Sermons Preached During Worship in the Paul Powell Chapel at George W. Truett Theological Seminary 2006-2007

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> A Gift from The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Truett Seminary W. Hulitt Gloer, Director

Edited by Elizabeth Grasham-Reeves

Romans 10:14-17

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

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Dr. Paul W. Powell

FORWARD

Welcome to the inaugural issue of The Truett Pulpit, a free publication of Truett Seminary's Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching. Each issue will highlight outstanding sermons preached in the Chapel at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary. These sermons will also be available for viewing on the Center's website. The Center for Effective Preaching is an expression of Truett Seminary's commitment to preaching and to preaching effectively. The Center will sponsor a Preaching Convocation each fall and a Pastor's School each spring. One week seminars will be held in January and June and two-day workshops throughout the year. You are invited to participate in any and all of these offerings which will feature significant preachers and teachers of preaching from around the world. In addition to The Truett Pulpit, the Center will publish Truett Preaching Notes, a quarterly on-line publication in which different Truett faculty members will reflect on trends and publication in their areas of significance to the preacher. By placing yourself on the Center's mailing list you will receive information about all of these offerings.

This inaugural issue features sermons from the Truett faculty and is dedicated with love and appreciation to Dr. Paul Powell. Dr. Powell served as the Dean of the seminary from 2001 to 2007 and supported the establishment of the Center from the birth of the idea. His efforts to fund the Center led to the establishment of a \$1,000,000 endowment in honor of Kyle Lake, a Truett graduate who was tragically electrocuted while baptizing a new believer at the University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. Kyle was pastor there from 1997 to 2005. This endowment was given to honor his memory and his commitment to preaching by his parents Mr. David and Mrs. Shirley Lake, to whom we owe our most heartfelt thanks.

Dr. Powell loves preaching and preachers and it is most appropriate that we dedicate this volume to him and begin it with one of his sermons.

- W. Hulitt Gloer

David Garland Professor of Preaching and Christian Scriptures Director, Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching

The Heart and Soul of a Pastor



l Peter 5:1-4 Dr. Paul W. Powell

George Barna in one of his studies reported: "We recently interviewed more than 24,000 Protestant pastors and discovered that 92 percent of them said they were leaders. Then we gave them the definition of what we used for leadership and saw the proportion drop to less than 2/3." Barna continued, "When we then asked if they felt that God had given them one of the spiritual gifts that relates to leading people, such as leadership, apostleship, or even administration, the proportion plummeted to less than one out of four. Finally, we asked them to dictate to us the vision that they are leading people toward that is, the very heartbeat of their ministry. We wound up in the single digits."

Then he concluded, "The tragedy is that church leaders at every level tend to have passive personalities" (Barna's Research Outline, "New Books and Diagnostic Resources Strive to Clear Up Widespread Confusion Regarding Leadership," August 5, 2002, www.barna.org).

Bill Parcells, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys liked to say, "The game tells you what you are." If that is true, with most of

our churches either plateaued or declining, we need a refresher course in what it means to be a pastor. Peter gives us one in I Peter 5:1.

He addresses his words to the elders of the church and then identifies himself as an elder, also. The word elder can have two meanings. It can refer to one advanced in age, or it can, as it does here, refer to a person raised up by the Holy Spirit to have spiritual care and oversight of the church. It is one of three words that are used interchangeably in scripture to describe the office of pastor. The words are "elder", "bishop" and "shepherd." All three ideas are found in this scripture.

The word "elder" speaks of the dignity of the office—someone who can be looked up to and respected. The word "bishop" speaks of the duty of the office—to oversee the flock. And the word "shepherd" or "pastor" suggests the disposition of the office—as a loving shepherd cares for his sheep.

Then Peter writes three things about the office of pastor: His work, his heart, and his reward.

An Impenitent Believer

Peter begins with the work of a pastor. It is to "feed the flock."(verse 2a) Those were the same words Jesus spoke to Peter when he reinstated him to his apostleship as they walked by the Sea of Galilee.

Three times in that experience Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, and each time Peter confessed his love for Jesus. Then Jesus said to him after each confession, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

Jesus used two different words for "feed" in the original language. In verses 15 and 17, he uses a word that means "to graze, to pasture, to fodder," i.e., to provide food. In verse 16, the word he uses is a broader word meaning "to watch over, to tend, to nurture." Together they suggest that it is the pastor's work to feed, lead, and bleed for his flock. The first duty of the pastor is to preach and teach his people the Word of God. John R. Stott, one of this century's greatest preachers said, "I declare myself to be an impenitent believer in the power of preaching" (*New York Times Metro*, March 8, 2006). So do I. As the Apostle Paul declared, "It pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save those that believe."

We need to pay attention to preaching. It is both a gift and a discipline. Good preaching requires hard work. In fact, no matter how gifted you are if you don't work at it, no one will ever know you have a gift.

Recently David Coffey, President of the Baptist World Alliance, spoke at Truett Seminary chapel service. He told that actor Michael Caine, appearing on an English talk show, was asked the difference between a Hollywood star and a good actor. He thought for a while and then said, "The Hollywood star reads a script and asks, 'How can I make this script fit my personality?' The actor reads a script and asks, 'How can I deliver the message to be true to the author?'"

We are not stars; we are messengers. We must be true to the author.

Recently, I conducted the funeral service of Judge William M. Steger, a federal judge for the U.S. Eastern District of Texas. In his 35 years on the bench, he worked more than 15,000 cases. Judge Steger was a genuine American hero. In WWII, he flew 56 combat missions returning home from one mission with 96 bullet holes in his plane.

He had little patience with ill-prepared attorneys who dillydallyed around in his court. His saying to them was, "Have a point, make your point, then move on." That's good advice for preachers, also.

But the pastor's job entails more than preaching. That's all some want to do. They do no funerals, no wedding, no counseling, and no visiting—just preach and teach. The true pastor does more than that. He is also a shepherd watching over and taking care of his people.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer was born to a prominent doctor's family which prided itself in the traditional German values of hard work, duty, and obedience. No one in his family had much interest in religion. To most young Germans after WWI, the church was irrelevant. His parents hoped their obedient young son would be a lawyer, a concert pianist, or a doctor. Imagine their shock when at sixteen he announced he wanted to be a minister.

How did he make this lonely decision? On his own, Dietrich began reading the Bible, and became obsessed with doing God's will.

By the age of 21, he earned his doctorate in theology Summa Cum Laude, was ordained a Lutheran minister, and began a writing career that carried his name across the Atlantic. In 1930, at the age of 24, he was invited to spend a year at Union Seminary. As he left Germany, the nation was in turmoil: mass unemployment, huge inflation, street battles between police, and the followers of a man called Hitler.

On January 30, 1933, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Back in Germany, Dietrich began to recognize Hitler for what he was—a mad man who would make himself God. To Dietrich's consternation, the churches supported the new order. Red banners bearing the black swastika hung from pulpits and services began with a fervent "Heil, Hitler!" When the Arian clause excluded Jews from government jobs, Dietrich wrote to pastors across the land, urging them to speak out for the Jews. Most remained silent. Their explanation, "If I oppose Hitler, my church will be closed. Who will minister to the people then? Isn't my first duty to my congregation?"

When an oath of obedience to Hitler was required of all teachers, Dietrich had to resign his university post, and for nearly two years directed a clandestine seminary for the "confessing church," the small minority of German pastors who opposed Hitler. Then the secret community was discovered, the students forcibly inducted into the army, and Dietrich was forbidden to preach or teach or publish. And at this moment—and it seemed to be God's will—came an invitation from Union Seminary to return to New York. There the Union faculty and friends greeted him with joy. His courses were scheduled, invitations piling up to lecture around the United States. But inside Dietrich, a battle was raging. Wasn't he mistaking a human voice—this time he own, longing to teach and publish—for God's? "I am going back," he told a stunned group of friends.

"You could end up in prison!" they warned him. "Think how much more good you can do here."

From a human viewpoint, he knew they were right. From God's \dots ? He said, "If I am going to help people remake my country when this evil ends, I must be a part of the suffering now." Three weeks after arriving in New York, Dietrich boarded what turned out to be the last ship to sail for Germany before the war.

Back in Germany, he learned of Hitler's concentration camps and his extermination of millions of men, women, and children. Though a pacifist, he concluded that Hitler's death was the only way to stop the mass killings. So he participated in a plot to assassinate the Fuëhrer. The man who hated killing was now aiding an attempt at murder.

The plot was discovered and Dietrich was arrested. Though he was arrested "on suspicion" only, there being no proof of his involvement, he was kept in solitary confinement for 20 months. Sympathetic guards took him writing paper and smuggled out as many letters as they could, collected later in his book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

With the war all but over, the Allied Forces storming toward Berlin, and Hitler realizing that his "Thousand-Year Reich" was truly ending, he drew up a list of camp inmates who must die before the Allies arrived. Dietrich was among them. Early Monday morning, April 9, 1945, he was forced to walk naked in freezing weather across the courtyard where he was hanged. He was 39 years old. (*Guideposts*, April 2006, pp. 75-79).

His words, however, still ring in the ears of every sincere minister, "If I am going to help people remake my country when this evil ends, I must be a part of the suffering now."

Every pastor needs to know that. If we are going to help our people through the hard experiences of life, we must go through their suffering with them.

Attitude is Everything

Then, Peter, using a series of three contrasting statements that sets out the spirit, the attitude of a good pastor. What he sets out speaks of the heart and soul of ministering to people.

First, the pastor should serve willingly, not by constraint, i.e., because he has to. I'm not sure who or what Peter had in mind here. He may have thought of Timothy who seemed to be so timid or reticent that he had to be continually pushed along in the ministry. Or he may have had in mind the priests of Malachi's day who, though they were exact about their priestly duties, said to themselves, "Behold, what a weariness it is" (Malachi 1:13). Or he could have had in mind the reluctant prophets like Moses and Jeremiah and Jonah who had to be cajoled into accepting their assignments.

That's not how we are to go about our work. We need, instead, to be like Isaiah who when the Lord asked, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" threw up his hand with the eagerness of a schoolchild wanting to volunteer and said, "Here am I, send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

That's the way I was. As a teenaged boy, I was sitting by myself in the First Baptist Church of Port Arthur one Sunday morning minding my own business. I was by myself because no one else in my family went to church. I had no real direction in my life. I had no ambition, no dream, and my only interests were girls and basketball. That day, figuratively speaking, Jesus walked down the aisle, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Boy, come follow me and I'll make you a fisher of men," and that day, like Peter, "I straightway left my nets," albeit mine were basketball nets, and followed him. He didn't have to beg me or bribe me. I did it willingly.

Then we are to serve devotedly – not for what we can get out of it, but out of sheer devotion to Christ. Years ago Dorothy Thompson wrote an article for *Reader's Digest* entitled "I'm A Child of the King." Raised in a Methodist parsonage, she said "we had a freedom characteristic of royalty; freedom from talk about money. I never heard money discussed in my father's house or used as a standard of measurement of ourselves or others. When, as children, we asked for things the household could not afford, we were told so; and although the telling no doubt brought pangs, they were not bitter. For relative wealth or poverty was not linked to relative superiority or inferiority. My father was trying to keep up with a standard much higher than that of the Joneses."

She added, "Father's call to the ministry had come from the mightiest force in the universe, from its author himself. In my childish mind my father's boss was God; and he was a boss of whom or to whom my father never complained." (*Reader's Digest* 1959)

George Washington Carver has been called "God's Ebony Scientist." Among other things, he discovered over 300 different uses for the peanut. Born a slave in Kansas, he was sickly in his youth and unable to work in the fields so his master allowed him to work in the house where he learned to read and write and developed an insatiable appetite for learning. When Lincoln freed the slaves, he washed and ironed his way through Tuskegee College in Tuskegee, Alabama. Upon graduation he joined the science faculty for a salary of \$125 a month. In time, he became known as one of America's greatest scientists.

He could have been a man of fabulous wealth, but all of his life he refused to accept payment for a single discovery. Actually, he had not the slightest regard for money. He never accepted a raise in salary. "What would I do with more money?" he once answered, "I already have all the earth." Forty years after he arrived at Tuskegee he was

still earning the \$125.00 a month that President Booker T. Washington had first offered him.

Thomas Edison once invited him to come work with him in the Edison Laboratories in Menlo Park, New Jersey at a minimum salary of \$100,000 a year. Carver declined the offer as he had all others and seemed astonished that anyone expected him to claim rewards for the gifts God had given him.

"But if you had all that money," he was once challenged, "you could help your people."

"If I had all that money," Carver replied, "I might forget about my people." (*George Washington Carver*; Basil Miller: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1943)

Finally, we are to serve humbly, not arrogantly—lording it over God's flock. There is no place for a tin-horn dictator or a petty tyrant in the ministry.

There are those who love authority, even if that authority is exercised in a narrow sphere. Milton's Satan thought it better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. The greatest characteristic of the shepherd is selfless care and his sacrificial love for his sheep, and we are to remember it is God's heritage not ours. Chuck Colson was prophetic, "The lure of power can separate the most resolute of Christians from the true nature of Christian leadership, which is service to others. It is difficult to stand on a pedestal and wash the feet of those below." A dirty towel is the truest measure of success. There is no other.

The Final Act

Peter concludes by reminding us, "When the Chief Shepherd shall appear . . ." we know who that is don't we? It is Jesus. He's the Chief, we are assistant chiefs. And when he arrives, "he will give us a crown that will never fade away."

I read that Jane Fonda, and I'm not too fond-a of Fonda, telling of

being raised in the home of her movie star father, Henry Fonda, said she had a "disease to please." She wanted everyone to like her.

The disease to please will destroy a good pastor. It will make him a hireling, a coward, a politician. The one we are to please is Christ alone. When he comes we will receive reward enough.

In World War II, there was a fighting group of black air pilots who had been trained at Tuskegee, Alabama. They were called Tuskegee Airmen or sometimes "Red Tails" for the painted markings on their planes. They operated out of an airfield in Ramitelli, Italy and escorted bombers on sorties over Germany.

The pilots, widely known as pioneers, have been praised for their skill. The Red Tails never lost a bomber.

But, because they were black, they never received the recognition due during World War II. Efforts now are being made by the few survivors to keep their memories alive. Calvin Spann, one of their group working to preserve their history said, "We had to get off of our rusty dusties and tell people what we did." (*Dallas Morning News*, March 11, 2006)

Preacher brother, it's time for us to get off of our "rusty dusties" and tell the world what Jesus did.

There's an old John Wayne movie entitled, "Cowboy." He has the responsibility of driving a herd of cattle to market, but there are no cowboys available. They have all followed the lure of the gold rush and gone off to California. The only help he can find is a group of boys, and so he enlists them to help him drive the cattle across the country to market. It's the only movie in which John Wayne is killed at the end. When he is shot dead, the young boys who have been driving the cattle gather around him, and one of them pulls out a sixshooter, spends the cartridge chamber and says, "Boys, it's time for us to finish the job."

I think that's what the Lord is saying to us today, "Boys, it's time for you to finish the job." As the father hath sent me so send I you.

Faith When You Are Desperate



Mark 7:24-30 David E. Garland

Some friends tell a story of spotting a mother duck at the end of their street doing what a desperate duck does—quacking her head off and flapping around in circles. They ventured down to investigate the cause of the commotion and saw her brood of ducklings at the bottom of a sewer drain. The mother duck was quacking despairingly, and the little baby ducks were quacking back just as despairingly.

They guessed what had happened. Mommy duck was taking her brood down to the creek, but blessed with only a duck brain she had marched them right over a sewer grate. She made it across easily, but one by one her little ducklings fell through the holes to the bottom. No way for her to get them out and no way for them to get out. All she could do was quack her loudest and flap around.

Our friends could not manage to lift the grate themselves and called the fire department to rescue the babies. When they were set free and reunited with their mother, she continued her quacking as they continued on to the creek, probably scolding them in duckese about being so careless as to fall through that grate.

That nurturing instinct for the young seems to run across the animal/bird world—particularly when your own children are sick or in trouble. You do not have to be a mother, and it does not have to be a child to feel desperate when someone you love is in trouble or gets sick.

