incentives" (Atta, Dale. "Meet Ted Turner," *Readers' Digest*: September 1998, 222).

Our age treats truth as if it were a lump of Silly Putty: we stretch it, mold it, and shape it to suit our own desires. We rearrange the facts ever so slightly to better serve our own causes. But truth is not like Silly Putty, it is more like a chunk of granite. It cannot be reshaped or remolded for our convenience. Once we change it, truth is not the truth anymore. Malcolm Muggeridge once said: "What was relevant and true a million years ago will be so a million years hence. Truth is not a thing that is subject to fashion."

The psalmist said, "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains" (Psalms 6:6). Let the winds blow, let the rains fall,

let the storms come and mountains stand. They endure the changing times. God is like that, and His truth is like that. If you hunger to know right from wrong, the truth about life and death, about sin and salvation, time and eternity, you need only look to God and his word. Jesus reminds us, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). "It endures forever" (I Peter 1:25).

Like Spreading Mayonnaise

Second, we need forgiveness to live joyfully. J. Vernon McGee tells the story about a young boy who wanted to join a rural church in the south. The deacons were examining his faith, and they asked, "How did you get saved?"

The boy replied, "God did his part, and I did my part."

Thinking that perhaps something was wrong with his doctrine, they questioned him further, "What was God's part, and what was your part?"

His explanation was a good one. He said, "I did the sinning, and God did the saving."

We've all done our part of sinning, and when we sin, it's like spreading mayonnaise on a slice of bread. Recently, my son and I played golf. As we came to the ninth tee-box, he called ahead to the snack shop to order a hamburger. He wanted it dry — just meat and bread, nothing else. When the waitress served him his burger, it had mayonnaise spread on one side and mustard on the other. Without complaint, he took the burger and tried to scrape the condiments off the bun. You know the result: he couldn't do it. There was no way it could be done. Sin is the same way: once done, it's impossible to undo. Our only hope is that we can be forgiven by the one against whom we have sinned — God himself.

If you are weighted down by guilt, if you hunger for forgiveness, you will find your soul food in God's word. Listen to what it says: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the

sins of the whole world" (I John 2:1-2).

"Propitiation" is a big word, meaning "to cover," "to take away." We preachers are good at using words that no one understands. A man came out of church one Sunday and said, "Pastor, you are smarter than Albert Einstein." The pastor blushed and replied, "Smarter than Albert Einstein? Einstein was the smartest man who ever lived. What makes you say that I am smarter than Albert Einstein?"

The man replied, "When Albert Einstein talked, only five percent of the people understood what he said. When you talk, nobody understands what you say."

Understand this: Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins and to make us right with God.

If you hunger for forgiveness, if you long to be right with God, you will find cleansing at the foot of the cross. We need only to confess and forsake our sins, and he will forgive us our sins (I John 1:9-10). Bishop Fulton Sheen said that there are three things every man must do for himself:

- You must do your own praying.
- You must do your own loving.
- You must do your own confessing.

If you hunger for cleansing and forgiveness, confess your sins to God.

My Soul Is Heaven Bound

Third, we need grace to live victoriously. The Norwegians have a saying, "Life is hard. If it isn't, it should be." We know from our own experience that it is hard, and being a Christian does not alter that.

William J. Reynolds, distinguished professor emeritus of church music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth and author of more than 700 songs, said, "I don't sing the song 'Every Day With Jesus Is Sweeter Than the Day Before,' because it's not." We all know that, don't we?

He said, "I'm much more in keeping, in sympathy, with the old spiritual that says, 'Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, but still my soul is heaven bound.' Every day is not

better; I have some days that are great, and some days that are not so great.”

We ought to sing the truth as well as tell the truth, and there are times when all of us are down and need strength. There are times when, in the storms of life, we need to be supported. If you hunger for this kind of strength, God’s word can satisfy. Listen to what it says: “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. 4:16).

The word “help” is also used to describe the girding of the ship on which the apostle Paul sailed to Rome (Acts 27:17). The ship was caught in a storm and was about to be broken asunder, so the crew wrapped chains around the bow of the ship to hold it together. If, in the midst of the storms of life, you need something to hold your life together, you can find it in our great High Priest who is in heaven.

For three years, Martin Neimoller survived the horrors of Dachau: the smells of burning human flesh and the sights of walking dead men. For three years, this German pastor who dared to defy Adolph Hitler, was kept in solitary confinement in the world’s most notorious concentration camp.

“How could you stand it without losing your sanity?” an interviewer asked Pastor Neimoller years later on a Chicago radio program. “A man doesn’t realize how much he can stand until he is put to the test,” Neimoller answered confidently. Then he said, “You can stand far more than you think you can. You’re much stronger than you think you are...if God is dwelling in your life.”

Someone once said, “Given a strong hub, a person can take a surprising number of shocks and bumps on the outer rim without sustaining permanent damage.” Make God and his work the hub of your life, and they will sustain you.

Somebody, Somewhere Love Me

Fourth, we need love to live richly. Mother Theresa, the saint of the gutters who dedicated her life to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, said, “Loneliness and the feeling

of being uncared for and unwanted are the greatest poverty.”

The need and desire for life is in all of us. Madalyn Murray O’Haire, who more than anyone else, was responsible for the 1963 Supreme Court ruling that outlawed compulsory, prescribed prayer in the public schools, once described herself as “America’s most hated woman.”

She was crude, arrogant, obnoxious, and overbearing, but people’s images of her changed when, after a mysterious disappearance several years ago, her personal diaries were discovered. In them, more than a half dozen times, she writes, “Somebody, somewhere love me.”

Craig Matthews, a friend I met in one of my interim pastorates, lost his wife of 56 years to Alzheimer’s. He wrote to me:

My darling Rebecca died three years ago, and I tell you from experience that grief does not lessen. I did the best I could to care for my wife in her cruel illness, but I believe her Lord was good to take her when her body broke down, and there was only confusion, fear, and pain for her. It is my empty house, my empty bed, my empty arms that continue to hurt me so. Death has no terror for me, and while I do not seek it, I would not flee it.

Do you know about an empty house, an empty bed, empty arms? We all do, and we all need love.

“Somebody, somewhere love me” is the heart cry of every person. If that’s the cry of your heart, God’s word has an answer. The scriptures say, “When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up” (Psalms 27:10).

Who are the two people in this world least likely to forsake you? Surely, it is your own mother and father. But if that should happen, the Lord will “take” you up. The word “take” literally means “adopt.” If you’ll come to God through Christ, you’ll never be an orphan; God will adopt you.

A recent television documentary related the life of Steve McQueen, who for years was one of Hollywood’s leading men. He was raised in an orphanage, endured multiple marriages, abused both drugs and alcohol, and in spite of his suc-

cess and stardom, found no happiness. In the latter years of his life, he turned to Christianity and found peace and contentment for the first time in his life.

Then, he learned that he had cancer.

McQueen later died following surgery in a hospital in Mexico. When he was discovered dead, a Bible lay across his chest opened to John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." If you hunger for love, you will find it in God.

I Hope Your Room Is Next To Mine

Fifth, we need hope to live eternally. Job's question is the heart cry of all mankind: "If a person dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). There is no "if" about it; we will die. George Bernard Shaw was right: "Life's ultimate statistic is the same for all people, one out of one dies." But is there hope in the face of death?

Jesus answers that for us. He said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25-26).

