

Jump Starting Dead Churches

**12 Revival Sermons
To Super-Charge Weak Christians**

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Paul W. Powell

*Dedicated to John C. Turner, Jr., M.D.
A friend of the Great Physician
and a friend of mine whose inspiring life
has jump started this preacher many times.*

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Introduction

Jesus sent the disciples out with special gifts and a special mission. Chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel records the gift of power to cast out unclean spirits and heal the sick. Then he charges the twelve to "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Aren't we glad he didn't mean those orders for us! Or did he?

It just may be that we still have a duty even to raise the dead. Look out from your pulpit next Sunday morning. How much life do you see? Turn through the list of your church roll. How vibrant are the spiritual lives of the names written there?

Is revival needed? Is there hope for revival? Is God still in the reviving business? Or, must we pronounce a benediction as we lower the church into a grave of irrelevance and failure? I believe God still is in the business of creating life, forgiving sin, restoring the fallen, exciting the depressed and reviving dead churches.

Jesus said the gates of hell would not close on his Church, and I believe there are no hopeless or helpless congregations within that Church. What is needed is loving confrontation of sin, prayer and preaching for conviction, a clear message of certain forgiveness, and cultivation of joyful fellowship.

In this book are twelve sermons that have been blessed by God as men and women and boys and girls have come to know Christ as savior and the Holy Spirit

as guide for daily lives of Christian commitment. If the sermons are helpful to you as a reader or as a preacher, and can be shared with others, or start your own creative energy to flow, to God be the glory.

Hook up the cables. Call for the promised power. God can jump start your church!

Paul W. Powell

Dallas, Texas, March 1, 1995

1

The Return of a Backslider

John 21:15-17

In his novel, *Point of No Return*, J. P. Marquand says of one of his characters, “He knew all the little answers, but he missed the large questions of life.”

The little answers of life include the American and National League standings, the latest television ratings, the top ten on the hit parade, the Dow-Jones report.

The big questions, on the other hand, are presented to us in scripture. They are: “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14); “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36); “For what is your life?” (James 4:14); and “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” (Matt. 27:22).

The biggest of all questions for a Christian

was posed by Jesus to Simon Peter when he asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" (John 21:16-17). This is a question of loyalty, of devotion, and of dedication.

The events that led to this question started days earlier. The night Jesus was betrayed he met with his disciples to observe the Pass-over. He startled them with the announcement, "... one of you shall betray me" (Matt. 26:21). While the other disciples realized their own weakness and asked, "Lord is it I?" Peter, in his characteristically impulsive way, boasted that he would never do such a thing. "Others may fail you," he said, "but not me." It was then that Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times before the rooster crowed the next morning. Peter assured the Lord that he would be faithful to the point of death.

Sure enough, that very night Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and put through the mockery of a trial. As the trial proceeded, Peter stood on the fringes of the crowd as an observer. Three times he was asked about his relationship to Jesus and three times he denied even knowing the Lord. Just as he made his last denial, the cock crowed. Amid bitter tears, Peter realized what we all need to realize, that the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves.

Then followed the blackness of crucifixion and the glory of his resurrection on the third day. After his resurrection Jesus appeared to

his disciples numerous times. It was after his second appearance that Peter said to his friends, "I am going fishing." They replied, "We will also come with you" (John 21:3 NASB). And off they went to the Sea of Galilee.

The trip proved to be as disappointing as the events that had transpired in the past few days. They toiled all night long and caught nothing. Towards the dawn, as they neared the shore, a voice called out to them, asking if they had had any luck. When they said they had not, he told them to drop their nets on the right side of the ship and they would have success. They did as the stranger suggested and they caught so many fish their nets were tested to the limit.

By this time John realized it was Jesus talking to them and told Peter, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). Without waiting for the ship to dock, Peter plunged into the water and swam ashore. There he found Jesus cooking breakfast for them over an open fire. Earlier Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper, now he had prepared the Lord's breakfast.

It was after he had dined with his disciples that Jesus posed his question to Peter. In all probability he invited him to walk along the shore for a while. Then, with his arms around Peter's shoulders, he asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" Peter answered, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus then said to him, "Feed my lambs."

Jesus asked a second time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" And again Peter answered, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." This time Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Then the third time Jesus asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" It grieved Peter that Jesus should ask him for the third time, "Lovest thou me?" This time he replied, "Lord, thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love thee." Then Jesus said once again, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

This experience amounts to what I believe to be Simon Peter's rededication to Christ. In it he reaffirms his love for and his devotion to Christ and receives a recommission from the Lord to his apostleship.

It is the example of a man whose fellowship with God was renewed. After his sin, Peter must have felt like he was in no man's land. He probably assumed he didn't even deserve to be an apostle anymore. But Jesus had a different attitude. He sought Peter out, drew from him a threefold confession, and then recalled him to his former position.

As a result of his denial, Peter had not lost his relationship with the Lord, but he had lost his fellowship with him. If he had lost his salvation, the question would be one of faith. "Simon, son of Jonas, believest thou me?" But that is not what he asked. He kept driving home the same truth, "Simon, son of Jonas, do you

love me?”

That question is the crucial question for you and me. Jesus does not ask Peter if he loved sheep. Nor did he ask him if he loved shepherding. What he asked was, “Do you love me?”

It is our love, also, Christ wants. And everyone is capable of giving that to him. As an African pastor said, “My people do not know how to read and write, but they do know how to love.”