I had to put down a beloved pet dog. I took it to the vet at lunch, went home and cried, and then went back to work for a meeting. My wife, who does not love dogs so much but loves me, allowed me to get a new puppy of the same breed. I took her to the veterinarian for her first puppy visit on a Saturday and on Monday she was deathly ill. I rushed her back to the vet feeling desperate and thinking, not again. I called every hour, and she only seemed to be getting worse. "Do whatever it takes, whatever it costs," I said, without consulting my wife. The puppy came this close to dying from eating who knows what, but she survived.

These are just ducks and dogs. In this story in Mark, we are talking about a little girl. She is at death's door, and the parents of a sick child are the most desperate of all people.

Many years ago, my six-month-old daughter had to be in the hospital. She had IV's in her little arms and fear in her little eyes, and there was no way to explain to her that everything was going to be all right. The children's ward waiting room is one of the hardest places I have ever been. We were the lucky parents. Our child was going to be okay. Other parents were not so lucky, and you could cut the desperation with a knife, it was so thick—wringing hands, tears, grasping for straws at the slightest turn for the better. One mother began to cry out to God: "Lord please don't take her now! My husband does not believe in you. Please save her and save him!"

When your child is sick, you will do anything, anything to help make them well. It is true of Jewish mothers, Samaritan mothers, Arab mothers, Syrophoenician mothers. Mothers, who gave birth to their children, nursed them, fed them, cradled them in their arms, wiped away their tears, whispered comfort, stroked their hair. We meet a desperate mother in this story whose daughter is battered by demons and the verge of death. She is willing to do anything, anything to get her well.

Somehow, she learns about this Jewish miracle worker from Galilee. Word had spread quickly as Jesus moves about Galilee leaving behind him a trail of transformed scenes and changed lives: fishermen no longer at their nets; sick people restored to health; demons routed; storms stilled; the hunger of thousands assuaged; a little girl—dead and raised to life. Jesus tried his best to keep things quiet, but how do you hush something like this? The word went out everywhere—even up to pagan Tyre.

We find him in this region sequestered in a house. Mark does not tell us why he decided to venture into this area or why he wished to remain incognito, but his presence can never remain secret for long. When word leaked out, this mom hunts him down to beg for help for her daughter.

It seems that she would already have three strikes against her before she even starts. She hails from this city that the Old Testament accounts as a wealthy, godless oppressor of Israel. The prophet Isaiah rails against Tyre for hoarding profits and living in the lap of luxury at the expense of the oppressed people of God (Isa 23). So does Jeremiah, so does Ezekiel, so does Joel, so does Amos, so does Zechariah. The people of Tyre are grabby, grasping, greedy people (Isa 23; Jer 47:4; Ezek 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9; Zech 9:2). Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, says: The people of Tyre are our bitterest, bitterest enemies.

She has a lot chutzpah coming to Jesus, a Galilean Jew, to ask for his help. It would be like a Jewish mom badgering a Palestinian miracle worker living in a refugee camp in Ramallah to please come heal her daughter.

This Gentile woman's humble request creates dramatic tension. Will Jesus be as gracious to this lady from Tyre as he was to the unclean outcasts within Israel? We expect so. Jesus is supposed to be

polite and say stuff like, "Yes ma'am." He is supposed not to mind being interrupted. He is supposed to grant our every request. It is in his job description, isn't it?

But we are in for a surprise. He appears to be rather surly. The plea, "My daughter is assailed by demons, please come help" meets with a sharp insult: "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the bread of the children and to toss it to dogs."

Is this the Jesus we know? This is not some Pharisee trying to trap him. This is a loving mom desperately pleading for her demonized daughter? Why does he speak about throwing bread to dogs? She did not ask about bread; she asked for help for her little child. How can Jesus compare a sick child to a dog?

The analogy is one of his enigmatic dark sayings, but we can figure it out. The dogs equal the Gentiles; the children equal the Jews; and bread equals rescue and life. Jesus asserts the priority of Israel, which Paul affirms: "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16; 2:9-10). Jesus comes as the Messiah of Israel, and she has no right as a Gentile to jump the queue to receive benefits from him. He seems to say that the only legitimate diners right now are members of the people of Israel. Too bad about you. You can expect nothing from me now. I will not give what is holy to dogs (Matt 7:6).

Can you imagine taking your child to a doctor and being treated this way? In the 1950's a Ph.D. student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky took his pregnant wife to the Baptist hospital in preparation for her to give birth. He was turned away because he was black. He was from Nigeria. He had been converted by Baptist missionaries. He had been educated in Baptist schools, but he was then turned away from a Baptist hospital because he was the wrong race. Emmanuel Dahunsi later became president of the Baptist convention in Nigeria. Why he ever forgave us, I'll never know. I am not sure that I would.

But is Jesus like this? Would he turn someone away because he

just didn't like Gentiles? Would he turn a deaf ear to a Gentile's cry for help. A cry to help a little child.

Let's face it. We do not mind Jesus being rude to a bunch of Pharisees and Sadducees, whom we believe deserve it, but we do not like him being rude to a forlorn mother.

What is important here is the woman's response to this slap in the face. Two basic human instincts collide. The gut reaction of desperation when your child is sick and you are willing to do anything and the gut reaction of recoiling in anger and wanting to strike back when we are insulted. "You are nothing but a dog. You dog you."

For this woman, the first impulse wins out, and we encounter a second surprise. She will not be put off.

I remember having to rush my son to the hospital when we were living in Germany. He was three years old and had fallen and gashed his mouth. Blood was spewing everywhere. In the panic of the situation, my German seemed to have left me, and my medical German was not all that good in the first place. The nurse was asking me medical questions that I did not understand, and I was unable to communicate what I wanted to say. A look of disgust came over the nurse's face, and she muttered something to the doctor in German that I could understand very well. An insult!

I did not grab my son and say, "Well, if that is the way you feel about Americans, forget it! I will take my son elsewhere!" (Like where?) I said to myself, "If you fix my son and stop this bleeding, you can call me anything you like!" For the grand sum of \$14 dollars, they brought in a plastic surgeon and my son went home all fixed up. I went home giving thanks all the way for the German health care system.

This women swallows her pride and accepts Jesus' premise that the children are to be fed first before the dogs get anything. She accepts the role of dog. But the word "first" gives her a ray of hope. "Wait, I am not asking to be first. Lord, even the dogs under the table

eat the children's crumbs. Sir, the dogs under the table feed when the children drop a morsel or two." She is not asking for a catered, full course meal, just a little crumb of Jesus' power for a little dog. She will gladly accept the rank of household dog if it means being fed.

She refuses to accept his dismissal and will not take no for an answer. She clearly accepts the role of dog and comes begging for food. And Jesus relents and grants her request: "Because of *this word*, go, your daughter has been set free from the demon" (Mark 7:29). The little dog is now accepted as a little girl.

"This word," however, troubles me. If it means that you are saved by your clever responses, I am lost. I am never clever. It takes me a week or more to think of some clever comeback. I would still be standing there, had it been me.

But she is not saved by her clever wit. She does not outduel Jesus in a battle of wits. "This word" refers to her humbleness. The willingness to humble oneself is a key requirement for discipleship and something the disciples of Jesus have difficulty learning (Mark 9:35-37; 10:44). The disciples have trouble learning to receive the kingdom "as a little child" (10:15); she has no qualms about receiving the kingdom as a little dog.

We may nevertheless get upset by Jesus' supposed want of chivalry. But Jesus is deliberately scandalous. He is always throwing stumbling blocks in people's way. An eager beaver comes to Jesus and says. "I'll follow you anywhere" "Yeah? Well, foxes have holes and birds have nests but the son of man has no place to lay his head. Do you still want to sign on?" Another says, "I'll follow you anywhere, but first let me bury my father." "Leave the dead to bury the dead!" "Good teacher," one asks, "Tell me how to inherit eternal life." "Sell all you have and give it to the poor!" "Rabbi, everyone respects you. Tell my brother to divide our father's inheritance with me." "Man, who made me a divider over you. Let me tell you a parable about a fool."

Faith When You Are Desperate / 27

This is a gruffer Jesus. No one likes being called "hypocrites," "an evil generation," "brood of vipers," "whitewashed tombs," "foxes," or "dogs." How would we have responded if he talked that way to us? We might say, "If that is the way he feels, I will never come to him for help." I would never submit to this kind of treatment. Our pride kicks in and keeps us from ever asking for help again.

Pride changed angels into devils. Satan uses pride as a favorite device for separating us from God's help. Pride stiffens the knees so that they will not bow down. It muzzles our voice so that we do not call out in humble supplication.

There was some time back a hymnal controversy in Canada. Some wanted to change the wording of "Amazing Grace"—"Amazing Grace who saved a wretch like me" to "Amazing grace which saved and strengthened me." We have already changed in our hymnals the wording of one hymn: "Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I" to "a sinner such as I." Few want to think of themselves as a "wretch," or a "worm"—or a "dog." We like to think of ourselves as somebodies. How dare God think I am not somebody and somebody special?

If that is the way God feels about me, I will turn to gods and saviors of my own making who will not offend me.

Only when we are truly desperate, are we willing to do anything it takes, including humbling ourselves, to find God's help.

And this story points us to the truth. Jesus sent no one away empty except those who were full of themselves. Jesus turns no one away who comes with humble faith. Bernard of Clairvaux said: "It is only when humility warrants it that great grace can be obtained,... And so when you perceive that you are being humiliated, look on it as the sign of a sure guarantee that grace is on the way. Just as the heart is puffed up with pride before its destruction, so it is humiliated before being honored" (*On the Song of Songs*; Sermon 34:1).

OTHERWISE



(see also Romans 8:31-38) Dr. W. Hulitt Gloer

In recent years I have grown to love the poetry of Jane Kenyon.

Hers is a remarkable story of courage and faith.

In 1993 she published a collection entitled "Constance." Among the poems included was one she called, "Otherwise".

Two years later on April 22, 1995, she would die of Leukemia.

"But one day, I know, It will be otherwise"

Otherwise has a way of intruding in our lives We thought we had studied all the right stuff We went into the exam with guarded optimism—we might even do better than just survive But somehow it turned out otherwise.

We thought we had made all the necessary arrangements We enlisted a great lineup of speakers Sent out publicity well in advance

By all rights it should have been standing room only, a smashing success But it turned out otherwise

We worked long and hard on that sermon Translated the text from the original Hebrew Scoured the resources for every possible nuance of meaning Shaped and reshaped the sermon structure Delivered it to the bedroom mirror, the faithful family dog, then finally the longsuffering spouse looking out over that sea of eager and expectant faces, confident that nothing quite like this had been heard since Amos rolled into Israel we mumble a quick prayer and we step confidently into the pulpit

But somehow it turned out otherwise

And the words of the Scottish poet Robert Burns ring ever so true—

"The best-laid plans o' mice an' men Gang aft a-gley, An' lea'e us naught but an' pain, For promised joy."

> It's a story as old as Scripture Adam and Eve just want to better themselves Abraham just wants to protect himself by pawning off Sarah as his sister Jacob just wanted Rachel for goodness sakes Joseph's brothers just want the attention due to them Aaron was just trying to make the best of a deteriorating situation The twelve tribes just want the security that a king can provide

David just wants to build a house for the God of Israel Solomon just wants to increase the size and influence of the kingdom But somehow it all turned out otherwise

The Romans just want to keep the peace in Palestine Jewish leaders just want to keep the temple in one piece and save the people

From dangerous messianic pretenders

Jesus' disciples just want Jesus to get on with being the messiah

But somehow it al turned out otherwise

And then there's Saul of Tarsus

whose zeal for the Law had catapulted him to the top of his seminary class

Whose Pharisaic commitments and burning desire put an end once and for all

the heretical law breaking cult of this Nazarene fraud called Jesus

Assured his appointment to the prestigious Hillel Chair of Rabbinic Theology and Practice

With all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto

At either Jerusalem Torah Tech or the Babylonian University

But somehow it had turned out otherwise

One day out of the blue he got knocked off his high horse on the road to Damascus

His diplomas disappeared beneath the Syrian sand His credentials were crushed into manure

His dreams of the prestige and honor due an esteemed and learned Torah scholar with a school to rival those of Hillel and Shammai dashed

And Jesus who couldn't possibly have been the messiah, must actually be the messiah, because God would never raise a fraud up, announces that he wants Paul on his team That he intends for Paul to undertake a worldwide speaking tour announcing to the Roman Empire that some itinerant holy man who was crucified on a Roman cross in some backwater province is the real Caesar and the only Caesar who really matters because there is coming a day when all earthly Caesars indeed all humankind will bow the knee to this Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

How's that for an otherwise!

We know what happened next Foolish as it all must have seemed, The Great Lion of God spends the rest of his life criscrossing the Roman Empire doing just this A stunning achievement especially when you consider what he went through...

Listen 2 Cor. 11: 24-8; 32-33

Do you think this is what Paul had expected?

Listen again...

Talk about your Otherwise!

This is not exactly you best life now!

And if all he had gone through wasn't enough...**there was that** infernal "thorn in the flesh"

2 Cor. 12: 7-8

So what was this 'thorn in the flesh''? While 2000 years of inquiry has failed to identify it One thing seems certain -For the most part we have sorely underestimated its nature Translating is as "thorn" just doesn't get at it -Better to translate "stake" Paul had a "stake" in body—and it had become an object of ridicule and derision by his enemies

"Three times I appealed to the Lord that it would leave me— "Lord, let this thorn pass from me"

Not once, not even twice, but three times...

And then there was all that jail time

Towards the end, there was Jerusalem, then possibly 2 to 4 years in Caesarea, and at least two years under house arrest in Rome

What could possibly have been more discouraging, more frustrating to a man who had spent his life on the road than being confined to a jail cell
All he wanted was to hit the road again, the road where it had all started
And if God had what it took to bust Jesus out of the tomb
Surely he could keep Paul out of jail

Surely, his enemies would argue, God takes better care of his people than this,

And surely Paul must have wondered himself After all, he was an ambassador for the risen, living Christ! And if God had raised Jesus from the dead, what might he do with the living Paul!

But somehow it had turned out otherwise

What shall we say to all of this...

"If God be for us...?" Sounds a bit hollow, doesn't it?

But that is what Paul said...Rom. 8:31-32; 35; 37-39

And about the "thorn" in the flesh—2 Cor. 12: 9 "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in your weakness."

And about his imprisonment ... Phil. 1:12

2 Cor. 4: 7-11

So...What do we say when "Otherwise" intrudes?

When that Otherwise intrudes, and it will...in ways you cannot dream or imagine

Would you allow me to make an uncomfortable suggestion?

Would you allow me to suggest that it is precisely when the Otherwise comes That Paul's words, so easy to quote to others when the Otherwise hasn't intruded So easy to pass on when we stand in the sunshine and outside of the pain And yet there is this uneasy feeling that Paul's words just might not be all we've set them up to be. This unsettled feeling that they may be less than adequate

Would you allow me to suggest that when that Otherwise comes Paul's words

Actually begin to fill up with meaning

A meaning we would never have expected or imagined That they begin to take on flesh and blood

That they no longer have the hollow ring of pious platitudes

That they no longer sound like syrupy sentimentality

That they no longer inhabit the world of "Precious Moments" or the incandescent light of a Thomas Kinkade print

When that Otherwise comes...

Then Paul's words no longer have the shrill voice of one who is wading in the shallows

But the resonate, rich, full voice of one who has drunk deep from

Abundance of amazing grace

Then Paul's words lose the strained sounds of Stoic resignation And begin to take on the trumpet sound of the great good news of resurrection

After all, God is in the business of turning night into day, darkness into light, shadows into sunlight nothing into something, resignation into resurrection, death into life
I think Paul got it

4:7-11

I know it sounds so counterintuitive, upside down, out of kilter, out of whack. It smacks of denying self, taking up a cross, and of all

things following Jesus

Paul called it foolishness

And in the final analysis that is what Lent is all about It's about preparation for the Otherwise we hope won't come It's what Jesus 40 days in the wilderness were all about Preparing to walk the way of the cross And even in the end kneeling there in that Garden, he prayed, Father if there be any otherwise...let this cup pass from me

But there was no Other way but this Otherwise

And this Otherwise was anything but what humankind expected

Anything but what humankind could have imagined But everything humankind needed

So in his love for us, Jesus walked right up to it And in his love for us, Jesus walked right through it

From Donkeys to Destiny

(I Samuel 9) By Dr. Joel C. Gregory

Recently, I took a trip of genealogical exploration for the first time with my two sons, Grant, 31, and Garrett, 28, on my paternal grandmother's side—the only traceable genealogy in my family. You have to be careful with tracing genealogy because you may find out something you did not want to know. "Tracing" is a tricky word in itself. The only other tracing that occurred in my extended family was the "tracing" of a relative by a used car lot when he disappeared with a car!