When in his old age, Bishop Darling lost a beloved daughter, he said, "I feel like an old tree, standing out in a field, struck many times by lightning. The last bolt has shattered me, but I'm still standing. My face is toward the sunrise, and with good hope in my heart, I'm looking forward to the future." Nothing – I say nothing – can destroy a man like that.

Jessie Moody tells about the day they buried his mother. He went back to the old home place for the funeral, and late in the evening, after the burial, he sat with his father and his family in the kitchen of their home. His father said, "I want you to take me back to the cemetery." They said, "But dad, it's late, and we just came from there a few hours ago. Wouldn't it be better if we waited until morning?"

But he insisted, so they got in the old pickup truck and drove back to the cemetery and the freshly dug grave. He knelt down beside it, patted the mound of freshly dug dirt,

and said, "We had 60 good years. All in all, it's been a good day."

What can give a person such hope in the face of death?
Only Jesus Christ.

I was in central Texas for a revival meeting last year, and a man told me that his brother, who died that year, had a saying on the mantel of his fireplace that read: "In my Father's house are many rooms. I hope yours is next to mine."

If you put your faith and trust in Christ, you can be sure of help while you live and heaven when you die.

Do you have a hunger or a thirst that has never been satisfied? Then listen again to Jesus: "Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you...As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father; so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me" (John 6:27, 57).

Have you fed your soul? Is there a void, a longing, an emptiness in you that the things of this earth cannot fill? Turn to Christ, and he will satisfy the deepest longing of your spirit.

8

Called To Be Saints

Romans 1:7

I once attended a meeting where a probing question was asked. It has intrigued me ever since. The question was this: “When you get where you’re going, where will you be?”

It is a question about the direction of your life, about your ultimate goal. Everyone is headed somewhere. Our goal may be simply to survive, to get married and raise a family, to retire, to achieve a certain position, to get an education, or to acquire wealth, but all of us are going somewhere in life – whether we can articulate it or not.

What about your Christian life? When you get where you’re going in it, where will you be? There is only one worthy goal for the Christian. The apostle Paul described it as “the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). In pursuit of that goal, he said he forgot the past — its failures and its achievements. He focused on the future — its potential and its challenges. And he forged ahead with energy and determination like a runner striving to cross the finish line to win a race.

What did he mean by “the high calling” of God? The apostle helps us to better understand it when he wrote to the church in Rome that they were “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7).

The apostle began his letter by saying that he was “called to be an apostle.” An apostle is one who is sent on a special mission. We know that Paul was sent by the Lord to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, but that was a special calling. Ours

is a general calling: we are all called to be saints.

There are five words used in the New Testament to describe the followers of Christ: believers, brethren, servants, disciples, and saints. They are called believers for their faith, brethren for their love, servants for their work, disciples for their knowledge, and saints for their holiness.

Of these five words, “saints” is the least understood. What is a saint? Most often we think of them as people who were especially good, who have died, and who are now in heaven. But that idea of saints comes from the Roman Catholic Church, not from scripture. The word “saint” literally means “one who is sanctified, set apart, for the service of God.”

A lad sat in church one Sunday morning looking up at the stained glass windows of the sanctuary. Each window depicted a character from the Bible, one of the heroes of the faith. The lad asked his mom, “Who are those people?”

His mother replied, “Those are saints.” As the rays of sunlight shone through the windows, he replied, “Now I know who the saints are. Saints are people who let the sun shine through them.” That’s not a bad definition, especially if you interpret sun to be S-O-N. Saints are people who let Jesus, the Son of God, shine through their lives.

Those who are followers of Christ are called to let Christ, the light of the world, shine through them and into the darkness that surrounds us. What does it mean to be called to be saints? It means three things:

- It is a call to holy living.
- It is a call to loving action.
- It is a call to total commitment.

Make Me Like Joe

First, the call to be saints is a call to holy living. Christians are often accused of being hypocrites. The criticism is occasionally justified, but not nearly as often as you might think. The reason is that we always preach a higher standard than we can live. We preach perfection, and none of us can ever

achieve that.

The fact is, the world does not expect us to be perfect, but it does expect us to be different. The Lord calls us in scripture to be “holy as I am holy” (I Peter 1:15), and he reminds us that without holiness “no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

The word “holy” literally means “different.” The Sabbath was holy because it was different from all other days. The temple was holy because it was different from all other buildings. We are to be holy – that is, different – from the unbelieving world around us. We are to be like the Lord.

Gordon Crosby tells of a man named Joe whom he worked with for some time, investing something of himself in the relationship. Eventually, he baptized Joe into the Christian faith, as he had many other men. Several months later, he inquired of Joe’s parole officer, “Tell me, how is Joe getting along?”

“What do you mean?” said the officer.

“I mean as a Christian. What kind of life is he leading?” The officer leaned back in his chair and laughed. “If Joe’s a Christian,” he said, “nobody in the company knows it.”

When we don’t live like we should, the world has a right to lean back and laugh.

It is often easier to tell others what we believe than it is to live a life that reflects what we believe. We need to back up our testimony with daily living. One unknown poet expressed it this way:

*So let our lips and lives express,
The Holy Gospel we profess,
So let our words and virtues shine,
To prove the doctrine all divine.*

Or as Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Pollster George Gallop, Jr. says that 84 percent of Americans declare themselves to be Christians. That ought to be more than enough to infuse solid Biblical values into all areas of culture – and if it isn’t, it’s because we are not living like saints. The call to be a saint is the call to be the salt and the

light in our world. It's a call to holy living.

Get Close Enough To See

Second, the call to be a saint is a call to loving action. Love, said Jesus, is the distinguishing mark of his followers. It is the one thing above all things that should characterize our lives. What is Christian love? By definition, it is caring more about other people than we care about ourselves, but it is best understood by example. It is the kind of love seen in the cross of Christ. There, our Lord demonstrated that he cared more about us than himself.

Jesus once told a story that illustrates how this kind of love is lived out. A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along the way, he was attacked by thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and left him for dead beside the road. In time, along came a priest, who saw the man but walked by on the other side of the road. Then along came a Levite, another religious man, who also passed by on the other side of the road.

Presently, along came a Samaritan, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. At danger to his own life, at inconvenience to his own plans, and at his own personal expense, he went to the man, bound up his wounds, set him on his donkey, and took him to a nearby inn where he could receive extended care.

Jesus then said to those who listened that day, and to all of us in our day, "Go and do like that Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37). That's what it means to be a loving neighbor.

Russ Bowers, pastor of the East Ninety-First Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, tells of visiting in the hospital with a little girl who had tumors — large, ugly, protruding tumors covering her face. The pastor, a very compassionate man, leaned over very close to her and said, "You're so pretty." She replied, "Thank you. Most people don't get close enough to see." We need to move from the other side of the street and go where needy people are.

To be a saint means we get close to people, close enough

to see, close enough to help. While the world stops and stares, the saint stoops and shares.

Sergeant Alvin York was America's greatest military hero during World War I. He single-handedly killed 25 enemy soldiers, single-handedly put 35 enemy machine guns out of commission, and single-handedly captured 132 prisoners on one mission.

At six feet two inches and 200 pounds, Alvin York was a Saturday night hell-raiser around Tennessee's tiny Cumberland Mountain towns — and a phenomenal shot. Yet at the mere sight of a church-going girl, Gracie Williams, whom he wanted to marry, he put away the jug, joined the Possum Trot church choir, and became religious. Above all, he took to heart the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

In 1917, York twice appealed for an exemption from the draft as a conscientious objector. Twice denied, he trained reluctantly in the army. He faced a religious dilemma when ordered overseas for combat duty, but his pastor persuaded him that it was his Christian duty to serve his country. And so, with Bible in hand, he went into the mountains alone and pondered the problem for two days. He came down from the mountain to announce, "I'm going." That decision, as it turned out, led him to become the most celebrated GI in America's military history. Upon his return, there were numerous requests to make a movie of his life — which he refused until later in his life.