D. L. Moody said, “There are thousands of men who would become more useful in God’s kingdom if they would wake up to this fact: it isn’t brains God wants — it is the heart.”

Some of you are like Peter. You have known better days with the Lord than you have now. And what Peter did, you need to do. You need to make a rededication of your life to Christ. You need to affirm again your love and devotion to him.

This encounter not only tells us that Christ wants our love, it also tells us the kind of love and devotion he wants from us.

This passage, better than any in the Bible, reveals what we must do to return from backsliding. We must recommit ourselves to love Christ in three ways:

- We must love him supremely.
- We must love him actively.
- We must love him openly.

Love Supremely

First, Jesus wants us to love him supremely. Jesus' initial question to Peter was, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" (John 21:15). That little phrase, "more than these," has been the subject of inquiry and debate since it was first written.

What did Jesus mean by it?

Some have suggested that it referred to the boats and nets that Peter and his companions had just left. He may have been saying, "Simon, do you love me more than you love these boats and nets?" Peter had been a fisherman by trade before Jesus had called him to be an apostle. The boats and nets represented his old way of life. They represented his former occupation. And they represented his principal form of recreation. When life pressed in on him he always thought of the cool breeze, the rolling waves, and the thrill of a big catch on the Sea of Galilee. It may be that Jesus was saying, "Peter, do you love me more than you love your old way of life? Do you love me more than you love your profession? Do you love me more than you love your favorite recreation?"

Others have suggested that the phrase, "more than these," referred to the other disciples. Jesus may have been saying, "Simon, do you love me more than you love these other men?" His brother, Andrew, was in that group. James and John, his former fishing partners, were there

also. And the rest of the men who had been his closest companions for the past three years were there. They had been through the kinds of experiences that weld men into a brotherhood. Perhaps Jesus was saying, "Simon, do you love me more than you love your brother? More than you love your business associates? More than you love your closest friends?"

Others have suggested that by the phrase, "more than these," Jesus was saying, "Simon, do you love me more than these other men love me?" That's what Peter had boasted of in the upper room. And now he was being called on to examine his boast and the genuineness of his devotion.

We can never be completely sure what Jesus meant by the phrase, "more than these." However, we can be sure of one thing. Whatever he was referring to, Jesus was saying, "I want you to love me supremely." That's the kind of devotion he wants. That's the only kind of love he will be satisfied with.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was asked the secret of his success. He thought for a minute and said, "If there is any secret to my success, it is simply this: ever since the day I got the poor of London on my heart, and a vision of what Jesus Christ could do, God has had all there was of William Booth. If there is one unsundered area of my life, I am unaware of it."

Is there any unsundered area of your life? Is there any contention between you and the Lord? Is there anything God is asking of you that you are withholding from him? If you do not love him supremely, you do not love him as he wants to be loved.

Bill Borden, an heir to the Borden Milk fortune, once described his commitment to Christ with the words, "No reservation, no regret, no retreat." He went to the mission field, contracted disease and died early. Christ wants that kind of devotion out of us also.

Love Actively

Second, he wants us to love him actively. Three times Jesus asked the question, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" Three times Peter answered in the affirmative. Then, in every instance, Jesus gave Peter a work assignment. First he told him, "Feed my lambs." The second and third times he told him, "Feed my sheep." Lambs represent little children who need to be taught, trained, and guided. Sheep represent adults who need to be fed and matured. Jesus was saying in essence, "I am re-assigning you as an apostle. Now, go to work."

Talk is cheap. And the cheapest of all talk is religious talk. Nelda David, a friend of mine, was returning from Tyler to Dallas late one night, when she began to have car trouble. She was in what she thought was an unsafe part of

the city, so she began looking for a good place to pull off the street. She spotted a post office with a well-lit parking lot so she turned into it.

Just as she stopped her car, a middle-aged man came out of the door of the post office. She told him her plight and asked for his help. He told her he was sorry, but he was in a hurry and got in his car and drove off.

As he pulled away she noticed the bumper sticker on his car. It read, "Jesus loves you and so do I."

That's the extent of some people's love. It never gets beyond words. They have a bumper sticker religion.

We not only tell lies, we also sing lies:

- We sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer" and are content with 5-10 minutes a day.
- We sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and wait to be drafted into his service.
- We sing "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and don't use the one we have.
- We sing "There Shall Be Showers of Blessings" but do not come to church when it rains.
- We sing "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" and let the least little offense sever it.
- We sing "Serve the Lord With Gladness" and gripe about all we have to do.
- We sing "I Love to Tell the Story" and never mention it at all.

- We sing “We’re Marching to Zion” but fail to march to worship or Sunday school.
- We sing “Standing on the Promises” while most often we are sitting on the premises.

Years ago Rev. James H. “Jim” Robinson founded a voluntary summer work program called “Operation Crossroads.” It was the forerunner to the Peace Corps. Through that program, he sought college students who would give up their summer vacations, pay part of their own way to some thirty African nations, and together with African counterparts, engage in work-camp projects to build new schools, clinics, libraries, community centers, roads, and water-supply systems.

Robinson believed that self-respect was the most vital element in any aid program. He believed it couldn’t be implanted by doing things for people but only by doing things with them.