I took my sons to the Cottonwood Cemetery near Bryson, Texas, two hours northwest of Dallas in the rattlesnake-infested sandy soil of Jack County, an area dotted with enduring post oak and mesquite trees. They knelt down by the marker of their great-great-great grandfather, Joseph Wolfe. That is as far back as my family can go; we lose the trail from there.

Saul, the son of Kish, could go back further than that. First Samuel 9:1 delineates a lavish genealogy of at least seven generations of the Kish family of Benjamin. (If a New Englander could count back

that many generations, he could trace his relatives back to colonial America.) It was a heroic, historic, dramatic, and dynamic family tree; that is to say, young Saul, son of Kish, had the endowment and entitlement of generations of a proud family. If this story happened in another time, imposing oil paintings on the walls of the Kish mansion would feature aged patriarchs of the family looking down on young Saul with daunting expectations.

I don't personally know John D. Rockefeller, IV, the senator from West Virginia born in 1937. I do know one fact about him without knowing him, however; he is under the pressure of a famous genealogical line of ancestors. When he sits down in the family dining room, there may be a bust of his great-grandfather, the founder of Standard Oil and the richest man in American history until Bill Gates came on the scene. There is probably a picture of his grandfather, John D., Jr., who built Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, donated the land where the United Nations sits, and operated the family foundation. I expect John D., IV lives with a sense of the weight and expectation of a patrician genealogy.

Saul, the son of Kish, had that same kind of pressure on him. His own father is described by a Hebrew word that suggests a man of wealth, substance, vigor, influence and rank, as well as a warrior. Saul had all of the advantages and pressure that come with that type of heritage.

But Saul had more than that. In addition to all of those genealogical endowments, Saul was the simply the best-looking man of his generation—the Denzel Washington or the Brad Pitt of his time. The translators "go to town" on the descriptive words: a young man of great stature, and well-built. There was none more handsome among the Israelites. Added to his striking physical appearance was his height. The description gives a figure of speech that lives throughout the ages: he was head and shoulders above everyone else in the nation. Three thousand years ago, the Israelites were short people. Saul towered over them.

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The combination of height and striking good looks always helps. Did you ever wonder how George Washington managed to become the first president, get his picture on the dollar bill, and get the capital of the nation named after him? It had much to do with the way he looked. In 1776, at 43 years of age, he stood 6'2" and weighed 190 pounds. His face was unwrinkled. He sat perfectly on his horse. The Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush observed that Washington "has so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a solder from among 10,000 people. There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a *valet de chambre* by his side." He looked so handsome that a king would look like his valet.

You can say the same thing of Saul, son of Kish. He is the embodiment of the Shakespearean description, "Every inch a king." Here is this tall, Hollywood-handsome young man with a genealogy reaching back to the legendary days of his nation.

Surely, with this grace of heritage and endowment of physique, Saul is about to do something striking. He will be like Lance Armstrong going after the seventh Tour de France. He will be like Tiger Woods going after the Grand Slam. He will be like Indiana Jones going after the lost ark. Or he will be another LeBron James, the youngest NBA player ever to get a triple-double with his 27 points, 11 rebounds, and 10 assists against Portland when he was 20 years and 20 days old. Saul is about to do something titanic.

Nothing prepares us for the contrast between endowment and assignment. To call it a letdown is not sufficient. To call it an anticlimax is not descriptive. This breathtakingly handsome and gifted young man is sent on a nationwide search for lost donkeys—an odyssey to find runaway jackasses.

Don't get me wrong; I have nothing personal against donkeys, but they're something of a joke. You can respect a lion, the king of beasts. You can have affection for a dog, your best friend. You can even have admiration for a cat's aloofness and detachment from everybody. You can have an awesome fear of a bear. You can admire an

eagle with an inner stirring of patriotism. But a donkey? A jackass? The sterile offspring of a mare and mule: what a joke! The very word invokes giggles, snickering, and smirks. A donkey just has no dignity. But Saul is sent on a donkey search.

First Samuel 9:1 begins like the William Tell Overture, but later devolves into someone playing "Chopsticks". This chapter lays the groundwork for a skyscraper, but then puts a chicken coop on the foundation instead.

Verses 1 and 2 make you think you are about to enter the Louvre. When you get to verse 3, you see nothing but fingerpainting and graffiti. This is a prelude without a symphony. This is a preface without a book. This is a grand entrance hall that leads straight into an outhouse. All of that heritage and all of that endowment leads Saul directly into a national search for missing jackasses. Why send Saul? Send the lowest servant in the house. Send the second assistant to the associate.

But there is another irony here. Saul went on a nation-wide donkey chase! The scope of something searched for ought to have some proportion to the value of the object looked for. Saul and his servant went on a nationwide search for lost jackasses. We would understand if he was looking for Weapons of Mass Destruction. We would understand if he was looking under every rock for Osama bin Laden. We would understand if he were Magellan looking for the Pacific Ocean. We would understand if he were Amundsen looking for the South Pole. But who would understand a nationwide search for jackasses? It is the squandering of great time and energy on trivial pursuits, like someone collecting a gigantic ball of string or Teddy Roosevelt looking for horse thieves instead of charging up Kettle Hill as a Rough Rider and thus riding into destiny.

Like a refrain you read three times the bleak report: they did not find them (v. 4). Finally, they give up (v. 5). This is the essence of bleakness—a diminishing return of the worst order. Businessmen talk

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about the cost of a lost opportunity. When you spend time chasing something that leads nowhere, you not only have the frustration of it all, but you also have the cost of lost opportunity, which is worse than nothing. Your project fails, your time is wasted, AND you lose the opportunity to do something productive while you chase jackasses.

When they came to Zuph, they said, "Enough!" Zuph is the place of "enough". Disgusted, frustrated, tired, broke, and worried, they said that Zuph is "enough". When times get tough, you land at Zuph. When the going gets rough, you land at Zuph. When you are tired of all the stuff, you wind up at Zuph.

Are you at Zuph? Most preachers wind up at Zuph sometime in their ministry. How do you know when your zip code is Zuph? How can you tell when your e-mail address is Zuph.com? How do you know when you are on an ecclesiastical donkey search?

Somewhere in the pristine past, you had a sense of the calling and the gifts of God. You may not have the genealogy of Saul, and you may not stand head and shoulders above everyone else. But somewhere in the past, you had noble expectations about your destiny after you heard the voice of God. You remember the high calling of the Lord Jesus Christ like it was yesterday. You came to a conference like this, you saw great visions, you had great aspirations, and you expected to achieve great things for God. In the words of Oswald Chambers, you wanted to give your utmost for His highest. You wanted to live out the heroic words of the missionary martyr Nate Saint: "It is always worth it to give up what you cannot keep to get what you cannot lose."

But then something happened. You wanted to fly like an eagle, but you were surrounded by turkeys. You wanted destiny, but instead you only found detours. You wanted to speed down the mainline, but now you are on the sideline. It may have started in a power struggle with a church boss. Now you are chasing jackasses. It may have been fighting with the city zoning commission in order to build a church

building. Now you are chasing jackasses. It may have been that a member of the ministerial fraternity thought he was doing God a favor by undermining you. Now you are chasing jackasses. It may be that a staff member undermined you with an attempted coup. Now you are chasing jackasses.

A few months ago, I spoke at a service for a pastor who had come to be pastor of the oldest African-American church in a western city. In the earlier days of his ministry, God moved in a striking, dramatic way. Gang members were saved, the church exploded with growth, the community was shaken, the people were revived, and the city took notice. Then, a donkey chase began. A deacon told the young pastor, "God does not run this church, and you do not run this church: the board runs this church." Welcome to the donkey chase. You have cried out, "Enough, enough. I am at Zuph. It's too tough at Zuph. Zuph is rough."

I have a word of grace directly from the gospel: **God can turn donkeys into destiny.** God turns donkeys into destiny in spite of everything that happens. God delights to turn donkeys into destiny.

Let me give you some clues about how God turns donkeys into destiny. **Important help comes from unexpected, unlikely people** (vv. 6-10). At Zuph, when they had enough, the unnamed servant gives young Saul a suggestion: "Sir, let me interrupt. Sir, I know that your daddy, Kish, is worried. Sir, I know that we only have \$1.85 left. Sir, I know that you are ready to go home. But there is a man of God here. He has answers." That word of advice from the anonymous servant led Saul from donkeys to destiny—from frustration to vocation. Like the unnamed servant girl who would tell Namaan the leper that there was a prophet in Israel, this servant told Saul where he could find an answer. Destiny turned on the hinges of a conversation between Saul and an unnamed servant.

Never get too big to listen to a word from one of God's humble servants. God delights in turning the hinges of history on a word

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from an anonymous servant. In any encounter, at any moment may come a word that changes your donkey search into your destiny. God can bring a nobody out of nowhere to change your future forever. In that moment, the crown of Israel hung on the words of an unnamed servant.

You've probably never heard of the name, Group Commander J. M. Stagg. His name will not be carved on any historical monument. Yet, on June 5, 1944 at 3:30 in the morning, the 28-year-old J.M. Stagg stood before the 54-year-old Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, General Dwight David Eisenhower, in the Southwick House, an estate outside Portsmouth, England. Around the table were people who do belong to the ages, such as British General Bernard Law Montgomery and General Omar Bradley. It was 1,736 days into World War II. They were all looking at the 28-year-old J.M. Stagg, the young Scottish weatherman. Only he could give the forecast on which the biggest invasion in history would depend. He grinned with confidence at General Eisenhower as he told the great men that there would be a 36-hour break in the stormy weather.

At his word, Eisenhower spoke the famous verdict leading to June 6, 1944, the day of the greatest invasion in history on which turned the fate of western civilization: "Let's go." For four weeks before that, Eisenhower had spent 30 minutes every day questioning the young Scot about the weather in the English Channel. The great man listened intently to the unknown Scotsman. The man whose name blazed across the headlines of the world listened to the man whose name would never be featured in a headline. The future president listened to an unknown weatherman. God intervened with the right weather, and all of history turned on that moment.

Do not despise the humble servant who brings you a word. God chooses to work that way. If you get too proud to listen to the janitor, the cook, the maid, the repairman, the carpenter, the retiree, or the dying saint in the back room of a shotgun house at the end of the road,

you can miss your destiny. God often puts big messages into little packages.

In *Aurora Leigh, Book vii,* Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) penned this thought-provoking poem:

Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God;

And only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.

Our destiny is often achieved by working with a divine synchronicity that defies all odds. Synchronicity is a word created by Swiss psychologist Karl Jung. *Sun* means "with" and *chronos* means "time". It refers to events which link together with no known causation, but are too meaningful to be random occurrences in life. Now, Karl Jung believed these were due to the collective unconsciousness of humanity. I rather say that these events are caused by the mysterious intervention of God's unexplainable timing in our lives.

There is a long series of perfectly timed, unexplainable events that led Saul from donkeys to destiny. Consider this:

- The donkeys did not have to run away to begin with.
- Kish did not have to send Saul to look for the donkeys.
- Saul did not have to go look for the donkeys.
- Saul could have found the donkeys on the first day, and ended the search without meeting Samuel.
- The servant might not have said anything about Samuel.
- The search did not have to end at Zuph at exactly the time the itinerant, circuit-riding prophet Samuel came to town to lead worship.

Yet behind all of this trivial, trite, marginal, meaningless, forgettable, frustrating, commonplace, everyday activity, GOD was working in synchronicity. GOD was all over the donkey search, but Saul did not even know it. But there is more. Consider the timing of events at the end of the search:

- In verse 11, at a village so small no one knows where it is, Saul meets young women at just the moment they are going to draw water. The young women just happen to know that a prophet is in town.
- In verse 12, the young women tell Saul that he is just in time to meet the prophet who is just about to hold a service.
- In verse 13, the prophet himself has not yet started the service, so he is available for the encounter with Saul.
- In verse 14, they almost have a wreck with the prophet, just as he is coming out of the gate.
- In verse 16, God reveals to Samuel the day before all of this happened that a man from Benjamin would show up out of nowhere. He tells the prophet to anoint him as the King of Israel.
- In verse 17, God reveals to Samuel on the spot that the young man walking toward him is *the* man.

Consider what the odds of that are. In a well-shuffled deck of playing cards, the mathematical odds of dealing a hand of thirteen specified cards are about 635 billion to one. In other words, if I said I am going to shuffle this deck of cards, tell you in advance that I will draw out a two of clubs, a five of diamonds, an ace of hearts, etc., etc., and call the names of thirteen cards, the odds are ONE in 635 billion that I would draw the cards in that order. If you applied that example to those 13 random events, that is the likelihood of Saul running into Samuel in that tiny town, on that ordinary day, at the end of a donkey chase.

Synchronicity happens. Michael Matsushita lived in the Bronx. After 9/11, he made a deliberate decision to get away from New York City and the possibility of further, future terrorist attacks. He wound

up in London. On a Thursday morning, he was on a London underground train that passes through Kings Cross Station, the site of the deadliest transit bombing in history. He disappeared and met his final destiny. You may think you are running toward your destiny when you might be running away from it.

In 1937, the most famous living pastoral preacher, Rev. Dr. Gardner Calvin Taylor, was an agnostic. Then one day, he was accused of causing a now famous-accident on a rural road in Louisiana. It seemed that his guilt was sealed. Yet, at just the opportune moment, an unknown white man burst into the hearing and totally unexpectedly said, "I seen it." His eyewitness account exonerated Dr. Taylor. A preaching ministry that will belong to the ages began in that moment. Taylor decided to go to Oberlin. In that moment of synchronicity, hung all of those NBC network radio sermons, all of those decades of majestic preaching, the Presidential Medal of Freedom presented in 2000, and thousands of other lives changed and touched...all because of the timing of an eyewitness account of an accident in rural Louisiana in 1937.

Our destiny is often achieved by divine sovereignty that does not depend on us. Saul's destiny had nothing to do with him. The direction of Saul's days and his projected future depended on the initiative of God. The life of Saul is God's plan, proposal, program, and project. The undertaking and endeavor is God's: all of God, totally God, and nothing but God.

In verse 15, GOD literally "uncovers Samuel's ear." The Word of JEHOVAH comes crashing into Samuel's consciousness. Samuel did not know Saul; he did not even want Israel to have a king. Samuel had only come to town to hold a worship service on the high place. The initiative of God, however, arrested Samuel; He seized Samuel, held Samuel, and spoke to Samuel.

Usually, the word order in the Hebrew language would place the verb first. But with an unusual expression, this verse places the proper

name of Jehovah first. Everything that is going to happen comes from the initiative of God. God overshadows it, precedes it, communicates it, engineers it, and accomplishes it.

Consider the order of the words: "I...you...he." This is about God's activity. Saul does not hear it, know it, expect it, or even understand it when it happens. Saul is chasing jackasses; he has been relegated to the daily donkey discovery detail. Saul is so clueless that he does not even know Samuel and fails to recognize the prophet when he stands face to face with him. That is world-class cluelessness; he cannot identify the most famous man in the nation. This is all about God and His initiative, the Word of God, the obedience of Samuel, and the untamed activity of the Holy Spirit.

God can get you where He wants you without you. When you cannot dream of it, do not expect it, never conceive it, and do not even want it, God can place you where He wants you without you—and even *in spite of you*.

It is to this very day a little village called Waterbeach, overlooking the River Cam, which gave its name to the great university town just south of the little village—Cambridge. That little village is surrounded by other tiny towns with ancient names: Landbeach, Impington, and Horningsea. I have been to Waterbeach with its few, narrow little streets. A little Baptist church that sits in the village would easily fit inside a small house. On a blustery morning in November, 1853, the nineteen-year-old pastor of that tiny, remote church walked the six miles from Cambridge to Waterbeach. He was a country lad who had no formal training and was not even ordained. He did not know that a letter postmarked LONDON was waiting for him on a table in that little church. Inside that envelope was a letter that changed history and shook the earth—a letter on which hinged worldwide impact.