York's only complaint about the unusually accurate film biography was over its portrayal of how he "got religion." According to Hollywood, he was knocked off a mule by a bolt of lightning, but York explained it differently.

That weren't the right-down facts of it. You see, I had met Miss Gracie. Miss Gracie said that she wouldn't let me come a-courting until I quit my mean drinking, fighting, and card flipping. So, you see, I was struck down by the power of love and the great God Almighty altogether.

Love, both romantic and Christian, is a powerful force. It not only can change a life — it can change the world. Albert

Einstein once said, "If any church would be content to have Jesus' teaching of love as its creed, I would join that church."

There is a bit more to Christianity than love, but it is an essential ingredient. The call to be a saint, then, is the call to loving action.

Head In, Heart Out

Third, the call to be a saint is the call to total commitment. Jesus said that if we would be his disciples, we must deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him. That was and is a call to self-denial, to total commitment. Someone once asked Mother Theresa if she were married. She replied, "Yes, I am married to Jesus, and sometimes he is most difficult to obey."

Years ago, when the exploits of Albert Schweitzer in Africa were receiving worldwide publicity and Jack Parr reigned on late-night television, Parr made a statement that captures the spirit of our age. He told his television audience: "I'd like to be an Albert Schweitzer, if I could commute."

Wouldn't we all? The call to discipleship is not a call to an easy chair. It is a call to an electric chair. It is a call to total commitment. Self-denial is never easy, but that's the call. It is one of the demands of discipleship. Sidney Lanier, the 19th century American poet and critic, captured the mood of our times when he wrote:

*We live in an age of half faith and half doubt;
Standing at the temple doors, head in, heart out.*

To those of us who share the spiritual ambivalence of our time, there is a well-known Bible verse that ought to shake us up: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). The scriptures ask us to love God totally, completely, with our whole being. Admiration of Jesus is not enough. Moderation is not enough. Only dedication will do, and that's never easy.

Andrew Young, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, served in the Carter administration and then was mayor of Atlanta, Georgia. He is also a preacher in the Dis-

ciples of Christ church.

He had a daughter who went away to college, and like so many college students, drifted away from the Lord for a period of time. Then she came returned to her spiritual roots and made a new commitment to the Lord. Out of that commitment came the call of Christ to serve as a missionary in Uganda.

When she told her father, he was less than excited. He reminded her that Idi Amin had just been deposed in Uganda and that it was a dangerous place to live. She might even die there. When he expressed his disappointment, she said, "But Daddy, you always said you wanted me to be a Christian."

He replied, "I did, but I didn't want you to be a real one."

"Real ones" listen to and respond to the voice of God. They follow him even if it means risking their lives.

In his book *Holy Sweat*, Tim Hansel says, "I'll never forget something that my college landlady said to me. I asked her, 'Mrs. Dinger, if my 'old self' is crucified with Christ, why is it still wiggling?' She gave me this gentle smile and said, 'Tim, you've got to remember that crucifixion is a slow death.'"

The call to be a saint is the call to holy living, to loving action, to total commitment.

So we're back to the original question: *when you get where you're going, where will you be?* I hope the answer is, you'll be a saint.

9

What You've Got That You Wouldn't Take Nothing For

Matthew 13:45-46

Dr. Bill Hinson once told of a salesman driving through the back roads of Missouri when he came upon an old country grocery-store-filling-station – you know the kind. It had a gravel driveway and a red gas pump in the front. The store had a screen door with a metal brace that advertised bread placed at a 45-degree angle across the front of it. The salesman pulled in, and while the young attendant filled his car, he walked inside the old store. When the door slammed behind him, it hit a ball that rang a bell, alerting the clerk that a customer had entered.

The old man behind the counter hardly looked up as the salesman walked in. He had a green sun visor on his head and was sitting at a roll top desk working on his books. Behind the man, on a shelf, was an old handgun. The salesman collected guns, so he told the proprietor that he was a collector of guns and asked if he could look at it. The old man hardly looked up. He just put his thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the gun as if to say, "Help yourself." The salesman looked the gun over and couldn't find a trademark on it, but decided he wanted it anyhow. He had only \$150.00 in his pocket, so he offered the proprietor \$50.00 for the gun. The old man replied, "No, thank you, it's not for sale." The salesman then

offered him \$75.00, and once again the proprietor refused his offer. The third time, he offered the man \$100.00, and his answer was the same: "Nope."

Finally, the salesman said, "Mister, I collect guns, and I know their value, and this pistol is not worth what I'm offering you for it, but I want it for my collection. So, what would you take for it?"

Using his pencil, the old man pushed on the bill of his sun visor as if to push his head up and said, "Sonny, my daddy made that gun, and I wouldn't take nothing for it."

With that answer, the conversation ended, the salesman paid for his gas and walked out. As the door slammed behind him, it hit the ball that rang the bell that let the proprietor know he was gone. When he drove away, he made a notation of the location of the store and said to himself, "I'll come back here in a year or two and that old man will be dead. That grandson of his won't value the gun nearly as much as his grandfather, and I will probably be able to buy it for \$25.00." But the nearer he got to Kansas City, the more he thought, "You know, I need something in my life that I wouldn't take nothing for."

That's a question worth pondering, "What have you got in your life that you wouldn't take nothing for?"

Now if you're an English teacher, don't get bent out of shape. I know the sentence ends with a preposition, and you are not supposed to do that. I know it contains a double negative, and you are not supposed to do that. But, if the purpose of language is to communicate, I think you get the message. Besides, that's the way the man said it.

It's important for us to recognize values in life. Jesus pointed that out in the parable of the pearl merchant, who one day, came upon the most beautiful, perfect pearl that he had ever seen. Recognizing its worth, he sold all that he had and bought it (Matthew 13:45-46). The meaning is clear: there is at least one thing that is worth everything and for which you should not take anything. Some things are of inestimable value.

That's why I ask you to ponder the question: what have you got that you wouldn't take nothing for? What is of ultimate value to you in your life? What is your pearl of great price?

Actually, rather than identify just one pearl, I want you to look at a string of pearls — at least six of them that should be of great value to us:

- Our salvation.
- Our family.
- Our integrity.
- Our church.
- Our Bible.
- Our nation.

My Pearl Of Great Price

First, salvation — my relationship to God — is one thing I wouldn't take nothing for. It is, for me, the pearl of great price.

The greatest thing that ever happened to me was becoming a Christian and receiving God's salvation. When I speak of my salvation, I'm speaking of it in its entirety, not just forgiveness of sin and heaven when I die. I think also about the meaning, purpose, direction, values, discipline, motivation, and power that came to me as a result of my trust in Christ. It was not only destiny-determining, it was life-changing for me.

Not long ago I talked with a young man who has fought a serious alcohol/drug problem in his life for years. He had, at one point, almost ruined his own life and the lives of the members of his family. As we talked, the thought struck me: if you removed just one thing from that boy's life — alcohol — his life would have been entirely different. When I shared that with him, he quickly agreed. Think of that: remove just one thing and everything would be different.