His efforts met many obstacles. Topping the list was that every team had to overcome the local people’s suspicion of American motives. A typical village chief had first refused to let his people cooperate in building a badly needed schoolhouse. While American college youths were putting in fourteen-hour days at the school site, they were harangued constantly by the chief and his elders. “How do we know you are our friends?” Only after the Crossroads leader

put down his shovel, wiped the sweat from his brow, and demanded, "Aren't these calluses proof enough?" did the chief finally believe him.

Caresses are not always the surest sign of love. After all, Judas used a kiss to betray Jesus. Our Lord wants us to love him with our calluses as well as our caresses. It may be that the greatest curse of the modern church is that when all has been said and done, a whole lot more has been said than has been done. We talk a better game than we play.

The Lord isn't interested in mere words. He wants love demonstrated. He wants love in action. John expressed the kind of love Christ wants when he wrote, "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Unless we feed his lambs and tend his sheep, we do not love him as he wants to be loved.

Love Openly

Third, he wants us to love him openly. The last time Jesus asked the question, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" (John 21:17), Peter was grieved. Why? Because three times he had denied Jesus. As he had warmed himself by the fire in the outer courtyard and Jesus went through the mockery of a trial, he had three opportunities to pledge his allegiance to Jesus. But he didn't. Instead, he denied the Lord all three times. The three questions brought back

the memory of that failure. It had grieved him at the moment. Now it grieved him at the memory. Grief is often the price we pay for disappointing someone we dearly love.

Peter replied, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." The fact is, Jesus does know all things. Why, then, did he keep asking Peter the question? Because Jesus wanted to hear it, and Peter needed to say it.

Our love for Christ is like marital love. No matter how many times in the past a man may have told his wife he loves her, it does not suffice for today. She wants to hear it again and again. And he needs to say it.

My wife and I have been married forty years. Let's suppose that I have told her twice a week since we married that I love her. (I assure you I have done it many more times than that.) That would be more than 100 times a year for forty years, or more than 4,000 times. Surely that should be enough for anyone. But I can assure you it isn't. She will want to hear it again and again. We never tire of hearing people say sincerely, "I love you." And saying it yesterday is not sufficient for today.

Arthur Ford was the oldest active member of my former church when I resigned. He was 95-years-old and he was still singing in the choir. He and his wife, Gertrude, had been married for seventy years when she died. I have never known a couple more devoted to one an-

other than they. On her dying bed, Gertrude said to Arthur, "Arthur, tell me one more time you love me." That's the way love is. It craves and it thrives on expression.

It is possible that no greater kindness could have been shown Peter than to draw from him that day this threefold confession of love. What is felt deeply in the heart needs to be attested to freely with the lips. Impression without expression leads to regression. Jesus was drawing out an open and unashamed confession of the deep feelings of Peter's heart and that helped both of them.

Carter Holmes Jones, a great preacher of another generation, had a small room in the attic of his home that he used as a place of prayer. When he was especially burdened, he would make his way up the winding staircase to that room to spend some quiet moments with God. The members of his family knew that when he went to the attic room for prayer, they were not to bother him under any circumstances.

One day, under heavy burdens, he climbed the stairs, went into the room, and knelt beside the chair to pray. He had hardly begun his prayer when the door to the room swung open and there stood his little girl. The moment his eyes met hers, she knew she had done wrong. She knew she shouldn't be there. But she said, "Daddy, you've been so busy lately I haven't seen you much and I just wanted to tell you that I love you." And with that she threw her arms around

her father's neck, gave him a big hug, wheeled around, and was gone as quickly as she had come.

The big preacher, still on his knees, wiped a tear from his eye and said, "Father, I've been so busy lately that I haven't had much time for you. I just want to tell you again that I love you."

That's what Christ wants from all of us. Unless we say it as well as feel it, and show it as well as confess it, we do not love him as he wants to be loved. He wants us to show our devotion by our commitment, our calluses, and by our confession.

On Calvary Jesus forgave his enemies. At the Sea of Galilee he forgave his friends. I wonder which was harder?

There is not a believer here whose fellowship with God is exactly what God wants it to be. God wants you to feel it in your heart and to know it in your mind, and to live it in your life, and he wants you to be right with him.

And you can do it now if you'll rededicate your life to him.

2

Not Falling From Grace

Galatians 5:3-4

One of the most troublesome statements in all of the Bible is the sentence, "... ye are fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Many have understood the apostle Paul's statement to mean that, once people have been saved, they may lose their salvation. Or in other words, they may fall out of favor with God and no longer be his children.

The context of the statement, however, indicates that Paul is not dealing with the danger of losing one's salvation. He is, instead, talking about the way of gaining salvation in the first place. Does salvation come by the law (keeping the rules and the rituals of the Old Testament) or by grace (by the love and mercy of God)? This is the question that occupies the thinking and writing of the apostle Paul in the whole book of Galatians where this statement is found.

Paul had preached to the Galatian Christians that salvation was by grace through faith. They had be-

lieved him, and had responded by trusting Christ as their savior. After a brief stay, Paul left this region to continue his missionary journeys. There soon followed after him a group called the Judaizers. They attempted to blend Christianity and Judaism together. They particularly taught that males must go through the Jewish rite of circumcision before they could ever really be saved. Had the Judaizers succeeded in their efforts, they would have made Christianity nothing more than a sect of Judaism.