The nineteen-year-old did not know something else. Shortly before that date, he had spoken at a Sunday School Union Meeting in the Guildhall at Cambridge. He was much younger than the other two

speakers at the meeting. One of them who followed him insulted him because of his youthfulness. He had to stand up and speak to defend himself. It was an embarrassing evening—one to be forgotten. But in the Guildhall at Cambridge was a man from Essex, George Gould of Loughton. The world will never remember the name of that unknown Victorian gentleman. But George Gould was overwhelmed by the preaching ability of the nineteen-year-old. He told Thomas Olney, a friend in London who was also an elderly deacon at the New Park Street Chapel. That church had been served by the most famous Baptist preachers in London: Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon, the one who designed the Baptist hymnal.

When that young Waterbeach pastor opened the letter from London, it invited him to supply the pulpit at the famous old Baptist church. He was certain that they had sent the letter to the wrong man—that it was meant for another man with the same name, SPURGEON, a man who lived in Norfolk, not in Waterbeach. But it was meant for the teen-aged preacher and no one else. On December 18, 1853, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, at nineteen, preached his first sermon in London, and the rest belongs to the ages.

Every movement of Spurgeon's destiny was directed by God. He hid the young man in a tiny village. God sent George Gould of Essex to a Sunday School conference in Cambridge and then sent him to Thomas Olney. At the very moment Spurgeon thought that he had been insulted, hurt, discounted, and marginalized, unknown to him or anyone else God was bringing about the onset of the greatest preaching ministry in English history.

Let God do it for you. He did it for Saul. There was no exploratory committee to discover if Saul had the support to be king. There was no New Hampshire primary or Iowa caucus for Saul. There was no Benjamite SOS "Select Our Saul" committee. God did it. He did it for David among the sheep. He did it for Moses, an 80-year-old in the desert. He did it for Joseph in an Egyptian prison. He did it for

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Daniel in the lion's den. He did it for Amos, the sycamore fig tender. God can get you where He wants you and you will not even know.

We give pious lip service to God's divine direction, but do we really believe it with our heart and soul? Are we not practical atheists when it comes to believing that God can get us where He wants us? We manipulate, plan, scheme, plot, connive, strategize, schmooze, peddle influence, slap backs, glad-hand one another, and think thereby we will get to the place where we need to be. We think that God needs our cronyism and maneuvering to get us where we think He wants us to be.

Let God do it. God can get you to the place where He wants you without you. If you get where you want to be without Him, you will wish you had never seen the place. When you get where you think you want to be without God getting you there, you will have one daily prayer...God, put this place in my rear-view mirror.

Yet this is not the last time or the most significant time that God combined synchronicity, donkeys and destiny. On another day another Son of Israel and Son of God commanded two anonymous followers to go into a village where they would find a donkey and a colt (Matthew 21:1-7). At just the right moment an anonymous owner arranged that donkey for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem. The two disciples found it just at Jesus described it. At the precise time needed, there was donkey tied that led to His destiny.

Indeed, God can always have the right thing, the right person and the right place for you to meet your destiny. He is the kind of God Who leads from donkeys to destiny.

A Declaration of Dependence



II Chronicles 7:14; I Peter 2:9 J. Randall O'Brien Trinity Baptist Church San Antonio, Texas, 7-1-07

On June 12, 1775, one year before the Declaration of Independence was written, the Continental Congress issued what has come to be called a "Declaration of Dependence on God." Aware that war loomed the Congress captured the religious fervor of the day with the historic document calling for a day to:

- "Be observed by the inhabitants of all the English colonies on this continent as a
- <u>Day of public humiliation, fasting, and prayer;</u> That we may, with united hearts
- And voices, unfeignedly <u>confess and deplore our many sins</u>, and offer up joint
- <u>Supplication to the all-wise, omnipotent, and merciful Disposer</u> of all events;

Humbly beseeching Him to forgive our iniquities, and remove our present

Calamities"

Then the document added:

"With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge

To each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

One year later the <u>Declaration of Independence</u> would be penned. Not, however—please remember—before our founding fathers had declared this, their <u>dependence upon God</u>. As we celebrate the signing of our Declaration of Independence this morning, let us consider offering our names to <u>A Declaration of Dependence Upon God</u>.

I. Consider first that Almighty God is the Author of our *Individual* Independence

A. <u>The **FIRST**</u> Declaration of Independence was <u>conceived</u> in the mind of God, <u>born</u> in the creation of humankind, and <u>recorded and preserved</u> in the Bible.

- 1. <u>God made us</u> in His Image. That means we are <u>FREE</u> and responsible. (Tillich)
- 2. <u>When God said</u> we could eat FREELY of every tree in the garden except one which carried a severe penalty, he was clarifying our FREEDOM—even to <u>choose</u> to do wrong . But we WERE created FREE—even in relation to Ultimate Authority, God!
- B. <u>Our ETERNAL</u> Declaration of Independence was <u>brought</u> by Jesus, <u>taught</u> In His life, <u>bought</u> on the cross, and <u>wrought</u> when we believed and were saved by Grace through faith.
- C. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free...If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."
- D. For those who abide in Him Jesus gives freedom-from

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Law, Sin, Fears/anxieties/meaninglessness, Death. Christ sets us FREE from whatever it is that binds us, or limits us.

E. <u>God wills that His creation be FREE</u>. Ultimately our Freedom comes from God. Jesus taught that. TRUE freedom, can only be found in a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. We come to that joy by asking Christ to save us from our sins and to be our Lord.

<u>Should we not</u> celebrate this liberating truth this morning? <u>Should we not</u> joyfully add our names to a *Declaration of Dependence* on God—for our individual liberation?

<u>Are we not</u> dependent upon Almighty God for our *personal*, spiritual, eternal Declaration of Independence? In Christ alone, we are truly free.

II. Secondly, Please Consider now that Almighty God is the Provider and Protector of our *National* Independence

Now it seems logical that if God wills INDIVIDUALS to be free, since nations are made up of individuals *God wills nations to be free* to insure human liberty.

(I would concede that it is conceivable that a King, or a Dictator, might grant wide scale freedom to the populace, or that a democratically elected ruler might be radically flawed and oppressive. While such possibilities do exist, neither scenario speaks against the case for free nations, which, I believe, remain nearest to the heart of God.)

<u>God created us free</u>. Freedom's authority and right derives from God's heart! From a free Creator creating a free creation. *Why* should nations be free? Because genuinely free nations grant and protect free people. <u>Ultimately, freedom</u>, including our national freedom, has its roots in <u>the mind of God</u>. Freedom's *authority* and *right* derives from *God's will*.

May God bless America! And any OTHER country seeking to

make people free! America's roots run deep into the rich, fertile soil of freedom. May God bless America and may America bless God!

When King James 1 of England (yes, THAT King James, for whom the 1611 translation of the Bible is named) issued the First Charter of Virginia on Thursday, April 10, 1606 leading to the sailing of the seas and the founding of Jamestown in 1607 he charged those early adventurers to the New World to carry, "Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God."

Later, religious zealots called Puritans (so-called because they desired to purify the Church of England) established Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts in 1620. These Puritans, also called Pilgrims—a religious term— wanted to build a City of God in this Fallen World. Their own words report that they saw America as "The New Israel," a new promised land where the people of God could dwell and prosper, thriving in religious liberty.

Alas, not everyone migrating to America in search of religious freedom, however, wanted to grant that freedom to others. Colonists in Massachusetts, (and elsewhere) proved fierce in their religious intolerance. As a result, ROGER WILLIAMS and some followers left Massachusetts in 1636 and founded the colony of Rhode Island where *complete religious freedom* was provided for all people. "I commend that man," Williams wrote, "whether Jew, or Turk, or Papist, or whoever, that steers no otherwise than his conscience dares." Moreover, he called for a "hedge or wall of separation between the Garden of the Church and the wilderness of the world." His desire was not to protect the state, but to protect the church. Williams prohibited an established church, one supported by tax dollars, thereby *instituting the principle of separation of church and state* later incorporated in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

Baptists proudly trace our beginnings in America to *Roger Williams* who accepted believer's baptism in *1639*, promptly baptized

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10 others, and formed at *Providence, Rhode Island*, the *First Baptist Church in the New World*.

We Baptists have just cause to be proud of our heritage. Baptists have *long* been leaders in freedom, political and religious.

John Leland, the vocal Baptist minister who worked alongside Jefferson and Madison to gain religious freedom for Virginians wrote, "Let every man <u>speak FREELY</u> without fear, <u>maintain</u> the principles he believes in, <u>worship</u> according to his faith, either in one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods, and <u>let government protect</u> him in doing so."

<u>Using his religious freedom Thomas Paine</u> attacked Christianity in his tract, *The Age of Reason*. <u>George Washington</u>, on the other hand, used his religious freedom to speak of "*that Almighty Being who rules over the universe*," in his first presidential oath, then sealed his oath by improvising, "*So help me, God*," and kissed the Bible.

<u>Jefferson and Franklin</u> used their religious liberty to believe in the Creator God and the Afterlife, but not in the divinity of Jesus. <u>Jefferson</u> thought Jesus a great moral teacher, but not divine. <u>Franklin</u> wrote, "I believe in one God, creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshiped. . . . As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I have some doubts about his divinity;"

<u>John Jay</u>, on the other hand,—the first Supreme Court Chief Justice—was a devout traditional Episcopalian, whose support of the rule of law included such public pronouncements as this one: "Real Christians will abstain from violating the rights of others."

When once asked if the Lord was on America's side, <u>President</u> <u>Abraham Lincoln</u> responded, "*My constant anxiety and prayer is that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side.*"

In America, we citizens have the freedom to worship and live on the Lord's side or not. Jefferson exclaimed, "*The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.*"

This political and religious freedom granted to all Americans is

protected by the *Declaration of Independence and U. S Constitution*. Signed July 4, 1776 and written chiefly by Thomas Jefferson with ideas borrowed from the Christian English Philosopher, John Locke, The Declaration of Independence states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident:

- 1. All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- 2. To secure these rights Governments are instituted and derive their powers from the consent of the governed.
- 3. Whenever Government becomes destructive of these ends it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and institute new government.

Please notice that *this document invites critique* of our government, rather than blind citizenship. Conscience resides in persons, not bureaucracy, not institutions, not government. Some would have you believe that patriotism is blind, unquestioning support of our government. *Don't you believe it!* A TRUE Patriot holds his country accountable to right!

How magnificent that our Declaration of Independence calls for the *highest* expression of patriotism, *vigilance and critique* of our citizen-centered government!

As Christians we must remember that there is only ONE Christian nation and that is the Church. I Peter 2:9 names the church as a Holy Nation. The church is a Christ-made nation, "a people for God's own possession." No country is a Christian nation. America is not a Christian nation. America is a FREE nation, a country where people are free. Only persons can profess or deny Christ. Nations cannot. A nation cannot walk an aisle, or be baptized.

What we mean when we boast that America is a Christian nation

is that she is inhabited primarily by Christians. America certainly is distinctive for the Christian influence felt within her society, culture, and government. *However*, as we know, a large number of Americans do Not profess Christ. We are increasingly becoming religiously pluralistic. Furthermore, it is terribly difficult to determine precisely how much influence American businessmen and women, citizens, and government officials actually let Christ have in their daily affairs. Is Christ Lord on <u>Wall Street</u>, the <u>New York Stock Exchange</u>, in <u>Congress</u>, in <u>the media</u>, in <u>corporate America</u>, in <u>the legal profession</u>, in our <u>schools</u>, <u>colleges</u>, in <u>Hollywood</u>, in <u>athletics</u>, in the <u>military</u>, over the <u>Supreme Court</u>, in the <u>streets</u>?

American culture's obsession with sex, drugs, alcohol, greed, and power would not be called Christ-like by any reasonable person. Certainly NO nation, including America, is synonymous with the Kingdom of God. Only the true church of Jesus Christ is a Christian nation, according to Scripture (I Peter 2:9).

We must remember then that, in actuality, America is not God's people, any more that Cuba is God's people, or Canada, or Russia, or Mexico. Rather, believers living IN America are God's people, as are believers living in Cuba, Russia, or Mexico. God loves us all—yes, even Iraqis, that's the Gospel! *"For God SO loved the world"* . . . Not just America. So we must be careful, very careful, to worship the biblical God of justice and righteousness who loves ALL of his creation; who sides with the weak, poor, oppressed, the least in our world. We must NEVER yield to the temptation of civil religion wherein God and Uncle Sam are one and the same. That is blasphemous! Let us steer clear of such heresy. We must never engage in nation worship! That is idolatry, and God will hold us accountable for all idolatry.

<u>Is it not conceivable</u> that God's will and Uncle Sam's ways might not always coincide?

Was government supported and sustained slavery in our country

the Will of God? Could the Civil War have been God's punishment for the sin of slavery? Lincoln so mused. He prayed for a speedy end to the war but feared it might last until "every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."

- How wrong can our country be than when we count a Black person only *as 3/5ths of a person* in determining representation in the House of Representatives?
- Why did it take as long as the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to our Constitution—one which declares all men to be created equal—to, respectively, *Free* the slaves, Make them *citizens*, and Give them the right to *vote*?
- If our government needs no vigilant critique, why did Susan B. Antony and others find it so necessary but hard to gain women the right to vote as late as 1920? No woman could cast a vote in America from 1776 to 1920.
- Just this week (June 27, 2007) secret files of the CIA disclosed official information of governmental wrong. (The NY Times reported):
 - 1. Our CIA was involved in 3 known assassination plots against foreign heads of state in the 60s (President Rafael Trujillo, Dominican Republic; Premier Patrice Lumumba, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Fidel Castro of Cuba, the latter in association with recruited mob figures such as John Roselli. The Trujillo assasination attempt was successful.
 - 2. For 7 years the CIA engaged in illegal domestic surveillance of 300, 000 American citizens, with 7,200 of those extensively targeted. (Presidents Johnson and Nixon both knew of this.)
 - 3. Journalists, such as syndicated columnist Jack Anderson and others, had their phones illegally wiretapped.

- 4. CIA contact and involvement with Watergate is a matter of record.
- 5. LSD experiments were conducted upon unwitting U.S. citizens during the 60s.
- 6. Previous revelations include Radiation experiments conducted upon unsuspecting citizens, along with the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.
- Even today our CIA holds terrorist suspects without a trial in secret prisons in other lands, torturing them, in violation of Geneva Convention law. (Baptist theologian, David Gushee, published an article in *Christianity Today*, in which he mused, WWJT, "Who would Jesus torture?")
- Jim Crow laws, the My Lai slaughter, the death of more than 40 million aborted babies, Just War issues, and governmental silence and/or inaction over known genocide in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, Kosovo, and the Sudan, while building Holocaust museums and crying, "Never Again!" all add to the
- evidence that we citizens must love our country enough to hold her accountable to right, just as our Founding Fathers insisted.

Is God an amoral god, blind to our national sin? The Prophet Amos reminds us that nations, too, will be judged by a righteous God.

"If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land."

Consequently, the American Christian will want to rethink her or his highest loyalty. Thinking Christian citizens will ask: **Are we Americans first and Christians second?** Or, *Are we Christians first and Americans second?*

<u>Civil Religion</u> says, "My country, right of wrong, my country!" That is, of course, Idol worship, nation worship, not patriotism, and certainly not Christianity. True Christian religion says, "My highest allegiance is to Jesus Christ—always Christ, never Caesar." Christ is Lord and Caesar is not! The early Christians understood this reality, embraced it, and were fed to lions in Rome as a result. (I just hope an Interim Pastor doesn't meet the same fate for clarifying the issue. :--)

"When my country is wrong I confront her and work to make her right. When she is right I commend her and work to keep her right." *True Christian religion* proclaims, "*My country Right or Repent*!"

Can a Christian be a patriotic American and not compromise his or her faith? Absolutely! How? By understanding that our supreme allegiance is always to God and by understanding too, that true Christian patriotism is NOT a blind love of country, but a tenacious insistence that one's government align itself with God's principles at all times. A true patriot loves his country enough to insist on right behavior as a parent would a child. A true Christian gives 1st place to the Kingdom of God, not to an earthly kingdom, just as Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:33.