That's the way it has been with my life. Subtract Christ from my life, and it would be altogether different — in a worse way. And the best thing of all, my salvation was given to me

freely by the grace of God, and it can never be taken away from me. In time, all the things we consider important, we will lose — our houses, our clothes, our cars, our stocks and bonds — even our families. We will die, or they will die. In the final analysis, the only thing we have that cannot be touched is our relationship to God: it alone is eternal. It is the one thing I wouldn't take nothing for.

The scriptures declare that nothing can separate us from Christ – not tribulation or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. Paul puts it this way: “For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

These things may separate us from health and wealth, from family and friends, from comfort and ease, but they can never separate us from God.

This salvation can be yours just as it is mine. The scriptures declare: “Jesus came unto His own, and His own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God” (John 1:11-12).

By personal faith and trust, you can receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and know his life-changing power.

God, Family, and the Dallas Cowboys

My family is another thing I wouldn't take nothing for. Former all-pro defensive tackle for the Dallas Cowboys, Bob Lilly, said in a testimony to our church several years ago: “On the first day of training camp during my rookie season, Tom Landry walked into the locker room and wrote four words on the blackboard: God, family, Dallas Cowboys. He then said to the squad, “Gentlemen, these are my priorities...and in that order.”

Like most of you, my family is near the top of my list of priorities. I want the best for them in every way, don't you?

While you love your family and work to provide the best

for them, don't forget their basic needs. It is not enough to give them housing, shelter, clothes, automobiles, and an education. They need other things from you beyond the material things.

"Man does not live by bread alone," said Jesus, "but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Bread is, of course, basic — truly the staff of life. But this biblical assertion reminds us that we human beings have other hungers, too — hungers that do not originate within our physical appetites. Poet J. Oppenheim was one who cried out from such hunger pains:

*Hearts starve as well as bodies:
Give us bread, but give us roses!*

What both the Bible and the poet are saying is that God has built into each of us powerful hungers that simply will not be satisfied by bread alone. We have a deep and abiding hunger for love and affection. Without them, we shrivel and die. This is not a poetic exaggeration; it is the truth. We have a hunger to be needed, to know that we are fulfilling a vital role in some life other than our own, that we are performing a task that enriches the community, and that we are making some contribution, however humble, to the sum total of things.

We have a genuine hunger for dignity, for self-respect, for the refreshing signs of goodness and courage and kindness — these, too, enable us to renew our faith in ourselves and in one another.

We hunger most powerfully to believe that life is not just a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but that it does have some vast enduring and imperishable meaning. So while you give your family many things, make sure you don't neglect the main thing — that which bread cannot satisfy.

Being Who You Are

Next, my integrity is something I wouldn't take nothing for. The word "integrity" literally means "well put together." It carries with it the idea of consistency, that your personal

behavior matches your public perception. A person of integrity does not preach one thing and practice another.

Living with integrity means being who you are all the time. Christianity does not make us perfect. That would be impossible, setting us up for inevitable failure, but it should make us authentic — real, genuine, consistent.

When asked the three most important ingredients in Christian work, Charles Colson said, "That's easy. Integrity, integrity, integrity."

In recent years, televangelists and some isolated preachers have caused the integrity of all of us to be brought into question. You are bound to wonder at times, "Is my minister real? Does he practice what he preaches?" It is essential for us to be what we claim to be, to be transparent. Without integrity, we have no ministry. As Allan Simpson said, "If I have integrity, nothing else matters. If I don't have integrity, nothing else matters."

The writer of Proverbs said: "Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity than he that is perverse in his lips (distorted or false) and is a fool" (Proverbs 19:1).

In his poem, "Myself," Edgar A. Guest said it best:

*I have to live with myself, and so
I want to be fit for myself to know;
I want to be able as days go by
Always to look myself straight in the eye;
I don't want to stand with a setting sun
And hate myself for the things I've done.*

*I don't want to keep on a closet shelf
A lot of secrets about myself,
And fool myself as I come and go
Into thinking that nobody else will know
The kind of man I really am,
I don't want to dress myself up in sham.*

*I want to go out with my head erect,
I want to deserve all men's respect;*

*But here in the struggle for fame and pelf,
I want to be able to like myself.
I don't want to think as I come and go
That I'm bluster and bluff and empty show.*

*I never can hide myself from me,
I see what others may never see,
I know what others may never know,
I never can fool myself—and so,
Whatever happens, I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.
(from *Collected Poems*, 1947)*

A Spiritual Stock Exchange

My church is another thing I wouldn't take nothing for. As I look back to my youth, I feel greatly indebted to the church for many reasons. First and foremost, of course, is that the church tried to direct my life in the right direction. Although I may be a poor representative, I am surely a better man than if it had not been for the church's influence. I also feel deeply grateful to my Sunday School teachers who taught me the Bible. This has been of immeasurable help to me when faced with problems, losses, and other misfortunes. Young people who fail to learn God's Word are missing an important part of a necessary education.

There are many other reasons why I'm indebted to the church. Let me mention one more: it is that I found my friends at the church instead of at a bar or pub. Friends are an important factor in determining habits and aims. We are largely – although unconsciously – influenced by our friends and especially by where we find these friends. As the old saying goes – birds of a feather flock together – our friends greatly influence our decisions.

For 55 years, the church has been my life, so you would expect me to say that, but I suspect it would be so even if I were not a minister. It was in the church that I was saved, grew, heard the call to preach, was loved and encouraged,

was married; it was the church that built and supported Baylor University as well as the seminary where I went to school. It was in the church that I was ordained. In fact, almost every good thing that has happened to me in life has been in some way related to the church.

I'm not the only one who shares that conviction about the church. George Bernard Shaw said: "If you destroyed all the churches tomorrow, people would, on the very day afterwards, begin to build them back again." That is the truth, because the church stands for something vital and essential.

Roger Babson, who was for many years America's foremost statistical expert and advisor on financial affairs, said:

Sometimes I think of Trinity Church, at the head of Wall Street, New York City, as the exchange like the stock exchange which is at the corner of Wall and Broad Streets. In Trinity Church, I can exchange my fears for courage; my worries for faith; my nervousness for patience; and my selfishness for justice, kindness, and the things that really count. Trinity Church is an exchange for the eternal things of life such as wisdom, serenity, kindness, justice, and beauty, while the stock exchange deals only with the fleeting and temporal things such as stocks, bonds, money, and materials.

The church stands like a beacon calling us to life's highest and best. It should be among the most important things in every Christian's life. No man can break away from the church and its worship of God without feeling the effects of it in his own soul. If you see a man begin to serve the god of money or pleasure or fame, you will observe that very soon there begins a moral, as well as spiritual, decline in his life. Church attendance is optional as far as choice is concerned, but it is essential as far as moral and spiritual welfare are concerned. It is one of those things I wouldn't take nothing for.

Who Got the Best Deal?

The fifth thing I wouldn't take nothing for is the Bible. Bishop Desmond Tutu of Johannesburg, South Africa, won the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership in the battle

against apartheid. His puckish wit and gentle manner captivate audiences worldwide. At an ecumenical service held in New York in 1986, he demonstrated his deft use of humor.

"When the missionaries first came to Africa," Tutu said, "they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, the tables had been turned: we had the Bible, and they had the land."

The Bishop then raised his Bible, tenderly kissed it, and said, "We will see who got the better deal."