It was in response to these false teachers that the apostle wrote these words. Paul essentially said that if a man must be circumcised before he can be saved, then he becomes a debtor to do the whole law. You can't, in all honesty, single out just one part of the law as essential and ignore the rest. It's all or none. And if you do that, you make what Christ did on the cross useless. You have, in effect, gone away from grace. You have given up grace. You have fallen from grace.

The thrust of the passage is an encouragement from the apostle Paul to the Galatian Christians to keep believing and preaching salvation by grace. He does not want them to fall away from this teaching and return to salvation by works (the keeping of the Old Testament law).

The truth of scripture is, when a Christian sins, he does not fall from grace, he falls *into* grace. As I make my case, I want to talk to four prominent men in the Bible. I shall ask

each of them the same questions:

First, are you a child of God? Are you really saved?

Second, after you became a child of God, did you ever sin?

Third, if you did sin after you became a child of God, did you fall from grace?

Let's see what each of them has to say about this crucial issue.

The Father of Many Nations

I begin my questioning with Abraham, who is considered the father of three world religions — Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity.

PREACHER: “Abraham, I should like to know, are you one of God's children?”

ABRAHAM: “Yes, thank the Lord, I am. If you have any doubts about that, you need only to read what James, the brother of our Lord, said about me. He quoted from Genesis and 2 Chronicles that I, Abraham, ‘believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness’ and that I, Abraham, ‘was called the Friend of God’ (James 2:23). Can scripture be any clearer? I was God's friend and that was never said of any other person in the Bible.

“As you know, I came out of idolatry and paganism. I was a successful businessman in Ur of the Chaldees when God first spoke to me. He told me to leave my homeland and to follow him into

an unknown land. If I did, he promised me he would multiply my seed and ultimately bless all the nations of the earth through me. By faith, I followed God, who brought me to the land of Canaan, and I ultimately became the father of the Jewish race. That took a lot of faith. I was 75 years old at the time and it wasn't easy pulling up stakes and moving out on a new venture at that age."

PREACHER: "Well, Abraham, it is clear enough to me that you are one of God's children. Now let me ask you this: after you followed him in faith, did you ever sin?"

ABRAHAM: "O, I wish you had not asked that! I did play the fool. Not once, but many times. I had enough faith to believe God for the future, but I did not have enough faith to believe him for the present. I believed God enough to follow him to the land of Canaan but I did not have enough faith in God to stay there. When there arose a mighty famine in the land, I moved my family into Egypt where things were better. My wife, Sarah, was very beautiful. I was afraid if Pharaoh saw her he would want her in his harem and would kill me so he could take her for himself. So Sarah and I agreed, if Pharaoh asked about her, I would say, 'She is my sister.'

"Sure enough, once in Egypt, Pharaoh saw the beauty of Sarah and wanted her as his own. And when I was questioned about her, I told a lie. I said, 'She is my sister.'"

PREACHER: "You, Abraham, the friend of God, lied? You, the father of faith, doubted that God would

take care of you?”

ABRAHAM: “Yes, not once, but twice. I did the same thing again years later with Abimelich.”

PREACHER: “Well, Abraham, tell me, when you lied, did you fall from grace?”

ABRAHAM: “Oh, no! No! Quite the opposite. I did not fall from grace; I fell into grace. God spoke to the heart of Pharaoh and revealed my dishonesty to him before he dishonored my wife. And Pharaoh promptly returned Sarah to me and sent me out of the land of Egypt.

“No, I didn’t fall from grace. I fell into grace. Rather than rejecting me and disowning me, God loved me and saved me. And, in his own time, when I was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, God honored his promise and made me the father of many nations. To us Isaac was born. And it was through Isaac that, ultimately, the Messiah came.

“Make no mistake about it. When I sinned, I didn’t fall from grace. I fell into grace.”

The World’s Greatest Leader

Next, I would like to talk with Moses, one of the greatest leaders of all times. He was the man chosen by God to lead the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land.

PREACHER: “Moses, may I ask you a very personal question? Are you a child of God? Are you saved?”

MOSES: “Yes, there is no doubt about it. If you

will read one of my books in the Bible, it will tell you the Lord spoke to me ‘face-to-face, just as a man speaks to his friend’ (Ex. 33:11 NASB). I had such a close, personal relationship with God that we walked and talked together as best friends. Yes, beyond question, I am one of God’s children.

“As you know, I was the product of two cultures. I was born the son of a Hebrew slave. According to Pharaoh’s edict, I should have been put to death. But my mother believed God had a special plan for my life and disobeyed the edict. Instead, she hid me in the bulrushes along the Nile River. In the providence of God, I was found and adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. Princesses don’t like to spend their time mixing formula and changing dirty diapers so she chose a Hebrew slave to nurse me, to raise me. Once again by God’s providence, my own mother was chosen to care for me until I was old enough to live in the palace. As I sat at Mother’s knee, she taught me about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“When I was older, I moved to the palace where I was schooled in all the wisdom of Egypt. In time, I saw the Egyptians’ injustice against my own people, and I attempted to lead the Israelites in rebellion. I was unsuccessful and had to flee Egypt, a fugitive from justice. Years later, when I was 80 years old, God appeared to me in a burning bush and told me I was to lead his people, Israel, out of bondage. With great reluctance I returned to Egypt and persuaded Pharaoh, with God’s help, to release the children of Israel. I then led them across the Red Sea, through

the wilderness, and to the borders of the Promised Land.”