Honesty compels us to confess that we have not always in the past, nor will we always in the future, do Right as a country in the sight of God. For no entity made up of fallible human beings will ever be perfect.

We are a *Good country*! We are a *Great nation*! We are not a perfect one. With God's help we as Christians can work to make America even GREATER.

I have traveled to 22 nations; many of you have traveled to more. I have worn the uniform of our country; many of you have done the same. I have fought for our flag and volunteered to do so. I am PROUD to be an American! Aren't you? We live in the greatest country on this planet—perhaps the greatest in the history of the human race. Though we are not perfect, I believe our Principles of Liberty and Justice for all originate with God Himself.

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Billions of people across the planet live trembling in a FEAR Society, but we enjoy a **FREE** Society. In this great country that God has blessed us with, we enjoy <u>freedom of speech</u>, <u>freedom of the press</u>, <u>freedom of assembly</u>, <u>freedom of religion</u>, and the <u>freedom of dissent</u>—all pillars of democracy. I am proud to be an American where our Constitution's first amendment guarantees us the <u>Freedom to Assemble</u> here this morning and worship God, where the state cannot intrude in our worship, forbid it, or persecute us for it. Aren't you?

Although we are guaranteed freedom of religion, freedom to worship God or not, I am encouraged that 34 or our 43 U.S. Presidents voluntarily chose to have the Bible upon which their hand was placed as they were sworn into office open to a specific passage. For instance, Carter chose Micah 6:8; Reagan chose Il Chronicles 7:14, our text for this morning's worship.

God has blessed us with a great country! Today we celebrate God's gift of a free country, a free society. "A society is free if people have a right to express their views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, of physical harm." (Natan Sharansky, The Case for Democracy, p. 40).

Contrast our free society with the fear societies of Nelson Mandela, Natan Sharansky, Andrei Sakharov, and Wei Jingsheng. Precisely because the freedoms we often take for granted were denied them, these men suffered at the hands of their governments.

- Nelson Mandela For working against the evil of South African apartheid, Mandela spent 27 years imprisoned in a 7'x 7' cubicle.
- Natan Sharansky—For fighting for human rights in the Soviet Union, Sharansky spent 9 years in prison.
- Andrei Sakharov—The father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb later dropped a bomb of his own when he insisted upon human rights in the USSR, arguing that "the international community should never trust a state more than that state trusts its own people." (N. S. , Case for Dem., p. 113.) For this, Sakharov suffered "internal exile."

- Wei Jingsheng—Jingsheng disappeared into a secretive prison and labor camp in China. His crime? Encouraging Democracy, voice by the people, and free debate.
- **Tinananmen Square**—And who can forget the massacre of students in 1989 for protesting Chinese totalitarianism?

For some of the words I have spoken this morning, I would have been arrested and imprisoned in some countries in our world. Should we not give thanks to God for our great country on this Independence Sunday? The American principle of freedom is indeed of Divine Origin. <u>Samuel Bowles</u> put it well. "*The cause of freedom is the cause of God.*" <u>Jefferson</u> exclaimed, "*The Bible is the cornerstone of liberty.*"

A foreign diplomat once proposed a toast to America on Independence Day. "Let me congratulate you on the second greatest day in history." When asked for his opinion on the greatest day he responded: December 25, for had there been no Christmas, there would never have been a 4^{th} of July."

Should we not declare our Dependence on God for our national independence and her continued blessing?

III. Lastly, IN OUR CALL FOR A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE UPON GOD THIS MORNING LET US CONFESS THAT IT IS UPON ALMIGHTY GOD THAT OUR HOPES FOR GLOBAL LIBERTY AND JUSTICE REST.

<u>God desires that individuals be free</u>; since nations consist of individuals, <u>God desires free nations to insure human liberties</u>. Since our world is made up of nations, it stands to reason that <u>God wills</u> global freedom, with liberty and justice for all creation.

Would it not be great if ALL nations everywhere were free this morning? Because all PEOPLE would be free!

<u>If nations joined hands, making an unbroken circle of love around</u> the world, God in Heaven would shout!!!

But do we need Him?

<u>Do we need</u> God's teachings on love and freedom, repentance and justice, internationally, as revealed in Jesus Christ? Or can we make it without God?

<u>Should we</u> now sign a Declaration of Dependence upon God for *Global* Peace, Justice, and Liberty?

<u>Martin Luther King, Jr</u>. once preached that, "Our greatest defense against communism is take (positive) offensive action in behalf of justice and righteousness." He exclaimed, "For injustice anywhere threatens justice everywhere." We might add this morning that our greatest defense against *terrorism* is take positive offensive action in behalf of justice and righteousness. To have *peace* we must work for *justice*. Both communism and terrorism spring from seedbeds of despair, hopelessness, poverty, hunger, and injustice.

No one can say how many celebrations such as this July 4th America will see if we do not work for justice, peace, and brotherly love around the world. For as John F. Kennedy warned, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable."

But <u>what if</u> we Christians in America would pray and work to mobilize our great nation and our Spirit-filled churches to eliminate these pathetic seedbeds of terrorism and communism? <u>What if</u> we covenanted anew to be that City of God, the light to the nations, the founding Puritans envisioned? <u>What if</u> we launched more missionaries than missiles? What if we served more bread than bullets? What if we believed in the Gospel more than in guns?

Stanley Hauerwas is right. "9/11 didn't change the world; 33 A.D. changed the world."

Jesus Christ, alone, is our hope! Amen? Can I have an Amen?

Ah, Independence Sunday! I love America! I *believe* in America! I *pray* for America! Don't you?

I am PROUD to be an American! I am Proud to be a global citizen! I am PROUD to be a CHRISTIAN!

Our individual, national, and international HOPE rests in the love of God revealed in Jesus the Messiah.

This week as we celebrate our Declaration of Independence, should we not sing of our Declaration of Dependence upon God,

For our Individual independence,

For our National independence,

For our hopes of International liberty for all?

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." (Il Chron. 7:14)

... And also our world!

Amen? Can I have an amen? Can the Lord have a chorus of amens? And all the people said????

Amen!

RUNAWAY



By Dr. Levi Price

When I was in the ninth grade, I ran away from home.

I had a fine family and my parents were outstanding in many ways, but they were very strict, and I wanted to be free from those restrictions.

I left the small west Texas town where I was raised in the afternoon. I got on the highway and began to hitchhike. I got a ride to Lubbock, where I found an empty truck in a truck yard and tried to settle down for the rest of the night. But it was cold and I could not sleep. So I got on the road again, about 3:00 in the morning and caught a ride to Plainview. There I got a room in a cheap hotel and went to sleep.

I slept most of that day, and then I went to a movie. After that I decided to look for a job. The only job available was a job picking cotton. I signed on and went out the next morning to pick cotton. I do not know if you have ever picked cotton, but it only took me one day to realize I did not want to do that very long!

The next morning I got back on the highway and caught a ride with a couple of Marines who were on their way to Oceanside, California

(where Camp Pendleton is located). By the time we got to Oceanside, most of my money was gone.

I caught a ride on a truck into Los Angeles. Being a young kid from a small west Texas town, I had never been in a town the size of Los Angeles. Needless to say, I was in awe. The truck driver told me that I could get a bed to sleep in at the Salvation Army, so I went there to get a place to sleep. After quite a long, intensive interview, they gave me a bed among many other beds in a large dormitory, and I went down to the coffee shop there and spent my last money on a doughnut and a cup of coffee.

When I went back up to the bed, the cops were there waiting for me. They arrested me for being a vagrant and took me to the L.A. Juvenile Hall. They booked me and incarcerated me there. They told me they would send my parents a telegram. If my parents wanted me back and would send the money for an airplane ticket home, they would send me home. If my parents did not want me back, they would keep me in the lockup at juvenile hall until I reached the age of eighteen. I was fourteen at that time. That meant I would have to be incarcerated there for four years! I prayed my parents would want me back. (I did not know—really—whether they would or would not want me back after I had run away.)

The days went by—three days, four, five—and I began to get really worried. At the end of the fifth day, I went to the authorities and asked if they had heard from my folks. They said they had not heard anything. That was just before they locked me up for the night.

Late in the night after the sixth day, two cops—a man and a woman—came and got me out of jail. They took me to the airport and put me on a plane to El Paso. Evidently, my folks planned to drive the 250 miles to El Paso to meet me.

When the plane finally landed at El Paso, I was reluctant to get off. I just sat there and waited for everyone to get off the plane. After a while, the stewardess came and told me I had to get off the plane. I did not know what I would say to my folks. I felt guilty and dirty and did not know how they would receive me. I knew they were poor and did not have the money to get me that ticket. To this day, I do not know how they paid for that airplane ticket home.

I got to the door, trembling, and started down the steps. It was the old days, when plane passengers walked across the asphalt and climbed a ladder into the plane. They deplaned by walking down that ladder and across the asphalt into the station. I do not know how my folks got out to the asphalt, but they both came running across the pavement and bounded up the stairs and received me in their wideopen arms.

It was an incredible, unbelievably warm welcome home. I felt their love and care, and I was so glad to be home in their arms. I was so glad to know they still wanted me and would receive me back into the family.

The next day we drove the 250 miles back to my hometown. Over and over, my parents told me how much they loved me and wanted me to be their son. I was so glad to be home. I made up my mind right then and there that my folks would never have a problem with me again.

Our text today is Luke 15:11-24. As we read this text, you will see why I say this story is my story.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave hi9m anything. When

he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

This is my story. But you may find it is your story also. Helmut Thielicke's book, "The Waiting Father" is a book of sermons on the parables. In one of the sermons on this parable, Thielicke writes of a young boy looking into a mirror and realizing for the first time that it is his own figure there. It is interesting and fun to watch him react to the realization that it is a reflection of himself. So, Thielicke says, it is with us when we see ourselves in this parable. As we look honestly at this story, we understand that it is our story. We may see ourselves here.

Truly, deep calls unto deep in this story. It is inspired in a way far beyond words on a sheet of paper. It speaks to our hearts.

Guldenhuys (*The Gospel of Luke in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*) says this is the "Gospel within the Gospel."

We understand that the younger son is treating the Father as if he were dead. It was on the death of the father that the estate would be divided between his sons. (R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke in* *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*) This creates a great shame for the father.

But the lure of the far country pulls the young man away from the watchful, caring eyes of the father. I probably don't need to remind the reader that the nature of sin is rebellion against a loving, caring heavenly Father. So the son goes to a far, distant, pagan place, far away from the father. He loses his relationship with his father and there wastes his worth in "wild living". The Greek term translated "wild living" is *asotos* (literally "without salvation").

The young man lost his relationship with the father. This led to the loss of his "life". Then, in a progression downhill, he lost his character. This is signified in that he was so bad off that he went into the fields to feed pigs. If you have ever been around pigs, you know how distasteful this can be. How much more so for a young Jewish man?

But there, in his need, he came to himself. God often speaks to us very plainly in our times of need. This was surely true for this young man. He "came to his senses," he saw himself as he really was; he realized truly what his condition was.

Some years ago, as I tried to witness to a young man who was seeking, he asked me, "Have you ever been in a bar the next morning when the lights came on? Everything seems so attractive, so intriguing the night before. But the next morning, when the light shines in, you can see how cheap and dirty it all is."

That is what happened to the young man in our story. He saw himself and his life as the thing that it really was. So he made up his mind to go home to his father and become a servant (he had lost all opportunity to be treated as a son).

Here we see the absolutely indispensable confession of sin and utter unworthiness that is necessary if we come home with a repentant heart. "I am no longer worthy to be your son." He had no "right" to be called "son" any longer.

The term translated, "I have sinned against heaven" may well mean "My sins have piled up to the heavens" (Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*). He is very much aware of his sinful condition.

One time a young man came to talk to me about becoming a Christian. After we had talked awhile, he wanted me to lead him in a prayer to give his life to Christ. I led with, "I know I have sinned against you and others." He said, "If I have sinned..." I stopped the prayer. "Wait a minute. You don't get it, do you?" I said.

If you have the idea that maybe you have sinned, you still haven't got it. The young man in our story understood. "I have sinned..." "I am unworthy..."

By the way, here we understand that the word, repentance, is a positive word. Some would speak of the things they give up to come home to the father. This young man gave up the pig pen. I think of when I came home from Juvenile hall in L. A. I gave up jail to come home! I think of the things I gave up when I gave my life to Christ. I did not give up anything that was worth much. Repentance is to turn from those things that really are not worth much in order to come home to a life that is worth something.

When the father saw the son coming home (was he watching for him?), he rushed down the road to meet and greet and welcome home his son. In his joy to see his son return home, he forgot his dignity. Someone has said that no image comes closer to describing the nature of God than this father running down the road to greet joyfully his returning son.

Make no mistake about it, this welcome is extremely important! D. L Moody told of the time his brother, who had run away, came home. He said he stood in the front yard and would come no further. His brothers told him to come on in. But he said he would not come in until his mother let him know she wanted him to come home.

I understand this. This is why I stayed on that plane until I had to

get off it. The runaway knows he (or she) is unworthy of the love of the father. That is why the welcome is so important and cannot be overdone.

This is why we must welcome with open arms and hearts the prodigals who come to church. If we do not welcome them, they feel rejected by God. They know they are unworthy. They don't blame anyone; they just go away and never really come home to God. If there is ever a situation in which we are the arms and heart of God to them, it is in this case. We represent God—whether we want to or not. And they must be welcomed home. Never forget, we are the followers of the One who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls..." If our hearts beat in tune with the heart of the heavenly Father, we will gladly welcome them home.

Then comes the party. The feast! The lost son is home. Let's all rejoice!

William Cushing had it right:

Ring the bells of heaven, there is joy today For a soul returning from the wild; See, the father greets him, out upon the way Welcoming his weary, wandering child.

And so did William Kirkpatrick:

I've wandered far away from God, Now I'm coming home. The paths of sin too long I've trod. Lord, I'm coming home.

And even Will Thompson:

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me; See, on the portals, he's waiting and watching, Watching for you and for me.

The word, "lost" in verse 24 (also in verse 32) comes from the Greek word, *apolomi*, which is translated twenty-eight times in the New Testament as "lost", and twenty-three times as "destroyed." To be "lost" is to live a life that is destructive (both self-destructive and destructive to others).

I am always impressed with the reinstatement of the prodigal son. Robe, ring, and shoes—and he still had the smell of the pig pen!

> Sinners, Jesus will receive, Sound this word of grace to all Who the heavenly pathway leave, All who linger, all who fall. Sing it o'er, and o'er again, Christ receiveth sinful men. Make the message clear and plain, Christ receiveth sinful men. (Erdmann Naumaister, translated by Emme F. Baya

(Erdmann Neumeister, translated by Emma F. Bevan)

My spiritual story is not unlike the story I began this message with. I was raised in an authentic Christian family. My father was a minister. But I saw how much he and my mother had been hurt by the people in the church, and when I left home to enter college, I made a conscious decision to turn my back upon Christianity. Over the years, I got a long way away from God.

It was a Navy Chaplain who influenced me to turn back to Christianity and come home to the Heavenly Father. He witnessed to me in Vietnam. He did it right. He built a relationship with me and, out of that relationship, he began to encourage me to consider Christianity anew. At one point he said to me, "Levi, the one thing a man must do is he must commit his life to Christ."

That does not sound outstanding to many of you. You have heard this a hundred times in church. But to me, far away from God as I was, I felt like he had hit me in the stomach with his fist.

About a year after I had returned home to the United States, while serving the Marine Barracks at Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, I came home. Late in the night, with my wife asleep in the other bedroom of our apartment on the base there, I went into the empty bedroom and got on my knees beside the bed. I prayed as best I could, "Lord, I don't even know if you will have me back. I would not blame you if you don't want me back, because of all the things I have done. But if you will have me back, I want to come back to you."

And that night the Lord opened wide his arms and welcomed me home.

And somewhere there was the sound of rejoicing.

Great Expectations: A Sermon on Philemon

Todd D. Still

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The nineteenth century English author Charles Dickens wrote no less than fifteen novels, one of which is entitled *Great Expectations*. The story revolves around the rising and falling hopes of the main character, Pip, especially in relation to Estella, a great beauty by whom he is smitten.