I can answer that for you. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but the word of God will endure forever. He who has the Bible, then, has one of God's greatest gifts to mankind. On his deathbed, Robert Burns spoke to his beloved nephew as he patted his well-worn Bible: "Read the Book and be a good man, and when you come to the place where I am now, you will know that that's all that's important."

The Bible is the Magna Carta of human rights. It is the sailor's compass. It is the shepherd's staff. It is the foundation of all that we hold near and dear. It is one of those things we shouldn't take nothing for.

They Don't Come Any Prettier Than This

Finally, America is one of those things I wouldn't take nothing for. Karl F. Schmiedeke, during a visit to Pineville, North Carolina, stopped at the post office for stamps. "May I please have some pretty ones?" he asked.

The clerk reached into the drawer, took out ten stamps imprinted with the American flag and slid them across the counter. "You can't get any prettier than that," he replied.

If the astronaut was right ("The earth is an oasis in space.") then I'm right when I say, "America is an oasis on earth." A friend and I stood on the banks of the Rio Grande some time ago peering into Mexico. He said, "It doesn't look any different over there than it does over here." I responded, "No, but we both know there's a world of difference between this side of the river and that side." I've traveled to 30 or 40 countries around the world, and there is none like America. It is one of

those things I wouldn't take nothing for.

I hope you noticed as I have gone through my list that materials things were not included. I didn't mention houses, clothes, cars, stocks, or bonds because these are not the real values in life. Recently, two families in our church experienced fires in their homes. One lost everything of value — furniture, clothing, family pictures, antiques, papers and records all were lost. The only thing remaining was the foundation.

When I visited with Tom Musslewhite, he said, "It reminds us not to put our trust in things. They can be gone in a flash." Build your life on God and his kingdom. It's the pearl of great price. It is the only thing that is worth everything.

10

Amazing Grace — His Story and Mine

I Corinthians 15:10

All of us who are Christians have two stories to tell — His and ours. His is the story of grace and truth; ours is the story of faith and trust. Here, I blend the two in the story of amazing grace.

I once heard ex-socialite Gert Bahanna, who, before his conversion to Christ, was married and divorced numerous times, describe his life this way: “I ain’t what I ought to be, and I ain’t what I’m gonna be, but thank God, I ain’t what I used to be.” That’s my testimony also. Add to that the words of the apostle Paul: “I am what I am by the grace of God” (I Corinthians 15:10).

When the apostle penned these verses, he had just set forth the gospel — that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. Naturally, many people had difficulty believing the resurrection. First century people had never talked on a cell phone, used a computer, or flown on a jet, but they did know that dead people do not come to life again. So Paul substantiates his message by giving us three proofs of the resurrection.

First, there is *fulfilled prophecy*. All of this happened “according to scripture.” Then there is the *evidence of eyewitnesses*. He tells of six times when Jesus was “seen” alive after his resurrection. In translation, the word “seen” in Greek signifies “to see with the naked eye” as opposed to an illusion or

hallucination. He was seen by Peter, by the apostles, by more than 500 people at once, and by others. This is the strongest kind of evidence, the same kind of evidence used daily in a court of law to convict people of capital offenses.

Finally, Paul adds the *evidence of a changed life*. So he gives his own testimony: “And last of all he was seen of me also, as one born out of due time.” Paul says: “I was among those who saw Jesus alive. The wonder is, he included me, and there was no reason for him to do so. I was his enemy. I persecuted the church of God. But still he appeared to me and saved me and chose me to preach the gospel.” Then he adds, “I am what I am by the grace of God.”

That is my testimony also — a testimony of grace — God’s grace.

- I was saved by grace.
- I was selected by grace.
- I have been sustained by grace.

Lost in the Shadow of the Church

First, it’s by grace that I was saved. I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in Port Arthur, a rough, tough, oil-refining town situated on the Texas gulf coast.

I lived in the shadow of the church, just across the alley from the First Christian Church and a half-block from the First Baptist Church – but we never attended either of them. In fact, all my life, my parents never took me to church — not at Christmas, not at Easter, not for a wedding, not for a funeral, not ever!

The best way to describe our family is to say we were civilized pagans. My mother was a kind and sweet Christian, but we were poor country people, and she felt her clothes or our culture, or lack of it, wouldn’t fit in those city churches. My dad drank some and cursed a lot, and he had absolutely no place for God in his life. He was an honest, hardworking, patriotic, conservative – but godless – man. I don’t know what happened early in his life, but something caused him to be hostile toward preachers and churches. He often made fun of

them, and after I became a preacher, he even occasionally made fun of me.

When I was 14 years old, a middle-school friend, Paul Smith, began to visit me and invite me to church. His parents taught Sunday School at the First Baptist Church, and they arrived early each Sunday to make preparation for their classes. With time on his hands, Paul would walk across the street to my apartment and invite me to Sunday School. After a few visits from Paul, I went with him. Listen now, that's why I don't buy that old line, "They know where the church is. They can come if they want to." I knew where the church was located. In fact, I lived so close I could have thrown a rock and hit it — and occasionally did — but I never attended services. The church had to come looking for me.

Once I attended, I learned the church had a softball team as well as a basketball team, and if you attended services three out of four Sundays every month, you could play on those teams. Churches, as you may know, pioneered community youth recreation programs — in fact, they were at it long before Little League and other such programs.

I didn't know God and wasn't missing him in my life at the age of 14, but I sure knew how to play softball and basketball and was willing to take the religion in order to get the recreation. In time, through the witness and influence of friends, I found something better than religion or recreation: I found redemption in Christ. I experienced God's grace — his amazing grace — and that was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me.

No doubt, you are familiar with the story of the prodigal son, one of Jesus' most famous parables. It is the story of a rebellious young man who told his father, "Give me part of my family inheritance, and I'm out of here — out of your house and out of your hair for good." With his newly acquired wealth and freedom, he went to the "far country" to get away from his father. There he wasted his life in riotous living. I never did that. I was never into drugs. I never smoked. I never committed crime and was never rebellious. I'm not sure why;

I had every opportunity. Two of my sisters smoked from the time they were children — not teenagers, but children. Dad smoked also, and he never took a drink that he didn't offer me one too. To him, that's just what men did. I never did those things, *but I was just as lost as the prodigal son.*

There's a lesson in all this — I lived in the shadow of the church, but I was a long way from God. And what happened to me can happen to anyone. You can live in the shadow of the church — you may have grown up in a preacher's or deacon's home or you may have been in church all your life — and still be a long way from God.

The far country is not a geographical location: it is a spiritual condition, it's being away from God. But we get out of the far country and back to God in the same way the prodigal son did: *by a personal, decisive act.* He came to himself; he came to the Father; he came clean. So must we. Until we come to ourselves, until we come to the Father, and until we come clean, we are as lost as a person can be. And I needed God's forgiveness and grace as much as John Newton, the slave-trader-turned-preacher, who wrote:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

A House Without a Soul

I was not only saved by grace, I was selected by grace. At the age of seventeen, I received the call to preach. There was nothing spectacular or dramatic about it, just the profound conviction of my heart that I was supposed to preach. In those days you could not have found a more unlikely candidate than I for the ministry. I have doubted many things about Christianity through the years, but one thing I have never doubted: that God called me to preach.

To preach the gospel has been the greatest honor of my life, but God's call was nothing but an act of grace. The apostle Paul said two things about his calling. First, he said he was

“made a minister” (Colossians 1:25), meaning that being a minister was not an honor he took upon himself, nor was it an honor bestowed on him by others. Rather, it came by divine mandate. That’s the way it was with me. I was such a poor student; I was so timid and had such a fear of public speaking that being a minister is the last thing I would have ever chosen for myself.