PREACHER: “Well, Moses, it seems evident enough to me that you are one of God’s children. So, tell me this, did you ever sin after that?”

MOSES: “I wish I didn’t have to tell you this part of the story. It grieves me until this very hour. But, in all honesty, I did sin against him after that. For forty years I led those stiff-necked Israelites through the Sinai Desert. And, it was an exhausting experience. They complained about their food. They complained about the weather. They complained about their leaders. Complain! Complain! Complain! That’s all they did.

“So one day when they complained about water, I went to God and asked him what to do. He told me to speak to a certain rock and water would come forth. But I had had all I could take and so I took the rod of God and struck the rock with a terrific blow instead. I hit it again and again until the water gushed out everywhere.”

PREACHER: “That surprises me. I have read that you were the meekest man who ever lived. How did this happen?”

MOSES: “It was an act of anger and frustration. The problem was, I disobeyed God. What I did, did not glorify him. The people thought I did it.”

PREACHER: “Moses, when you did this, did you fall from grace?”

MOSES: “No! Oh, no! God didn’t disown me.”

PREACHER: “Well, from what I read in the Bible, it looks like he did. Don’t the scriptures say that, because of your sin, you were not allowed to go into the Promised Land? Didn’t God take you to the top of Mt. Nebo, where you died and were buried? Isn’t it true that your grave has never been found? It looks to me like you fell from grace.”

MOSES: “Well, it might appear that way, but that’s not what happened. God was not pleased with me, but he never rejected me. He chastened me, but he still loved me. As the Lord said later, ‘My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth’ (Prov. 3:11-12). That’s what God did to me. He chastened me, but he did not disown me.

“If you doubt that, look to another mountain: not Mt. Nebo, where I died, but the Mount of Transfiguration. Many years after my death, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the Mount of Transfiguration to allow them to see his glory. Guess who appeared on the mountain with Jesus? That’s right, I did. Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, and I appeared to those disciples to confirm that Jesus was really the son of God.

“So, you see, when I sinned, I didn’t fall from grace. I fell into grace.”

The Great King

Now let’s talk to David, the king of Israel. We begin with him as we did with Abraham and Moses.

PREACHER: “David, are you one of God’s children? Have you been justified?”

DAVID: “O, most assuredly! Haven’t you read the scriptures? They say plainly that I was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). That means that God’s desires were my desires. Our hearts were knit together as one.

“Understand, now, my experience was not the same as those of Abraham and Moses. I wasn’t an old man when I first heard the call of God. Abraham was age 75 and Moses was 80. I was just a lad. And my experience with God was certainly not as dramatic as Moses at the burning bush. In fact, I can’t even remember when I first met God. It seems like I’ve always known him. I grew up tending my father’s sheep. As a lad, I was aware of God’s presence on those quiet Judean hillsides, especially in the night as I looked up into the starry heavens. In fact, I think I came to know God in a way few other people have known him. I often wrote poetry to express what I learned. Perhaps you have read one of the best known of my poems:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he
leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth
my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righ-
teousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I
walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and
thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table
before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou*

anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever” (Ps. 23).

“When I was only a teenager, God led Samuel, the prophet, to anoint me as the future king of Israel. Yes, I am a child of God. It seems as though I have known him forever.”

PREACHER: “Well, David, that being the case, I imagine that you have walked with God all your life. I doubt if you ever wandered off the path of righteousness. But, just for the record, tell me, did you ever fail God? Did you ever sin against him?”

DAVID: “You don’t know? I thought everyone knew by now. I fell in love with another man’s wife and we had an affair. Then, in order to cover up our relationship, I had her husband killed. His name was Uriah, and he was one of my most loyal soldiers. I commanded my General Joab, who was leading my army in battle against the children of Ammon, to send Uriah to the front lines. Then, when the fighting was the fiercest, I told him to have the rest of the troops retreat and leave Uriah to face the enemy alone. It worked out just as I had planned. When Uriah was killed, I thought my sin would never be known. Watergate was not the first government cover-up, you know. I had my own little Watergate, 3,000 years before Richard Nixon.”

PREACHER: “Adultery? Murder? David, you

did all that? Well, then, let me ask you this, did you fall from grace?”

DAVID: “No, oh no, a thousand times, no! God never stopped loving me. God never stopped seeking me. Even though I wouldn’t confess my sin at first, God sent his prophet, Nathan, to confront me with my sin. It was already haunting me. In fact, it was before me day and night. That’s the way it is with a Christian when he sins, you know. It was only then that I, with a broken heart, confessed my sin. If you are interested in more details of my guilt and agony, you can read Ps. 51. There I bare my soul for the sins I committed.

“And then in Ps. 32 I describe in detail the joy that came to me once I had repented of my sin and confessed it to the Lord.

“No, friend, I didn’t fall from grace. I fell into grace. And the surest evidence of that was that when Jesus, the Messiah, came, he was called ‘the son of David.’”

The Rock Man

We have spent most of our time talking to men from the Old Testament. That is because there is more biographical material there than in the New Testament. But let’s take just a moment to interview Simon Peter, one of the Lord’s twelve apostles.

PREACHER: “Peter, were you one of God’s children? Were you ever really saved?”

PETER: “Yes, you know, I was the self-appointed leader of the apostles. Nobody ever really voted on it. We never had an election. But because of my impulsive ways, I sort of took over and the other apostles were willing to let me.