The Apostle Paul, a first century Jewish missionary to the Gentiles, was a writer of letters, a number of which survive. The shortest of these is his 335-word letter addressed to one Philemon, an otherwise unknown Colossian Christian. This letter, which is an admixture of praise and pressure, is marked and vivified by Paul's great expectations of Philemon with respect to his slave Onesimus.

On two occasions in Paul's carefully crafted letter, the apostle employs the Greek adverb *hyper*, a term meaning "more." This word has come over into English as a prefix. Consider, for example, our words hyperactive ("overly active") or hypersensitive ("too sensitive"). The first time Paul uses *hyper* is in v. 16, where he is seeking to reframe the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon.

Onesimus is to be viewed by Philemon, Paul writes, "no longer as a slave but *hyper doulon* ['more than a slave'], as a beloved brother." The second that Paul reaches for the adverb *hyper* is near the end of the letter. In v. 21 Paul states, "Having been convinced of your obedience, I have written to you, knowing that you will do *kai hyper* ['even more'] than the things which I am saying."

While some may regard such statements as manipulative, in this sermon I would like to suggest that these and other such remarks in Philemon demonstrate Paul's great expectations of/for Philemon. In addition, by way of extension and application, I will contend that great expectations should typify our relations one with another. Before we get to the heart of the matter, however, we need to take a couple of preliminary steps.

First of all, let's remind ourselves of Philemon's storyline. Although we do not know precisely when, where, or why, Paul is in captivity as he writes to Philemon. His reason for writing is singular: he wants Philemon, a fellow believer and coworker, to embrace his returning slave Onesimus. From all we can gather, Paul is asking a good amount from Philemon. It does in fact seem that there had been a falling out between Philemon and Onesimus, one that was apparently severe enough to cause Onesimus to leave Philemon's house. Coming into contact with Paul, however, Onesimus becomes a believer. Subsequently, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter asking that he be received as if he were Paul.

It may also be helpful to note at this point that it was not uncommon for Paul to express confidence in and to have great expectations of fellow believers, not unlike what we find in Philemon. For example, in 2 Corinthians 7:4 Paul writes to what appears to have been a rather unruly assembly, "I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you...." To the Galatians who were flirting with living life under the law, Paul writes, "I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine..." (5:10). To Philippian Christians, Paul states, "I am confident that the One who began a good work among you will

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bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6). And, when writing to the Thessalonians Paul contends, "We have confidence in the Lord about you..." (2 Thessalonians 3:4).

When Paul says that he has confidence in others and in their obedience to the Lord, is he tilting at windmills or misplacing his trust? Is Paul simply engaged in wishful thinking when he expresses his hope that Philemon will do *kai hyper* than he says? I think not. As it happens, a careful reading of Philemon reveals the grounds for the confidence that Paul expresses.

First of all, Paul has great expectations of Philemon because of their common confession of Christ as Lord. They are fellow believers, brothers with a shared commitment to the gospel. They recognize and embrace Jesus Christ as the church's one foundation and as the center of all Christian relations. Paul anticipates that Philemon will fully appreciate and appropriate their shared belief that in Christ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Paul is also hopeful that Philemon will do more than he asks because he knows him to be a Christian who demonstrates hospitality and generosity. The fact that Philemon opens his home for church gatherings and has been a source of refreshment for other believers leads Paul to believe that he will deal graciously with Onesimus (vv. 2, 5, 7). That is to say, in addition to Philemon's Christian belief, his pattern of Christian behavior buoys Paul's sense of expectation that he will do even more than he says with respect to Onesimus.

Similarly, Paul's belief that they are partners in mission and ministry heightens his hope in Philemon (v. 17). The fact that they are working for the purpose of the cross causes Paul to think that they will not work at cross-purposes one with another. Additionally, the Christian affinity they have share and the mutual respect and trust they have display gives Paul good reason to believe that his appeal for Onesimus will not fall upon deaf ears.

Paul's anticipation of Christian reciprocity on Philemon's part

also gives him reason belief that the best conceivable outcome will eventuate. Even as Paul was there for Philemon, Paul now expects that Philemon will respond in kind (v. 19).

Beyond these reasons for Paul's great expectations of Philemon, however, there are two greater grounds still for Paul's confidence. The first is this: Paul was convinced that the God who transforms human hearts can also transform human and Christian relations (vv. 15-16). Divine guidance coupled with human cooperation can overcome conflict and alter outlook.

Paul also believed in the power and lure of love (v. 9). Paul regarded Philemon as and wanted Philemon to regard Onesimus as a beloved brother. What is more, Paul does not tell Philemon how to respond to Onesimus because of his confidence in Christ or his authority as an apostle. Rather, he appeals to him on the grounds of love (v. 14).

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter. For Paul, love is a spiritual fruit and the most excellent way. Love hopes all things and is the greatest of Christian graces for it mirrors the divine (1 Corinthians 13). Indeed, God demonstrated his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Martin Luther, the Reformer, read Philemon along these lines. Luther remarks, "What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and pride, and receive us into his favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we all are his Onesimuses if we believe."

First John speaks elegantly and persuasively about the love that God has for us and about the love that we ought to have one for another. The letter states, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who love has been born of God and knows

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God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was manifest among us, that God send his only begotten Son into the world in order that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he himself loved us and gave his son as a covering for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so, we also ought to love one another" (4:7-10).

It is often said that we should expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. The message that I have drawn from Philemon for this sermon is this: expect great things from one another and attempt great things with one another under God in Christ. Moreover, I have contended that love is the foundation for such expectations. Yes, "Love is the theme, love is supreme; Sweeter it grows, glory bestows; Bright as the sun ever it glows! Love is the theme, eternal theme."

In Dickens's *Great Expectations* Pip's expectations prove to be too great, and he is forced to adjust them to accord with reality. Some might wonder if Christians should have great expectations of one another given our sinful condition and inclinations. Such misgivings are understandable. Let us nevertheless recall that "Christ's strength is made perfect in our weaknesses" (2 Corinthians 12:9) and that "for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

Furthermore, it seems to me that even if great expectations lead to unrealistic expectations this is much to be preferred over negative or no expectations. In any event, as another nineteenth century English writer, Alfred Lord Tennyson, once put it in a poem entitled "In Memoriam": "I hold it true, whate'er befall; I feel it, when I sorrow most; 'Tis better to have loved and lost, Than never to have loved at all."

In the history of biblical interpretation, Paul's letter to Philemon has frequently been regarded as a companion volume of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Please allow a quotation from Colossians to serve as the conclusion to this sermon: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones,

holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these things put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful" (3:12-15).

Founder's Day Address George W. Truett: The World His Parish

January 23, 2007 Mike W. Stroope

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The date is July 1939. The occasion is the 6th World Baptist Congress. The site is the Ponce de Leon Ball Park in Atlanta, Georgia where 12,000 delegates from sixty countries gather with others from across the United States, swelling the attendance to as many as 100,000.¹ The backdrop is the Great Depression of the previous decade and the current aggression of Nazism, Stalinism, and nationalism across Europe and Asia. Germany has just marched into Austria and Poland, occupies Bohemia and Moravia; Mussolini has invaded Albania; and Japan has taken Beijing. The national mood of Americans is to conserve and protect. A devastating war, financial collapse, and the advent of yet another world conflict, hang over the ball park like a gathering storm. The messenger is George W. Truett.

Truett had been elected President of the Baptist World Alliance in 1934 at its meeting in Berlin, Germany, and thus he is delivering his Presidential Address to the 1939 Atlanta gathering. From his

seat next to Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke, the World Secretary for Baptists, Truett moves to the center of the platform, positions himself behind the lectern, and begins his address with greetings to fellow Baptists around the world and fellow Christians of "every name and land." The need in this ominous and fateful time in world history is clear direction for Baptists. Who are Baptists to be? What are they to say? In other words, what is the mission of Baptists <u>in</u> the world and what is the message of Baptists <u>to</u> the world?

On this occasion, the seventy-two year old Truett is more than a famous preacher delivering a well-honed sermon on a standard theme, or an old and faithful pastor standing in the fame of his own light. Rather, Truett stands before Baptists as a prophet, calling them to certain faith in uncertain times. Listen to his words and his assessment of the hour:

You have come together in one of the ominous and fateful epochal hours in the life of the world. Stupendous influences and forces are shaking the world to its very foundation. The deadly menace of materialism casts its baleful shadow throughout all realms, and among all peoples. The astounding fact of ghastly persecutions, both racial and religious, continues to challenge the whole world with horror, and to make a blot that is an unspeakable disgrace to civilization. Fear seems to have the pass-key to whole nations, as well as to myriad individuals, whether in palace or cottage. Vast changes of all kinds are rapidly sweeping the world as swirling ocean currents sweep the seas. These changes are economic and financial, political and governmental, educational and social, moral and religious. Misunderstandings, both national and international, seem relentless in their persistence. Wars and rumors of wars, even now are casting their dark shadows across the earth. All these conditions poignantly remind us how desperately we need help above ourselves. We are now facing one of the most fateful days in all the history of the world.²

Truett then, in language just as compelling, rallies Baptists to obey their call to a worldwide mission and live with fidelity to their unique message. He declares,

The momentous days which are now upon us call mightily for renewed clarity of thought, and for deepening of convictions concerning the message and mission of all Christ's people. ... This incomparably fateful hour in the life of the world calls for the dedication of our all for the furtherance of Christ's Kingdom through every nook and corner of this earth. Our task is nothing less than the evangelization of the whole world, and to bring it into obedience to Christ.³

Truett's sharp assessment of the world of his day and his call to Baptist brothers and sisters direct questions to us that are critical: Are we, as the people of God, able to read with clarity and precision the signs of our times? Can we give a certain and bold answer for the cultural and religious, political and economic, social and moral conditions of our day? I believe that in George W. Truett, we find a model of courage and clarity of message that could inform and guide us.

At the outset, I need to make a confession. To be honest, I was hesitant to take this assignment. I feared that I would find little to no connection between Truett and missions. Thankfully I can report that my fears were unwarranted. What I have found is that alongside

Truett's reputation as a great orator, a defender of Baptist principles, and a champion for religious liberty is a profound commitment to the world. In fact, Truett's skill as a preacher and his convictions were to him means of access to hurting humanity.

Here is what I discovered:

First, **Truett saw the whole world**. In the 1930's, the outlook of Americans, and of Baptists in particular, was quite narrow and provincial. News was not readily available, and there was nothing like the kind of information transfer that we experience today. Travel beyond one's immediate community was a huge undertaking, and thus, exposure to the wider world for most people was limited. Baptists, in general, were still a rural people focused on family, church, and community.

And yet, the world for Truett was not defined by what took place within the walls of his church or the city of Dallas. One would think that sermon preparation for this great preacher and pastoral care for thousands of congregants would be more than enough to occupy him, but not Truett. As a trustee of Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Baylor Hospital, he served the educational and medical efforts of Baptists throughout Texas. For thirty-seven summers, he preached at the "Cowboy Camp Meetings" in West Texas.

And the horizon, for Truett, extended far beyond the Dallas skyline and the state of Texas. His vision reached across oceans, into faraway communities, and to the ends of the earth. He actively promoted his church's involvement in mission projects in and around Dallas, the state, and beyond. His personal involvement in the development of Baylor Hospital was because of his commitment to the city of Dallas. And yet, his vision for the hospital was larger than Dallas, as he dreamed it would be a place to prepare and send out medical missionaries "to the ends of the earth, to help save a lost world."⁴ Founder's Day Address George W. Truett: The World His Parish / 85

During the First World War, Truett served on the European front as a chaplain and preached to Allied Forces for six months. In the span of his lifetime, he preached in every continent of the world, except Australia. He toured South America during the summer of 1930, preaching to large crowds. The trip included visits to Brazil, Argentina and Chile. In addition, he traveled to Canada, Sweden, England, Scotland, Wales, France, Germany, Latvia, Hungary, Romania, Holland, Switzerland, Egypt, Palestine, India, Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, China and Japan. The breath of Truett's travel represents quite a feat for anyone living in the first three decades of the 20th century. Besides preaching in each of these places, he promoted the work of local Christian groups and encouraged local believers in their witness to Jesus.

When one reads Truett's sermons, one finds a liberal sprinkling of world personalities, events, and men and women who gave themselves in service to the world. Some of these illustrations he gathered from his expansive reading, but many were first-hand accounts from his travels.

While Truett was a pastor of a local church, a leader among Texas Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention, he was also a world Christian. Because he saw the world and moved toward it, he was able to exhort others to do the same. His call for others to see the world and serve its peoples rang true because of his personal involvement and service. Thus, with conviction and integrity he challenged his congregants and others to "face world tasks, not withstanding driblets of love and life and service, but to face them with the noblest service of manhood and womanhood we can lay on the altar, for the redemption of the world."

Secondly, **Truett summoned Baptists not to waver in their commitment to God's worldwide mission**. For him, Baptists were a missionary people. He spoke with pride of the robust mission legacy of Baptists stretching back to William Carey, Adonirum and

Ann Judson, Luther Rice, Matthew Yates, Lottie Moon, Henrietta Hall Shuck, and Robert Morrison. He referred to them as "our valiant missionaries," "the chief ambassadors to the world," and "more important than all our gifts in money." His biographer notes that "no censorious word concerning the missionaries or their work on any foreign field has ever escaped his lips. He has always had for them praise, and only praise."⁵ Truett maintained that men and women are the means through which the world sees and hears about Christ and thus Baptist men and women must be sent and supported. He believed that "... God's people are to be the salt of the earth. Wherever men [and women] suffer and sin and die, you are to go. You are to go with the contact of the Christian appeal and the Christian message, the Christian salt, to save decaying and dying humanity."⁶

Truett's personal commitment to the mission cause was evident even at the outset of his tenure at First Baptist Church Dallas. When Truett came to Dallas to visit with the leadership of the church, he agreed to accept the church's call to be their pastor under one condition. He insisted that the church abandon its time-honored policy of forbidding special offerings for missions and other benevolences. He wanted to be free to appeal for missions whenever the need presented itself, and "made it clear he would decline the call without such freedom."⁷ The trustees of the church at first balked but eventually agreed, and Truett came to Dallas. On his second Sunday in Dallas, Truett called the trustees into conference and proposed an offering for state missions. One trustee voiced concern that they would not be able to raise even \$25. To which Truett replied, "I plan to give that amount myself."8 In the end, \$300 was raised—a tremendous amount for a church struggling with property debt. This single offering jolted the church's vision of itself and initiated a new pattern of stewardship that would become its hallmark in the years to come. And as its offerings to mission and benevolence ministries climbed, so did its influence in the convention.

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During Truett's day, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board suffered one setback after another and thus support of the mission board was not always popular or widespread. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Foreign Mission Board was continually underfinanced and thus operated under an embarrassing indebtedness. Added to this financial burden was the embezzlement of \$103,000 by the treasurer of the Foreign Mission Board in 1927 and then the Stock Market crash of 1929. These blows created the prospect that Baptists might, as William Estep describes, "go out of the foreign mission business."⁹ Between 1926 and 1929, there was a mass resignation of field missionaries and many others were told to seek employment in the US. The general feeling among Baptists was that they had overreached their capacity and thus needed to consolidate mission effort and even retreat.

Truett was not one of those who wavered in commitment to the mission cause, nor did he believe that Baptists had exhausted their mission capacity. Rather, he maintained that it was for himself and his fellow Baptists a spiritual matter of obedience to the mandate of Jesus, and thus he worked to create solutions for the board's financial problems and ways to accelerate its mission effort.

In 1919, Truett chaired the ambitious and visionary 'Seventy-five Million Campaign'. The campaign was an unusual initiative, in that it represented a bold step toward cooperation for the loosely defined and scattered Baptists. Truett agreed to chair the campaign because the lion-share of the funds was to be used in domestic and international mission causes. And while the campaign fell short of its goal because of the downturn of the US economy, it did galvanize Baptists to create a giving mechanism called the cooperative program that became the financial engine that would generate millions of dollars for mission and benevolent causes.

In 1920, Truett represented Southern Baptists along with the Executive Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board at a conference

in London. Its purpose was to allocate field responsibilities for British, Canadian, Northern and Southern Baptists, in order that there would not be overlap or redundancy of effort. Truett was no mere bystander but involved himself in the work of mission strategy and implementation.