The second thing Paul said about his ministry was “not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (I Corinthians 1:26). By that, he meant that not many big names, not many powerful, not many wealthy are called. I certainly met those criteria. The truth is, ordinarily when God wants something done, he reaches down and touches ordinary people to do it — people with no exceptional abilities — so that when it is over, we know it is all a result of his grace.

By these criteria I was well qualified. I was born in a log house deep in the piney woods of east Texas – not a modern prefab house, but a real pioneer log house. My ancestors were early settlers in Texas, and my granddaddy felled the trees, split the cypress shingles, and chinked the cracks between the logs with a mixture of mud and moss. He drew water out of the well and farmed with a mule and Georgia stock plow. When it came time for my birth, Dad headed for town to get the doctor, but before he could return, my granddad had delivered me.

In my early years, we lived in a number of settlements in east Texas where my father worked for small sawmills. When World War II came, we moved to Port Arthur. The young men were being drafted into military service, and men my dad’s age were moving to the city to replace them in the oil refineries.

We moved into an office building that had been converted into apartments to accommodate the influx of new people. It was located above a shoe store and next to a department store on the main street in the middle of downtown Port Arthur. It was a three room apartment — not three bedrooms, just three

rooms — a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen with no air conditioning and no outside windows. The building had been built with outside windows, but the department store had later been built flush against it, and when we looked out our windows, we saw nothing only a brick wall.

There were always five of us in that apartment — mom, dad, my two unmarried sisters, and me. And depending on the ever-changing status of my older sister's on-again, off-again marriage and her two girls and my grandmother, who rotated living with her children, there were at times as many as nine of us living there. For the life of me, I can't remember where all nine of us slept in that one bedroom apartment, but I do know where I slept. I slept on the floor every night under the kitchen table on a small cotton mattress, much like a bedroll, that when unrolled, became my bed. Sleeping there was a safety factor: the kitchen was located between the bedroom and the bathroom, and I didn't want to get stepped on by the comings and goings during the night.

Maybe worse than having no outside windows, no air conditioning, and no bed was the fact that we had no books in our home — no encyclopedia, no dictionary, no Bible, *nothing*. Socrates once said: "A house without books is like a body without a soul." Ours was a soulless house.

Dad had only completed the fifth grade, while my Mother had completed only the third grade — so I guess they had no need for books.

Growing up like that had a marked effect on my life. I was not only a poor student, but I also had a poor self-image. I didn't like where I lived or how I lived, and I grew up with an inferiority complex. All that made me a most unlikely candidate for the ministry. To stand before an audience and speak was the most frightening thing I could imagine. It's still frightening after 50 years — especially before strangers.

I still don't like crowds. At a big gathering, I'm most apt to find a quiet corner and stay there, feeling out of place. It's not that I'm unfriendly; I simply feel out of place. You would never guess that about me as I cover it very well — but it is

nevertheless still there.

Others saw the same thing in me. As I left my senior English class one day, my teacher, Miss Ara Goldman, stopped me and said: “Paul, I know you want to be a preacher and intend to go to college. I just want to tell you, you won’t ever make it.” To this day, I don’t know if she was trying to help me face reality or was using reverse psychology on me. Regardless of her intent, she motivated me to become a student. In college I buckled down and went to work.

I finished college, and I did it by God’s grace — his amazing grace. That’s why John Newton was singing my song when he wrote:

*Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace hath bro’t me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

As a side note, I was at Gulf Shores Encampment in Gulfport, Mississippi, several years ago and learned that Miss Goldman had retired and was living in Brookhaven, Mississippi. I got her address from one of her friends and sent her four or five of my books. I told her I had served for nine years as a trustee and had received an honorary doctorate from her *alma mater*.

She wrote me back the nicest note, saying, “Paul, you were such a good student. I always believed you would go far in life.” It must have been senility speaking!

There’s a lesson here for us — it’s not ability, but availability and dependability that God is looking for. Don’t underestimate your worth by comparing yourself to others. What makes us special is that we are all different. Don’t be ashamed of where you come from or be afraid to admit you are less than perfect. What’s important is not what others think of you or even what you think of yourself, but what God’s will is for your life and your willingness to follow it.

Remember, God can use both a diminutive Mother Theresa as well as a tall, lanky Billy Graham. He can use a wiry Vince Havner, who probably didn’t weigh 130 pounds

soaking wet, and he can use a portly D.L. Moody, who tipped the scales at 300 pounds or more. He can use a brilliant, intellectual like C.S. Lewis just as he can use a poorly educated John Bunyan. He can use a steely-eyed Billy Sunday, and he can use a George Whitfield, who was so cross-eyed that when he looked at an audience and said, "God is speaking to the man I'm looking at right now," two people fell under conviction.

And God can use you if you are willing.

God has always reached down and touched ordinary people to do his work. When he picked Gideon to lead Israel, Gideon responded by saying that he was the most insignificant member of the poorest family of the smallest tribe in Israel (Judges 6:15). David was the runt of his family, and when God called Jeremiah, he tried to beg off saying he was just a child and could not speak.

I've learned the truthfulness of Paul's words through the years. You don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar. You don't need a registered pedigree, and it's not required that you be among the world's most powerful and influential people for God to use you. You just have to be willing. His specialty is using ordinary people like you and me.

You're On Your Own

Finally, I was not only saved by grace and selected by grace, I have been sustained by grace. Near high school graduation time, my dad stopped me on the back porch one day to talk. To my recollection, that's the only extended conversation I ever had with my dad. He said, "I'm going to get you a job at the gulf refinery." That was the best job he had ever had — union wages, retirement benefits, insurance, and good working conditions. He wanted that for me too.

I said, "No, dad, I'm going to college." He said, "You don't need to go to college. You've got all the education you need."

"But, dad, you don't understand," I said. "God has called me to preach." He didn't understand. The scriptures say, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit" (I

Corinthians 2:14). He couldn't conceive of God speaking to a person, much less calling someone into ministry.

He said, "Okay, you're on your own. Don't ever ask me for any help." My dad was not a bad man; he was just tough. That's the way he was raised, and that's the way he raised me. And, of course, by that time I was just like him. So I said, "Okay, I won't ask." I never asked, and he never offered.

But God provided. The psalmist said, "When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up" (Psalms 27:10) – i.e., adopt me and care for all of my needs. I can testify to that. My parents didn't desert me in that sense, but they sent me out on my own. But the Lord took care of me.

By that time, we were living in a real house next door to a brickyard. The foreman of the brickyard, a Christian, asked me if I would like to have a job to earn college money. I told him I would, so I went to work and earned enough money for my first year at Baylor. He told me that when I was home for vacation or holidays and wanted to work, just show up on the yard at 7:00 a.m. No call was necessary — just be there — and I would always have a job. So God provided.

At Baylor, I worked in the maintenance department sweeping the gym and mopping the bathrooms – very good training for a preacher. By the way, I was back in Tyler years after I left the pastorate there to head the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a black woman who often watched me on television came to the services. Afterwards, she said, "Oh, Brother Powell, I've wondered where you were. Someone said you had gone to that 'Manurity Board'." I thought, "Dear lady, if you only knew what size shovel they issued me when I went there, you'd realize how right you are."

I made 75 cents an hour working for Baylor and that, along with the money I had saved, was more than enough to get me through. I didn't need any help, except from God, and He supplied that in abundance.