“I first met Jesus through my brother, Andrew, who introduced us. I was drawn to him immediately. Sometime later he found us cleaning our fishing nets and called us to be a part of his kingdom. I remember his exact words. ‘Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men’ (Mark 1:16).

“To the surprise of almost everyone, we gave up our lucrative fishing business, ‘Simon Peter Enterprises,’ and became his disciples. For three years I followed him. We drank out of the same wells, ate out of the same cups, sat by the same campfires. We were the closest of friends. In fact, I was one of the inner circle of Jesus’ most trusted friends. There were just three of us in that group — James, John, and me.

“I was, you know, the first person to recognize and confess who Jesus was. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked, ‘But whom say ye that I am?’ (Matt. 16:15) And I declared, for the first time in the world, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Matt. 16:16). At first I assumed I had thought of that. But I now realize it was revealed to me by the Lord.”

PREACHER: “Well, Peter, if you knew the Lord like that, I doubt you ever sinned after that experience, did you?”

PETER: “Yes, to my embarrassment and shame, I did. It happened the night Jesus was betrayed. The

soldiers arrested him in the garden and rushed him off to the mockery of a trial. The other disciples fled, but not I. I followed Jesus and the soldiers to the courtyard where I had an opportunity to stand up for him. But I let him down instead. I stood by the campfire and watched the proceedings. I'll never forget the experience. It is etched in my mind forever.

"The night was cold; the fire was hot; and I was lukewarm. While I stood there I was asked three different times if I knew him, and all three times I denied him. In the hour when he needed me the most, he could depend upon me the least. It was the worst night of my life."

PREACHER: "Well, tell me Peter, when you denied the Lord, did he deny you? Did you fall from grace?"

PETER: "Oh no, far from that! Following his death, burial, and resurrection, we met by the Sea of Galilee and he recommissioned me as one of his apostles.

"It happened like this. I had gone with the other apostles back to the Sea of Galilee to fish one night. Toward the dawn we headed in, tired and discouraged because we had caught nothing. As we neared the shore I saw him silhouetted against the eastern sky. Without waiting for the boat to dock, I plunged into the water and swam ashore to meet him. When I arrived, Jesus had prepared breakfast for us. After we dined he said to me, 'Peter, let's take a walk. I want to talk to you.' As we walked along the

shores of Galilee, the Lord put his arm around my shoulder and asked, 'Peter, do you love me?' I told him I did. Then he commissioned me, 'Feed my lambs.' He asked me the same question a second time and then a third. It grieved me for him to ask me that same question three times. With a heart broken over my failure, I told him, 'Lord, you know all things. You know I love you.' And, right there, the Lord recommissioned me as an apostle by saying, 'Follow me.' Those were the same words he had said to me three years earlier by this same sea.

"Would you believe, after all I had done, that I was the one who got to preach on the day of Pentecost? That day 3,000 people were saved. Does that sound like I fell from grace? Still later, there was a Gentile Pentecost at the house of Cornelius. And once again, I was the one privileged by God to be there to see Gentiles saved just like Jews. Does that sound like I fell from grace? Years later I was privileged to dictate my memoirs to Mark who wrote them into the first account ever given to the world of the life of Christ, the gospel of Mark. Does that sound like I fell from grace? And still later, I wrote two epistles, 1 and 2 Peter, that have been a source of inspiration to Christians for almost 2,000 years. Does that sound like I fell from grace?

"The truth is, when I sinned, I didn't fall from grace, I fell into grace."

Do you need more proof than this? When God's people sin he does not reject them or wash

his hands of them because they are sinners. He reaches out to them to reclaim them and to restore them.

Some of you are saying to yourselves right now, “Preacher, I too have played the fool. Like Abraham, I have lied. Like Moses, I have lost my temper. Like David, I have committed adultery. Like Peter, I have denied the Lord.” But, thank God, you are still his. You haven’t fallen from grace. You have fallen into grace. And today he calls you to return to him.

Listen to the words of Jesus, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

Don’t miss the truth of this promise: He knows his own; he calls his own; he keeps his own. You may be a wounded sheep, but you are his sheep. You may be a wandering sheep, but you are his sheep. You may be a black sheep, but you are his sheep. You were purchased by the blood and he’s not about to let you go. We may fail but his mercies fail not.

3

Once Saved, Always Saved - Fact or Fiction?

John 10:27-29

One of the most difficult and controversial teachings of scripture is that of the security of the believer. It's commonly referred to as "once saved, always saved." The very mention of this doctrine creates more discussion and raises more questions than any other teaching of the Bible.

"Once saved, always saved" is the belief that once a person becomes a Christian, his salvation is eternally fixed. He can never be lost again.

The key to understanding this teaching is in the words, "once saved." We do not believe that once a person joins the church, he is always saved. We do not believe that once a person is baptized that he is always saved. We don't even believe that once a person says he is saved, he is always saved. What we believe is that, once a person is "saved," he is always saved.

We freely recognize and admit that there are many false professions of faith. After all, Judas was among the twelve. And almost everyone has had at least one religious spasm in their lifetime; in a revival meeting, at a church camp, in a Vacation Bible School, they made an emotional response to the gospel. But it was superficial; no real conversion took place.

Every pastor occasionally conducts the funeral service of a church member with his fingers crossed. He hopes the person was saved, but there was never any evidence of a genuine conversion. False professions have always been around.