Truett's commitment to and involvement in the mission cause was such that at the death of Dr. J. Franklin Love, the Executive Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, in 1928, Truett was asked to become the new executive. He gave the matter prayerful consideration but in the end decided that his greatest contribution to the mission cause would be from Dallas rather than Richmond, Virginia.

From his pulpit, Truett could see the world. And yet, he did more than preach about the world. He went to the world and worked to create avenues for others to do the same.

And lastly, **Truett's message for the world was Jesus Christ**. The simple confession of faith in Jesus that Truett made at the age of nineteen became the bedrock of his life and the core of his message. He preached Jesus and exhorted others to make Jesus their message. He said on one occasion, "Here, brethren, is our message made out for us. It is Jesus Christ—in His divine personality, in the spotlessness of His humanity, in His offices as Prophet, Priest and King, in the atoning efficacy of His death, in the power of His resurrection, in the persistence of His intercession, in the certainty and purposes of His coming again."¹⁰ In sermon after sermon, he states with simple and yet sharp conviction that the answer to the world's tremendous need is Jesus Christ.

For Truett, Jesus is the answer for the businessman in Dallas, the politician in Washington, and the village woman in India. Without pause or apology, Truett declares Jesus to be the Savior of all humanity.

To the Baptists gathered in Atlanta, he asserts that the task of Christians everywhere is to proclaim the supremacy of Christ to the whole world and to bring all people into obedience to him. There is in his words and even in the tone of his address no suggestion of accommodation to the other religions. Rather, he resolutely declares, "Christ must be Lord of all, or He will not be Lord at all. There are not two Saviors, but one, and hence Christ's holy religion must be exclusive and adapted to all [humankind]."¹¹

For Truett, the exclusive claims and unique message of Jesus are not reasons for retreat into dogmatism. Rather than causing Truett to insulate himself from the world, Jesus compels him to embrace the world. Rather than a domesticated Savior meant only for Texans or Americans, Truett proclaims a Savior who abounds in riches toward all who call upon him.

While Truett proudly identifies himself as a Baptist and defends Baptist principles, he is, above all, a champion of Jesus Christ.

The date is January 2007, and obviously the world is no longer the same as it was in 1939. And yet, wars and rumors of wars in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia, rising religious fundamentalism, racial and sectarian divide and violence at home and abroad, endless humanitarian crises, abject poverty, pandemic diseases, and terrorism cast dark, sinister shadows across our world. Fear still has the pass-key to homes, villages, cities, and whole nations.

As in 1939, we cannot afford to be nearsighted, consumed solely with the world at our feet or within the walls of our institutions and parishes. Rather, like Truett, we must look up and set our sight on the wide horizon of the world.

As in Truett's day, missions has suffered repeated blows and that which was so easy for us to rally behind is now suspect and confusing. Like Truett, we must do more than throw up our hands in exasperation and walk away from missions. Rather, we, the church leaders and missionaries of this day, must ask the hard questions that will lead us to new and innovative avenues for vibrant witness to Jesus Christ. We must not waiver in our commitment to the peoples of the earth.

And just as Truett was, so must we be—faithful heralds of Jesus Christ. Truett, the messenger on that summer night in 1939 and the namesake of our seminary, calls us to be passionate devotees of Jesus and to dedicate ourselves "for the furtherance of Christ's Kingdom through every nook and corner of this earth."

Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for those who have gone before us and for the example of their commitments and their actions. Give us courage for the living of our days. May we with hope and faith live each day unto you and for your purposes throughout the whole world. Amen.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Opening is an adaptation of Quinn Pugh's account of George W. Truett and the Atlanta World Baptist Congress on 8 July 2003, accessed at http://www.bwa-baptistheritage.org/r_truett.htm.
- 2 "Presidential Address to the 6th World Baptist Congress," Atlanta, GA, 1939.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "Philip in Samaria," in *The Salt of the Earth by George W. Truett*, edited by Powhatan W. James (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1949), 61-2.
- 5 Powhatan W. James, *George W. Truett: A Biography* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1939), 221.
- 6 "The Salt of the Earth," in The Salt of the Earth, 18-19.
- 7 Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas: Centennial History* (1868-1968) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 113.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 William R. Estep, Whole Gospel Whole World: The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1995 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 212.
- 10 "Subject and Object of the Gospel," in We Would See Jesus and Other Sermons (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1915), 206.
- 11 "Presidential Address to the 6th World Baptist Congress," Atlanta, GA, 1939.

Wrestling for Your Life

Gen 32:22-32 Dr. W. Dennis Tucker, Jr.

I grew up in rural North Carolina, and up until the age of 7 or so, I believed there were two and only two sports in America. After all, that is what we watched on TV at our house—or so it seemed.

And for me, the two sports were Pro Wrestling and Roller Derby.

I can still remember the names of the great heroes of Saturday morning TV—there was Wahoo McDaniel, Jay Youngblood, Rick Flair, Ricky Steamboat, and the ever-feared Andre the Giant.

And I, like many others, would watch the World Wrestling Federation religiously—studying their moves, looking for pointers, determining what it would take to be a good wrestler.

And then—Then I would try all the moves out on my two younger sisters.

We had hard wood floors in our house with a square carpeted section about 10 feet by 10 feet—and on Saturday mornings it was converted to the ring—all while my sleeping parents remained in the other side of the house.

I would ring the bell and the fight would commence--

I would use the power driver, then the claw. A body slam here, and knee drop there—all of the moves, I had perfected on my somewhat willing siblings.

And soon, after a few moves, maybe a figure four leg lock, or something like that, one of my sisters would begin screaming screaming as though her life were on the line.

Our story today is about one who wrestles as though his life were on the line.

The Patriarch Jacob—the man whose name means the "Trickster," "The Supplanter," finds himself struggling for life, wrestling with God.

He has just settled matters with Laban, cutting a covenant with him to preserve the peace between the two of him.

And he is on the way to establish the peace between him and Esau—it is along the way—between a peace achieved and a peace to be realized—that 0 the Match begins, somewhere between there and here.

At the river Jabbok, he sends his two wives, Leah and Rachel, along with their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah and the eleven children across the river.

And suddenly the intensity of the scene increases.

I. Jacob Wrestles at Jabbok

A. We find Jacob alone on the banks of the Jabbok river, when suddenly we are told that a man wrestles with him until daylight.

The symbolism in the text screams out-

--The Jabbok river stands on the border of the Promised Land. Jacob fled the Promised Land in his dealings with Laban, and now, as he prepares to enter the new land—to return home—he is destined to struggle with God.

- --And it is night. His encounter is not like that of Moses who encounters God in a burning bush, on the side of a hill in the brightness of day. The encounter of Jacob is at night. All of this does not take place in the bright light of day, but rather in the night, when identities are hidden and fears are heightened. Even for you and me, the modern reader, we are not sure of the identity of this mystery wrestler until later in the text.
- --And he is alone. It appears everyone else has passed over into the Promised Land—but Jacob is left alone on the far shore to struggle for his life.
- The text presents a rather stark contrast: The promised land is only a river's width away, and yet, we find Jacob alone, in the darkness, forced to wrestle with God.
- B. So too, we must find ourselves at the River Jabbok.
 Encounters with God do not always occur in the Promised Land—at times we find ourselves grappling with God while the Promised Land is only a river's width away.

At times we find ourselves caught in the grip of God while the others have passed on to the other side seemingly disinterested in our struggle in the sand.

And perhaps like Jacob, we are caught off guard, a bit surprised by God's strong initiative.

And so, we attempt to avoid wrestling with God. But we must remember—Jacob is on the way to

reconcile with his brother—to find a forbidden peace. But there would be no peace with Esau until there was a Jabbok experience.

There would be no Promised Land unless he struggled until daylight.

And if we truly want peace with our sisters and brothers, if we actually want to taste the joy of the Promised Land in our own lives, then why do we think we will not find ourselves alone, in the darkness, by the River Jabbok?

Perhaps we think it implies failure—but in the story of Jacob, the Jabbok scene implies potentiality. To wrestle with God is not to have failed --for Jacob, and for us, to wrestle with God is to have only begun to find our way in him.

II. The Desperate Desire for a Blessing

A. Jacob

Our story today depicts not only a wrestling match between God and Jacob; it also depicts the desperate desire of one man for a blessing from God.

Jacob is not a passive participant in this event.

In the midst of the struggle, God announces, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

To see God in full light, to behold his face, would have been certain death for Jacob—and God knows this, perhaps explaining his request.

Yet, so desperate is Jacob that he risks death for a divine blessing and wrestles until daybreak—

Jacob's desire is not just to have an encounter with

God—He wants the blessing—and so he announces "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Jacob knows the power of the blessing.

B. Henri Nouwen

In his little book, Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen

recounts an event in which the desperate desire for blessing was fully evident.

Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community said to me, "Henri, can you give me a blessing?" I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, she protested vehemently, "No, that doesn't work. I want a real blessing." I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, "Oh, I am sorry...let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service." She nodded with a smile...After the service, when about thirty people were sitting in circle on the floor, I said, "Janet has asked me for a special blessing"...As I was saying this I didn't know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn't leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, "Janet has asked me for a special blessing," she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms. Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, "Janet I want you to know you are God's beloved daughter."...Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, "I want a blessing too." She stood up

and before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her, many of the handicapped people followed...The most touching moment, however, came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four year old student, raised his and said, "And what about me?"...And I said, "Come"...I put my arms around him and said, "John...you are God's beloved son...you are loved with an everlasting love." As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and then he said, "thank you, thank you very much."¹

C. The Power of Blessing

- The story of Jacob and the story by Nouwen remind us of the power of blessing—Jacob refused to leave his encounter with God until he was blessed—Janet would not consent to the mere ritual of blessing—she wanted the blessing of God in all of its fullness
- And frankly, for most of us, these stories sound odd to our ear—clinging to God until a blessing is received demanding that somehow we experience the blessing of God.
- To be blunt, even to talk about the blessing of God seems awkward at best.
- But maybe that is part of the power of this story—it rekindles within us that deep desire—that desire to know the blessing of God.
- And for some of us, perhaps it has been some time since we have clung to God and demanded a blessing.
 - --for some, it has been a long time since we have experienced the transforming power of God's work.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 57-58.

Remember the Trickster, the Supplanter, is blessed and becomes Israel—the one who has striven with God and humans, and has prevailed.

The blessing of God has transforming power—but only those, like Jacob, who possess a certain sense a desperation, only those like Jacob, who dare wrestle until daybreak—will know this kind of blessing.

I am fearful too many of us have lost our desperate desire to know the blessing of God—that too many of us are unwilling to wrestle until daybreak.

But the story of Jacob leaves us with little doubt—this is the path to knowing the blessing of God.

III. The Cost of the Blessing

A. The Limp

Yet, we are also reminded in the story that this blessing Jacob so desperately desires will not come without a cost.

Near the end of the story, Jacob announces, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

But all things are not as they seem—things have changed—there was a cost to this blessing.

We are told in vs. 25 that in the midst of this battle, Jacob is struck on the hip socket, and his hip was out of joint as he wrestled.

So severe is the injury that Jacob is forced to walk with a limp—

--imagine—a nomad with a limp;

Every day, every step he takes, will be a constant reminder of this incident at Peniel—it will be a reminder of his coming face to face with God.

The first readers of this story were reminded, and so are we, of how blessings are given and at what cost.

--blessings do not come easy and they are not free.

To be blessed means to accept the cost.

Walter Brueggemann writes, "There is a dangerous, costly mystery in drawing too near."²

And yet the ironic aspect of our faith is that it is only when we dare draw too near, when we dare embrace those Jabbok moments that we will find the transforming blessings of God.

I fear the problem with much of popular Christianity today is that we have allowed a type of "hit and run" mentality to dominate.

We are led to believe that we can hit God up for all the blessings we need, and then run before the costs occur—

--we have convinced ourselves that faith is about receiving, and not relinquishing.

--we have come to believe blessings are for the faithful, and costs are for the unworthy.

And deep within most of us, we believe we deserve only the blessings—and we will work like a Trickster to supplant the costs.

If that is you—don't worry—you are in good company.

B. The Disciples

The disciples had the same problem.

In Mark 10, James and John approach Jesus, and declare "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

--We want the blessing, or so they seemed to be saying.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 270.

They request that Jesus would allow one to sit on the right hand and the other to sit on the left, the places of honor and recognition.

But do you remember Jesus' comment to them,

"You do not know what you are asking."

James and John think faith is about receiving and not about relinquishing.

Jesus continues by asking if they are ready to drink from the same cup as he will, or if they are ready to be baptized as he will be baptized.

They are speaking of seats of honor and positions of power

Jesus is speaking of baptisms and cups.

They are speaking of glory

Jesus is speaking of suffering and death.

They are speaking of blessing

Jesus is speaking of cost.

Jesus makes it abundantly clear, here and elsewhere in the Gospels, that there is no new blessing without a new cost.

Prior to the story of James and John, Jesus had just announced his impending death for the third time—he had just announced the cost, and yet the two of them still could only think of blessing.

C. And Us?

And us? Are we really so different?

Why is it—why do we needlessly fool ourselves into believing that our faith costs us nothing, and that the showers of blessings will come without the cost of drawing too near?

The story of Jacob reminds us that we will not receive the blessing until we accept the cost.

The story of James and John reminds us that --until we drink from the cup of discipleship --until we are baptized into a life of sacrificial living we dare not expect the blessing.

To wrestle with God—to find ourselves on the banks of the Jabbok river is not a curse—it is part of the cost. --In those Jabbok River moments, we finally discover faith is not about receiving, it is first about relinquishing.

I would imagine if we could ask Jacob, whether he would do it again. He would say "the blessing was worth the cost."

Paul expresses such a view when he writes,

"I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

Did you hear Paul? I have suffered the loss of all things—but I gain one blessing, knowing Christ Jesus.

Maybe what our churches need are more people accepting the cost—more people who understand that the transforming blessing of God comes to those who accept the cost.

Maybe your desire and my desire should be to drink the cup of suffering and to be baptized into the way of sacrificial living—and to give up the desire for glory and power.

Maybe for you, it is time to wrestle with God.

Maybe you need to find yourself much like Jacob—alone, in the darkness, at the River Jabbok.

Wrestling for Your Life / 101

And maybe there, he will touch you—that he will touch you in such a way, that every day, with every step you take you, much like Jacob, will be reminded that you have seen God face to face.



By Steve Wells

It has been ten years since we (the class of 1997) walked across the stage and were sent into the world. In many ways our experience was different from yours. When we arrived, there was no building, no tradition, no community. No one had yet heard of the Deborah Cycle or seen the bullwhip; there had been no margarita incident at El Chico. We were nurtured by a faculty that have all gone on to other places; three of whom—Bill Treadwell, Chip Conyers, and Ruth Ann Foster —have gone on to be with the Lord. Ten years is a long time and a short while.

I have been thinking and praying about what I ought to tell you as you embark to your next places of ministry. And I have fallen to a word about relationships. The hard truth is: if you love people strong enough for long enough, either they will hurt you or you will hurt them. The real question is not whether we will have broken relationships, but in what way will we work to redeem and restore those we have hurt and those who have hurt us. Offering and receiving forgiveness is, in turns, the most divine and most human of events. It is miraculous every time it occurs. I would like to turn our attention to a moment of real forgiveness in the New Testament.

2 Timothy 4:9-11 "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

Duress breaks down our defenses. It peels back the veneer. We find out what people look like when raw nerves are exposed. Here, Paul is writing to young Timothy; Paul knows these are his last days. "Come quickly!," he writes (2 Timothy 4:9). Paul has been mistreated and abandoned by colleagues. He is lonely, and he longs to see those he loves one last time. He is anxious to pass on responsibility for ministry to the next generation.

Sometimes the most profound miracles are recorded in the most mundane words. "Bring Mark with you, he is helpful to me..." (2 Timothy 4:11). Did you catch the miracle in what Paul wrote? We will have to get a sense of from whence Paul has come to unpack those words.

Paul's promising career as a zealous persecutor of the church ended on road to Damascus (Acts 9). There Christ confronted him, and he was broken by his sin. There Paul realized he had been rebelling against the very One he ought to be worshipping. Paul realized God does not demand he earn love, but God offers love freely as a gift. Paul spent the rest of his life trying to live out of that truth. Like the rest of us, he was better at that some times than others.