But I wanted to preach. Joe Waltz, my friend from Baylor who pastored a little country church in Otto, Texas, asked if I

would like to preach for him some Sunday when he was to be away – and I said I would. Following morning services, one of his deacons, Robbie Warnake, took me home for lunch. He asked if I'd like to preach again, and I said I would.

He said his stepson, Bill Engleke, was a deacon at First Baptist Church of Chilton. They had recently called a pastor, but needed someone to preach until he arrived on the field. He told me to contact his son, so as soon as I returned to Waco, I wrote to his stepson. Although Chilton was only 25 miles south of Waco, I sent the letter airmail, special delivery.

The deacon took me home for lunch the day I preached and asked, "Boy, how did you think they were going to deliver that air mail letter to Chilton? Did you think they would fly over and drop it out the window?" I hadn't thought of that – I was just anxious to preach.

He asked if I would like to pastor. I said I would. He said he had some friends who were members of Belfalls Baptist Church, and they were looking for a pastor. He would tell them about me.

The next week the chairman of the deacons at Belfalls called and invited me to preach. Following the first sermon, they called me to be their pastor. They paid me thirty dollars each Sunday. It wasn't worth that much, but I took it with gratitude. It was an unusual chain of events that led to my first church, but from that day until I agreed to serve as dean of Truett Seminary, I was never without a church.

Some people would call that chain of events a coincidence; I call it providence. Mrs. Marvin York's maid was attempting to quote William Cowper's words, "God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform," one day, and she missed it. She said, "God moves in mischievous ways, his wonders to perform." Say it any way you will. God is at work in our lives to bring us to a place He wants us to be. He was at work in my life.

On another note, my dad became a Christian at the age of 70, two years before he died – but it took the death of my sister to wake him up. By that time, my parents had moved to

a rural community, and my mother and deaf sister (who always lived at home) started attending church. Although my sister could not hear, she heard the voice of God, and though she could not speak, she said “Yes” to Jesus. She was saved. When she died, Dad said, “If Pat’s going to heaven, I want to go,” and from then on, he was a changed man. What no man could do in life, my sister did in death. She tendered the heart of an old man toward eternity. God deals with us as gently as He can and as severely as He must. Don’t wait for some tragedy to turn to Him. *Do it today.*

The bottom line is this — if I had planned my own life, I would have cheated myself. Just think of all the wonderful things I would have missed. I’d have missed abundant life now and eternal life later, but I let God plan it, and it has been more than I could have ever imagined.

What’s important is not where you came from or what you’ve come through – it’s where you’re going and who you are going with that counts. We’re all going to eternity, and I am going with God.

Above all, don’t forget this — we owe it all to God’s grace. The songwriter expresses my experience best:

*If you could see what I once was,
If you could go with me,
Back to where I started from,
Then I know you could see;
The miracle of love that took me,
In its sweet embrace,
And made me what I am today,
A sinner saved by grace.
That’s why I love to sing:
When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.*

11

The Night Cometh - II

John 9:4

Of all God's creatures, man alone seems to have an awareness of time, an awareness that borders on obsession. As a result, we have devised calendars to group weeks into months and months into years, and clocks that divide the days into hours and hours into minutes and minutes into seconds. I have a friend who was given an atomic clock for Christmas. It is controlled by a radio signal beamed from Ft. Collins, Colorado, where a team of atomic physicists continues to measure every second of every day. It resets itself daily and is accurate within ten billionths of a second. That's the kind of obsession that seems to dominate us.

Jesus lived his life with an awareness of time without being obsessed by it. He spoke of his awareness when He said to his disciples, "We must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day; for the night cometh, when no one can work" (John 9:4).

There are four truths in this verse that we need to understand. First, Jesus was a man under divine appointment: God sent him on a special mission.

Second, His mission was to do God's work:

- He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10, John 12:47, Luke 9:56).
- He came that we might have abundant life (John 10:10).
- He came to minister and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26-28).

- He came to die for our sins (John 12:27).
- He came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17).
- He came to divide the lost from the saved (Matthew 10:34-36, Luke 12:51).
- He came to preach the gospel (Luke 4:18-19, 43).

Third, he includes us in his mission. "We must do the work of Him that sent me," Jesus said. Using the personal pronouns "we" and "me," Jesus transfers his mission to include us. Later He would say, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). We, like Jesus, are people under divine appointment. We too are people on a special mission.

But the fourth and central idea of this statement is that of *urgency*. The Living Bible translates the verse as follows: "All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned to us by the one who sent me, for there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end."

Jesus was aware that he must soon die on the cross for the sins of the world, and he would go back to the Father (John 7:33). The work the Father had sent him to do would then be placed in our hands. It was important for us to go about it with a sense of urgency. We need to see that time is passing, death is coming, the end is approaching, and whatever we are to do for God, we must do now while the opportunity exists.

We need to recapture this sense of urgency today. It is one of the elements missing in most of our churches. We are much too indifferent about God's work. What was the task assigned to Jesus and to us? What do we need to be urgent about?

- We need to have an urgency about seeking the lost.
- We need to have an urgency about serving the needy.
- We need to have an urgency about surrendering our lives.

Those are things that he came to do, and they are things we must do also.

A Country Church for the Lost and Found

First, we need to have an urgency about seeking the lost.

Jesus said, "I have come to seek and save that which was lost." If that's why Jesus came, and if our mission and his are the same, we must then seek after the lost so they can be saved. We don't hear much about people being lost and needing to be saved in the church today. Maybe it is because we don't believe that people without Christ are lost and need to be saved. In our pluralistic society, some people think that one religion is as good as another, that all roads lead to God, and that the only qualification for getting to heaven is dying. As one minister put it, "Abraham, Isaac, Joseph...Mary...Buddha and Muhammad and all the prophets of old. They led God's people to God's light" (*Christianity Today*, Jan. 7, 2002, 13).

As a result, we have become "keepers of the aquarium" rather than "fishers of men." We are playing solitaire with the prospect cards while the world goes to hell. Most of our growth today comes from people transferring from one church to another. We are chiefly recycling, not regenerating. It is because we are not seeking the lost. The minister is still one of the few people who can enter people's homes to share his message with them. But the opportunity is wasted if we do not use it.

Unless Jesus died in vain, unless he deceived us, or unless he was deluded himself, people are lost, and the only way they can be saved is through faith and trust in Him. Jesus said: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you...And I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-5).

Then Jesus concluded: "I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

That seems clear enough. There is only one way to reach God, and that is through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

But if the lost are to be saved, they must be sought. People do not naturally seek God. The scriptures say, "There is none who seeketh after God" (Romans 3:11). That is an issue I raise with these so-called seeker services. Men and women may seek entertainment or something to soothe their conscience,

but they do not often seek God. We must do the seeking: like the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep safely in the fold to search for the lost one and like the woman who has nine coins tucked away safely in her purse then uses a candle to search for one lost coin. So we are to seek those who are lost.

George W. Truett, the namesake of our seminary, said, "When the church loses its seeking note, it is off the main track." Somehow, we've got to get the church back on track, back at its main task of seeking the lost.

When I came to Truett as dean, Jay Allison sent me a CD containing country and western singer Randy Travis' Christian songs. The one he wanted me to hear was called "Don't Sell Your Saddle," a ballad about a dying father's advice to his son. Among other things he said, "Don't sell your saddle, cause life's a long, long ride." That, of course, is what I had done. I had sold my saddle and hung up my spurs in retirement when I was asked to come to Truett, and I had to ride this thing bareback. One of my favorite songs on the CD was called "Drive Another Nail." One line in particular caught my attention. Let's see if you find it too.