As difficult as this doctrine may seem, its alternative is totally unacceptable. The alternative to being “once saved, always saved” is salvation by works. If you believe a person can be saved today and lost tomorrow, you are saying in effect, “They are saved today because they are worthy, because of the life they have lived, of being saved.” And if you say a person can lose their salvation, then you are saying, “They lost their salvation because of something they did — they ceased to be worthy.” That is salvation by works. And it is totally unscriptural. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5). We are never saved by works; we are saved by his grace.

Furthermore, without this belief, we end up in hopeless confusion in our spiritual lives. If once a person is saved they can be lost again, how many sins do they have to commit to be lost again? One? Two? Five? Ten? How many?

And which sins are they? Murder? Adultery? Profanity? Or will gossip, anger, or not tithing do?

And, if a person can be saved today and lost tomorrow, what must they do to be saved again? Do they have to receive Jesus as their savior again? Do they have to walk the aisle again? Must they be baptized again? Who knows the answer to these questions?

Any belief other than “once saved, always saved” leads to total frustration in the Christian life. Without the assurance of salvation, a believer can never have peace, joy, and usefulness in the kingdom of God because they are never sure of their own relationship to the Lord.

We must remember that Christians do backslide. As the bumper sticker reads, “Christians aren’t perfect, they are just forgiven.” Or, as a card I received at Christmas read, “Christians aren’t perfect, they just know someone who is.” There has to be room for growth and development in the Christian life. That means there must also be the possibility of regression and failure.

How far can one wander away from God and still rightly be called a Christian? I don’t know. How long can they stay away from God and still be considered a child of God? I don’t know. How deep into sin can they fall and still be thought of as a believer? I don’t know.

And, fortunately, we do not have to judge other people. That is God’s business. Only he

knows the heart. Our responsibility is to make sure that we have been once saved and that we continue to live in obedience to the Lord.

I do know this: the true Christian will repent of his backsliding and will come back into fellowship with God eventually or God will chasten him severely.

Somewhere between false professions and weak commitments, we can find the answers to all of our questions about the security of the believer.

Jesus spoke clearly about our security when he said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

There are two words in this promise we need to examine. The first is the word "perish." It means "to suffer utter loss of true life or blessed communion." Jesus promises that no matter what happens, his children will never lose their relationship with him.

We must distinguish between our relationship to God and our fellowship with God. Our relationship is fixed. Our fellowship changes and depends upon our actions.

When I am not in prayer, when I'm not in the study of God's word, when I'm not in worship,

when I'm not witnessing, my fellowship with God wanes and I drift away from him. I am still his child but I am a wayward one.

The second word we need to understand is "never." It was used by Jesus on two other occasions. He used it at the grave of Lazarus when he said to Martha, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:26).

He used it again with the woman at the well when he said to her, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).

Here he used the word "never" in regard to our security. In the same way that the person who believes in Christ shall never die, and in the same way that the person who believes in Christ shall never thirst, so the person who believes in Christ shall never perish. They will never suffer utter loss of their salvation.

These words of Jesus give us the grounds of our assurance. Our security is based upon three things:

- The guidance of God
- The grace of God
- The greatness of God.

The Great Seducer

First, our security is based on the guidance of God. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them,

and they follow me” (John 10:27).

The tense of the verb follow suggests continuous action. So Jesus is saying, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they keep on following me.” This is how we know who Jesus’ true sheep are. They are people who heard his voice, who began following him, and are continuing to do so.

Our assurance is not based on a moment of a single act in the past (e.g., joining the church or being baptized five, ten, twenty years ago). It is based on a relationship that was established in the past and still continues into the present.

We know who his sheep are then, not by what they say, but by what they do. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord,” said Jesus, “shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). His sheep hear and they are heeding his voice. This is the distinguishing mark between the real and the superficial follower of Christ.

Of course none of us follow him perfectly. We all wander from the path of righteousness. But it is the desire of our heart and the direction of our life to follow him, and though we may stray from him, we will hear his call and come back where we belong.

There are many voices that call us today. We must, therefore, learn to distinguish be-

tween our Lord's voice and the voice of Satan. Let me illustrate. The language of love and the language of seduction are the same. The man who wishes a woman for his wife and the one who wishes her for a night both say, "I love you." Wise is the woman who learns the difference between the two.

Satan is a seducer. He is a skillful impersonator. So we must learn to distinguish between the voice of the one who saves us and the one who would seduce us. Jesus has told us to beware of wolves clad in sheepskin.

But discerning God's voice is not all that difficult. If we know the Lord, we have already heard his voice. After all, it was his inner leading that brought us to him in the first place. Now that we are his, we will keep on following him. And when we do, there is a special and gracious providence that watches over us to keep us safe, to keep us from falling (Jude 24).

May I ask you personally, "Are you listening to his voice and seeking to follow him in a relationship of obedience and trust? Is he guiding you day by day?" If not, you may still be his sheep, but you have no basis for confidence. For his sheep hear his voice and they keep on following him.

Grace Vs. Works

Second, our security is based on the grace of God. Jesus said, "And I give unto them eternal life . . ." (John 10:28). Note that eternal life is a gift, not a

loan. When someone lends you something you have to return it. Unlike a gift, it is not yours. This life is a gift. It is the testimony of scripture that we are not saved by being good or by being religious. We are saved by grace, through faith.

Logic says if we can't earn our salvation by being good we can't lose it by being bad. Our salvation is never dependent on our goodness or our badness, but upon his goodness and his grace.