Paul spent the following three years trying to work through the contours of this new calling. He returned to Jerusalem, where his reputation preceded him. In Jerusalem, Paul was known as a persecutor, not a preacher. Therefore, he could not get an audience with the Apostles. Not until Barnabas took a chance on him by introducing him to the Apostles in Jerusalem was Paul able to begin his ministry. Even then, he was sent back to Tarsus, and might have been forgotten forever had not Barnabas, on assignment in Antioch, remembered Paul and sent for him. Paul and Barnabas spent a year preaching and teaching in Antioch. While there Paul and Barnabas heard the call of God to take the Gospel to new places; the call sent them on the first missionary journey.

Stop for a moment and consider what that must have been like for Paul. The One he persecuted, asking him to proclaim to the Gospel in new lands. He has gone out on a mission before and he is now going out again, but this time to heal, not to kill—to build, not to destroy. This missionary journey was Paul's real second chance.

Have you ever needed a second chance? Have you ever made a mistake that you looked back upon and said, "That is not me; I am not like that." Have you made the kind of mistake that caused you to realize, "This may cost me my entire future"? If you have, you know how precious a second chance really is. How rare in this world is the opportunity to make amends and begin again. Paul was offered his second chance, and surely he was eager to make the most of it; to show himself a workman worthy of his wages.

Paul and Barnabas set off for Cyprus, Barnabas' hometown (Acts 13). From there they made their way to Perga and Pamphylia when two things happened. First, Paul was struck by a terrible illness (Galatians 4:13). We do not know exactly what it was, but it manifested itself in obvious pain in Paul's eyes. Whatever it was, it caused severe headaches which travelers of the time described as "like having a white-hot poker driven through the cranium." That pain led to the second thing that happened: evidently Paul left the coastal region of Pamphylia without preaching. But he never considered going home. This mission was his second chance, his opportunity to return the kind of love and trust shown him by God and the Church. These should have been the best days of Paul's life. He was traveling with disciples who were at the heart of the faith: Barnabas, the trusted church planter and encourager ; John Mark, Barnabas' nephew whose mother, Mary, was

the head of a house church in Jerusalem (the tradition of the Church says that it was this house where Jesus and His disciples shared the Last Supper); and a team of others.¹ Together, they were taking the Gospel of grace to a world broken by sin. Paul was being given an opportunity, not to earn his place, but to return love for love, grace for grace.

Paul should have been living the best days of his life. Instead, he was living the worst of days of his life. He had searing pain in his body that was surely crushing his spirit. Would he fail Jesus yet again? First by killing, now by being forced to quit. He resolved to keep at the task, no matter the personal cost. The entire team moved to elevated Pisidian Antioch to seek relief from Paul's illness. Pisidian Antioch is on a plateau some 3600 feet above sea level. Getting there required crossing the Taurus mountain range, one of roughest roads in Asia Minor. The difficult terrain was matched by dangers from highway robbers. Paul needed the help of every member of the team if he was to make it. Paul and Barnabas made the journey, but John Mark abandoned them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). The implication in the text is that John Mark quit not only their work but the work of the Gospel altogether; that his leaving was an apostasy.

We do not know exactly why John Mark left.² It could have been pettiness: Paul's emerging leadership meant Barnabas (his cousin) moved to a more peripheral role. It could have been the hazards of the trip. It could have been frustration over Paul's demeanor (resulting from his condition) or a fear of catching whatever Paul had. We don't know exactly why John Mark left. What we do know is that his leaving created a rift between Paul and Barnabas over which they will eventually part company.

We also know that both Paul and John Mark have failed each other, and John Mark's failure, unlike Paul's pain, was more than

Thomas C. Oden, First and Second Timothy and Titus, in Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 177.

² Oden, 177.

Paul could bear. When preparing for the second missionary journey, Barnabas brought up to Paul the possibility of bringing John Mark. Paul refused. He did not want a quitter along; he did not want to risk failure again. So Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus and began retracing steps of the first missionary journey. Paul took a separate journey with Silas and Timothy which ultimately led them to Macedonia.

This saga reminds me of a turning point in the life of King David. David should been living the best days of his life. He was King over the nation, he had grown children to love; but his son Absalom overthrew the government with a swift coup d'état (2 Samuel 16). David was forced to flee Jerusalem. On the way out of town, a man named Shimei heckled the defeated king. Joab, the commander of David's army, offered to cut off Shimei's head to quiet him down. David refused to let him, arguing that if David let Shimei live and show Shimei mercy, then God might yet show mercy to David. It was an incredible moment offering grace, it is the kind of tide on which all ships rise.³ But David never forgot Shimei, and he never really forgave him. David played a game wherein he pretended to forgive so God would offer David grace. We know that because, at end of his life, when David was no longer seeking grace, he told Solomon that his first act as the new king should be to kill Shimei (1 Kings 2:8). David was man after God's own heart, but every heart has its limit. David's limit was Shimei.⁴

Something very different happens in the New Testament. We don't know when, because it was not written for us, but Paul gave John Mark a real second chance. We know that he did because as Paul wrote to Philemon (24) and the church in Colosse (4:10) John Mark was there.⁵ And now, in the last days of Paul's life, he sent for... John Mark. Paul wrote, "He is helpful to me in my ministry." The grace

³ Robert Alter, **The David Story: A Translation and Commentary on 1 and 2** Samuel, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 293.

⁴ Alter, 374-76.

⁵ Oden, 177; Tom Wright, **The Pastoral Letters: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus** in **Paul for Everyone**, (Westminster: John Knox, 2003), 134.
Paul and John Mark extend to each other changed the future of our faith. Paul became the greatest church planter in history. According to the tradition of the Church, John Mark did well with his second chance. He became Peter's translator and wrote the Gospel according to Mark. Eusabius said that he founded the church at Alexandria.⁶ And all because these adversaries learn to become encouragers to one another.

I wonder what made difference between David and Paul when it came to forgiveness? Any answer is sheer conjecture, and I offer this one as nothing more than mine. But it could it be as simple as this: the message that came to David was, "I am going to anoint you King." As king, David was to be a steward of what God entrusted to him. On his best days he was that; no life has every been lived more publicly. His prayer life, recorded in psalms, remains to this day our school for growth. But on his worst days, David lived as though all creation was his playground. Unfortunately, David's last words to his son Solomon reflect his worst side. On the other hand, the message to Paul was, "I have chosen you to announce the Good News that Jesus is King." Paul is not alone in the call to announce that Jesus is King. Paul told the church in Corinth,

> "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5: 17-20)

⁶ Oden, 178.

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Like Paul, we have been called to be, not kings, but heralds of the risen King, we are ambassadors for Christ! Paul understood that part of that call means that we are called in all things to be like Jesus. I believe that Jesus' famous last words changed Paul in the deepest places in his soul. From the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Paul preached these words; he came to know them intimately. "Jesus died for me" are words with power to completely transform our lives. Those words define how we are to live; they are the substance of the Good News. For if we are forgiven, we must be people who forgive. Jesus said more strongly, "forgive and you will be forgiven." The One who offers us forgiveness eternally, commands us to offer forgiveness proximately.

It is such a quiet act, but it carries such power in our lives and in the lives of others. It is true, the most profound miracles sometimes come in the most mundane words. If the world is in such need of forgiveness and if we have taken own sin seriously enough to confess it to God and to ask for forgiveness, then now is the time for us to stop playing games and to offer forgiveness to others. We are heralds of the King.

Choose Mercy

Text: I Chronicles 21:1-16 Terry W. York

Oh, the poetry of it! "In the Spring," says Alfred Lord Tennyson, "a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love"¹

"In the spring of the year," says the Chronicler, "the time when kings go out to battle." It sort of shatters the poetry a bit doesn't it?

Love and war...they both spring from the same spot within a young man. It's a matter of "feeling your oats."

How strong am I? This is one of springtime's questions. If not asked openly, it lingers in the backs of our minds and in the depths of our hearts. How strong am I? Its spiritual version is, "How much can I regulate before I have to subject myself to God's regulation?" The question isn't symptomatic of our era, its symptomatic of our humanness.

David was human and, at this time, dangerously successful. For a couple of chapters now, David and his generals have been winning battle after battle. It was, after all, spring, the time when kings go off to war and this was an especially good year for King David. During one of the down times between battles, David asked our

question. It's recorded in the first two verses of chapter 21. King David ordered Gen. Joab to go and count the troops. The chronicler says that the Devil made him do it. David wanted to know how strong he was. He was king, he had a general that was working for him, not against him, it was spring, he was on a winning streak in battle; ah, kinging was his life and life was grand. The question seemed logical enough for a king resting between battles: "Gen. Joab, just how strong am I?" (Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?) "How strong am I? Gen., how many troops do I have?"

I love Joab's answer. His answer was respectful toward King David, and, at the same time, faithful to Jehovah. Joab replied, "They are ALL your troopies, Great King. Why don't we just let it go at that? Why bother yourself with the numbers?"

Joab seems to have a closer walk with Jehovah than does David at this point. Maybe that's because Joab was doing the fighting and David was staying back in Jerusalem until the battles were decided. Then he would move in to do the plundering. The man with the scars was trying to remind the man with the treasure that the battles belong to God. Joab knew that there would be more battles and now was not the time to be elbowing God's strength and blessing out of the picture.

"Why do you want to measure your strength, king? Whatever is there, its all yours, its all at your disposal." David didn't even answer. He gave Joab a look that communicated something like, "The crown on my head out-ranks the stars on your shoulder." How many times does what we are entitled to say keep us from listening to what we need to hear? "Joab go count 'em," "Yes Sir," and the count began.

Joab had counted all the troops in all the tribes except for two, the tribes of Levi and Benjamin. By the time he got that far, his spirit was so heavy and his sense of how wrong the endeavor was so intense, he quit counting. The time had come to acknowledge that his loyalty

to Jehovah was in conflict with and out-weighed his loyalty to his earthly supervisor. He knew that the exact number of soldiers really didn't matter. He had a number sufficient to satisfy the real reason David had given the order. "King," he said," "You have 1.1 million troopies and every one of them is checked out on the sword." "Over a million!" I can imagine David thinking, "If my strength can be measured by the millions, I must really be strong." And then it hit him. Joab's report was that YOU have 1.1million troops. There was something in the way the general said "You." That word seemed to draw a very small circle around David. It sounded and felt very distant and lonely. "You." ... and David knew he had sinned against God. A presence he had grown to rely on, yet take for granted, had been pushed out of his circle and he felt very alone and, now, weak. Listen to this king in the prime of his springtime macho-ism, verse 8: Then David said to God, "I have sinned greatly by doing this. Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."

The king who gave orders to generals now falls on his face as a humble servant. The only good thing we can say about this scene is that David got an answer to our question, "How strong am I?"

Into the picture walks Gad, David's seer. God had said to Gad, "Tell David that I'm giving him three ways he can be punished for his sin. Have him choose the way he wants me to punish him. [Talk about reading a menu where nothing looks good.] Here are the three choices: Three years of famine, three months of your enemy running all over you like you've been running over them, or three days of the sword of the Lord—days of plague ravaging every part of Israel."

David commented that that was a rather distressing set of choices, but it didn't take long to make up his mind. Three years of famine was out. As much as we talk about "mother nature," he knew that there was no such person. There was no one or no-thing to appeal to there.

You can't reason with drought, you can't look the dry dusty wind in the eye. Three years was a long time and a bad choice. Choose that and you are still alone in your little circle call "You." You can call the wind "Moriah", but "Moriah" ain't home.

Well, then, how about three months of your enemies running rough-shod over you? This time their spears finding their mark and your's missing the mark. That choice dropped out of the running real fast. As successful as David has been in battle this spring, he sure doesn't want to gove the bad guys a chance at "pay-back."

No, David's computer-fast review of his options led him to this statement, "Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men." David chose mercy. He knew God, though he hadn't been acting like it. He knew God and he knew men. He needed mercy and he knew there was only one source that he could count on. God was stronger than the forces of nature and stronger than David's enemies, but there was someone home. God was real. God was alive. And God was merciful. David must have thought, "If I can remember now that God is stronger than nature and my enemies, why didn't I remember that back before the counting?" David was now banking on God's mercy. David's decision says alot about him, says alot about God, says alot about mankind. "Put me in the hands of God, not in the hands of man."

Sure enough, the day of punishment came.

Day one and the scripture says that "the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead." A couple days of this and it was going to be alot easier for David to count his troopies. Phase two of the punishment: "And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem." Had David misplaced his trust? God's judgement and God's mercy were having a tug-of-war and David was the rope. David knew that however all this turned out, it would be God's choice and, as such, right. Even on this dark and frightening day, David was trusting God and God was there and God was right...but so was David.

Verse 15 tells us that the Lord saw the calamity and destruction caused by the angel He had dispatched said to the angel," Enough! Withdraw your hand." Our sinning so grieves the Lord. Our being punished, deserved as it is, grieves the Lord. But, oh, when we choose mercy God can step in. We can choose to sin, we can choose punishment, we can choose death, but God has mace it possible, not mandatory, but possible to choose mercy! It's on the menu.

Now, did David jump up and say, "Wow, that was close. Joab, run out and see how many of my troopies survived!"? No. He and his elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell face down. and said Lord, go ahead and do me in, my family too if this things not over, but please don't keep the plague on YOUR people. Your people? Just a couple days ago they were David's troops, now they are God's people.

The angel of the Lord, with sword now lowered, ordered Gad to tell David to go up and build an altar to the Lord on the very spot where the angel was standing when God said, "Enough." And it seems to me that we worship at that same spot fairly often ourselves; that point in our lives where again and always, God's anger stops and His mercy starts.

Wow, what a scene, what a series of events! But, Terry, we are smart enough to choose mercy as our punishment. Its been awhile since we've read this passage, but we knew pretty much how it was going to end up. Is there a "therefore" to all this? What are we to take home with us? My response is this...I'm confident there is a "therefore" for each of us, but its not my place to determine that for you. That's for you and the Holy Spirit to work out. I do have a couple of left-over questions, however. So, I'll send you home with questions instead of answers. You can help me work them out.

The questions stem from a statement that David made while choosing his punishment.

You will recall that he said "Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men." Why didn't he say, "but do not let me fall into the hands of my enemies?" The second item on the menu was three months at the hands of his "enemies." In response to that possibility, he said do not let me fall into the hands of men. I hope I'm not anyone's enemy, but I am a man.

Would David have still have said "Don't let me fall into the hands of men" if he had known us; Christian men and women?...if he had known Americans? David looked into his own heart and determined there was no mercy in man. What if David had known me, Terry York? Would he still have said "men?"

Then I remember that if anyone knew the nature of mankind, David did. He could probably guess how often I consider the option of getting even. He might have guessed that I don't always want the best for others; that I don't always want to be a part of second chances for those who have messed up. David knew what word he was using. To him, being put in the hands of men, in general, was no more frightening than being put in the hands of those who were designated "enemies." David certainly knew how quickly friends could become very dangerous enemies.

Oh, God, "Because I have been given much, I, too, must give."² I have received love, let me give it. I have received forgiveness, let me give it. In my relationship to you I have chosen mercy, I have thrown myself on your mercy. "I have no other argument I have no other plea."³ Now, dear God, as I relate to others, to anyone, to everyone, in all my relationships and encounters, in any and every circumstance, help me to choose mercy.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are children of the King. We serve a risen savior and, therefore, live in a continuous springtime of the soul. Our sins are met with the springtime freshness of forgiveness. We live in the springtime of purpose and meaning in life. We live in

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the springtime of new opportunities...the springtime of fellowship. It was springtime, our scripture passage says, when kings go off to war. We are not kings, we are servants, priests. But we share with kings the springtime struggle to know our own strength and impose it on others. Lord, have mercy on us. And the good news is...He does.

Amen

¹ Tennyson, Alfred. Poem, "Locksley Hall."

² Crowell, Grace Noll. "Because I have been given much." From Light of the Years, copyright 1936 Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. Hymn 605, The Baptist Hymnal, 1991.

³ Edmunds, Lidie H. "My faith has found a resting place." Hymn 412, The Baptist Hymnal, 1991.