*Old Sam was a carpenter fifty years;
He pounded out blood, sweat, and tears.
One day he hung his hammer up,
He wanted to do the things he loved.
What was once Sunday fishing,
Now was seven days a week.
He told his wife to find me,
"I'll be down at the creek."
'Cause I don't want to drive another nail.
I've worked hard to do my job and I did it well.
I've got the scars on these two hands to show I haven't failed.
But I don't want to drive another nail.
Now she was a woman full of faith and ol' Sam was full of pride.
And she knew that he had one more job to do before he died.
As Easter Sunday rolled around,
At a country church for the lost and found,
Ol' Sam was there against his will,*

*As the preacher spoke on Calvary's hill;
About how they took the Master,
And nailed him to a tree,
And you could hear Ol' Sam a' cryin'
As he fell down on his knees.
I don't want to drive another nail.
I'll live my life for you; I want to do it well.
You've got the scars on your two hands to show where I have
failed,
Lord, I don't want to drive another nail.*

Did you catch it? It's the line, "Easter Sunday rolled around, at a country church for the lost and found . . ." I like that! That's what the church is and what we are to be: heaven's lost and found department on earth. We are to busy ourselves seeking the lost – and to do it while we can, while it is day, for the night cometh when no man shall work.

Why Don't You Start in Your Own Front Yard?

Second, we need an urgency about serving the needy. There is a social as well as a saving aspect to the Gospel. As Jesus and his disciples moved toward Jerusalem near the end of his ministry, the mother of James and John asked Jesus if her two sons could sit, one on Jesus' right hand and the other on his left, when he came to his kingdom (Matthew 20:21).

She, like most of the disciples, believed that the Messiah would set up an earthly kingdom and reign from Jerusalem. She wanted her sons to have a prominent place in it.

When the other disciples heard this, they became angry, so Jesus seized this opportunity to teach them about true greatness. He reminded them that in the unbelieving world, greatness was measured by authority and power, and then he added, "But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister: whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

At the Last Supper, the disciples were still arguing about

who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24). So Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and circling the room, he washed their feet. When he had finished, he asked, "Do you realize what has just happened here?" We do! Jesus had taken the role of a common slave by washing their feet. Then he said, "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet." Then he added, "Happy are ye if ye do these things" (John 13:17).

There is a practical as well as a spiritual reason for servanthood. Practically, it is the way of happiness. Spiritually, it is the way of holiness, to be like Christ.

George Barna said recently that Christian workers are "the most occupationally frustrated people in America." Why is that? Is it because we have forgotten the servant spirit? Albert Schweitzer, who had five earned doctoral degrees and distinguished himself in the fields of music, medicine, and missions, said in an address to a graduating class, "I don't know what your destiny will be. But one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

And, serving is the way to be like Christ. He came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister," and if we want to be like him, we must minister to others also.

His people are not cattle to drive, but sheep to be led. We can't be tinhorn dictators and petty tyrants and be like him. We've got to be foot-washers; the symbol of a minister is a towel, not a whip.

And we don't need to go to the ends of the earth to find people to serve. The poor, the elderly, the homeless, the sick, the abused, the divorced, the addicted, the lonely, the depressed, the broken-hearted, are all around us. We must begin with them.

I pastored in San Marcos in the turbulent years of the sixties. Many young people, disillusioned with life, were turning to drugs and to the hippie culture. Time and time again, a mother or father would call or write and ask me to seek out their son or daughter who had moved to San Marcos to at-

tend college but had apparently gone astray. I always followed up on these parental requests.

One day, at the request of a mother, I visited a young man who lived in a mobile home. As I approached the house, the yard was a veritable junkyard littered with an old refrigerator, a 50-gallon oil drum, two or three old tires, a car battery, cans and junk of all kinds.

When I got inside to visit with the young man, I eventually asked him, "Son, what do you intend to do with your life?" He said, "I am going to Florida to help them clean up the Everglades." I responded, "If you want to clean up something, why don't you start in your own front yard?" The lure of the everglades — the far away places — is always there.

But at Truett, we are dedicated to raising up a generation of servants who want to change the world, starting with their own front yard and reaching to the ends of the earth – and doing it now, while we can, for the night cometh when no man shall work.

Needed: Planted Christians, Not Packaged Ones

Third, we need an urgency about surrendering our lives to the Lord. It was Passover season as Jesus entered the final week of his life. In Jerusalem, a group of Greeks came to his disciples seeking Jesus (John 12:20-27). This within itself would not have been unusual. At Passover season, thousands of people came to Jerusalem, some to worship and some out of curiosity. These may well have been Jewish proselytes. And the Greeks were characteristically always seekers after the truth.

What was unusual was Jesus' response to this request. He said, "Now the hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified" (John 12:26-27).

Jesus used an ordinary illustration to teach an eternal truth. He said that a grain of wheat, if kept insulated or solitary, never produced anything. It must be planted in the ground and die, i.e., germinate, in order to reproduce. It is

from that death that the seed does whatever it was created to do — it reproduces.

Jesus then took this truth and applied it to discipleship, saying that any person who wants to find life rich and abundant must be willing to die to self as the grain must die in order to be productive.

He also applied it to himself. “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour...?” We would not have faulted him if he had asked. No one wants to die, especially at the age of 33 on a cross.

But instead, his response was, “But for this cause, came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” Then there came a voice from Heaven saying, ‘I have both glorified it and will glorify it again’” (John 12:27-28).

This was the third time that God had spoken to Jesus from heaven. The first time was at his baptism, when God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). The second time was on the Mount of Transfiguration, when God said, “This is my Son, hear ye him” (Matthew 17:5). Then, this time Jesus had glorified God by the miracles he performed, by the messages he preached, by the manner in which he treated people. Now he would glorify God by his death and resurrection.

If Jesus came to die and through his death, burial, and resurrection glorify God, then we must die also. We must die to self, sin, success, and safety, and surrender to the will of God to glorify him.

A package of garden seeds is pretty, but fruit or flowers won't be produced until the package has been opened, and the seeds have been planted in the dirty ground. From the seeds of death comes the glory of new life.

Note this somewhere: it is the planted life – not the packaged life – that brings glory to God. If we want to honor him, we must plant our lives in the grit and grime of human suffering and sorrow and, in this dirty world, bring forth fruit for him. That's what Jesus came to do and what we must do. But if we are going to do it, we must work while it is day, for

the night comes when no man shall work.

Incidentally, the word *seminary* comes from the Latin word *seminarium*, meaning “seed plot.” It suggests a place where seeds are planted, nurtured, and grown. We are committed to Truett being a “hot house” of evangelism and missions, where the seeds of faith and dedication in young people can be returned and brought to their full potential.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, Curtis Crofton, who has always tried to get me to slow down, said to me, “Powell, you need to slow down and take it easy. We may be in the fourth quarter of the game.” Without a thought, I retorted: “The fact is we may be in the last two minutes.”

Recently, I had two brushes with death. For reasons known only to God, I survived, but I was not left untouched. The encounters serve to remind me that I am not in the last quarter or even the last two minutes of the game. I am in overtime, and you may be also. We cannot waste our limited time on earth. I need to live more committed to seeking, to serving, and surrendering to Christ. We need to work with a greater sense of urgency, because the night is coming for me. *And I must hurry before sundown.*