God could have saved us any way he wanted to. The choice was his. So why did he choose to save us by grace? There is a good reason: "Lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:9). God knew that if we could earn our salvation we would become proud of it and boast of it. Thus we would be worse in the end than we were in the beginning. For the only thing worse than a poor, lost sinner is a proud, lost sinner. So he took all possibility of human pride out of it by saving us through grace alone.

There are three kinds of faith. There is intellectual faith, there is temporal faith, and there is saving faith. Some people believe in Christ like they believe in George Washington. If I were to ask you, "Do you believe in George Washington?" you would say, "Yes." You have read about him in textbooks and you have heard about him from people you have confidence in, so you believe that there was a man named George Washington. While you believe that George Washington lived and died, you are not trusting in him for anything. You do not pray to him, nor are you expecting him to do any-

thing for you. Some people believe in Christ the same way they believe in George Washington. That's intellectual faith.

A second kind of faith is temporal faith. This is the kind of faith that turns to God for help in time of need. When the crisis passes, so does the commitment to God. It is shallow, emotional, temporary.

The third kind of faith is saving faith. Intellectual faith is mental. Temporary faith is emotional. Saving faith involves the will. It trusts Jesus only for salvation and then serves him out of gratitude.

There is a place for works in the Christian life, but they are an outgrowth of salvation, not a means of it. Having been saved by the grace of God, I now serve him out of gratitude and abiding joy.

Held by Him

Third, our security is based on the greatness of God. Jesus said, "My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29). We are held by him and his power is absolute. He is supreme, and therefore it is unthinkable that any power could snatch us from him.

The Bible wastes no time introducing us to the greatness of God. The first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

There are two words in that verse that we need to understand to gain its full impact. The first is the word "God." It is the Hebrew name *Elohim*, which has a root meaning of power. It is a common name for God that is used over 2,550 times in the Old Testament. It literally means "the one from whom all power flows" or "the one to whom all power belongs."

The second word is "created." It is the Hebrew word *bara*, which means "to make from nothing." When God created the heavens and the earth, he didn't take a lump of clay, roll it into a ball called the earth, and thump it out into space. When he made the stars, he didn't take a piece of yellow construction paper, cut them out with a pair of grade-school scissors, and thumb tack them to the inner walls of space. He didn't start with anything. He started with nothing and made everything that is. That's the kind of power he has.

A carpenter can take a load of wood and make a house from it. A machinist can take a stack of metal and make an automobile from it. A potter can take a lump of clay and make a beautiful vase from it. But only God could take nothing and make everything.

And the whole universe which God made is charged with his kind of power. The average life of a hurricane is nine days. In just one day there is enough energy produced by a hurricane to supply the electrical needs of every man, woman, and child in America for four months. In the entire life of a hurricane there is enough energy produced to supply the electrical needs of everyone in America for three years. That's energy!

When the crew members of Skylab II were out in space, they photographed an eruption of the sun. There was enough energy produced by that one eruption to supply the electrical needs of every man, woman, boy, and girl on the face of the earth for half a million years. That's power! If you don't think that's significant, just check your last month's electric bill.

A second verse that speaks of the greatness of God is Genesis 17:1. There the Lord identified himself to Abraham by saying, "I am the Almighty God." The word almighty is the Hebrew name *El Shaddai*. It is another common name for God in the Old Testament. *El Shaddai* is a compound word. The first part, *El*, is the same as that of *Elohim*. It means power. The second part, *Shaddai*, means adequate or sufficient. So God introduces himself to Abraham as the God who has power sufficient, power adequate.

Why does he introduce himself that way? It is because he has just reaffirmed a promise he had made to Abraham and Sarah years before, that they would have a son through whom all the whole world would be blessed. But now Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah, his wife, is 89 and they still have not had a child. God now tells him the promise is still valid; they will yet have a child. The idea was so preposterous to Abraham and to Sarah that they laughed. Who wouldn't? Think of it: a child being born in the geriatrics ward and the bill being picked up by Medicare. So God reminded Abraham of who he was. He said, "I am the Lord God Almighty. I am the God who has

power sufficient, power adequate, to do whatever needs to be done.”

Sure enough, when Abraham was one hundred and Sarah was ninety, the promise was fulfilled: Isaac was born. To their amazement, they discovered that “nothing is too hard for God.” That’s the kind of power God has.

Now we have the promise of Jesus: “My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:29). The profound truth is, the God of creation and the God of procreation is also the God of our salvation and our preservation. We are held by his hand.

The construction of the sentence, “shall never perish,” in the Greek is a double negative. Literally it reads, “shall not never perish.” That’s poor English, but good Greek. It is the strongest possible way of stating a thing. These two verses together are what I call the double grip of God. We are in Jesus’ hands and Jesus is in God’s hands.

Our 2 1/2-year-old grandson came to Dallas for a visit. One afternoon he and I walked to a nearby pond to feed some ducks. As we neared the pond the ground was rough and the slope of the bank was steep. Jordan and I were walking hand in hand. My son, Mike, was walking behind us. Mike called out to Jordan, “Be careful, Jordan. Don’t fall.”

Jordan kept right on walking and said, “Don’t let me fall P. Paul. Don’t let me fall.” I tightened my grip on his hand and thought, “Jordan, if you only knew, you will never be safer in your life than you are right

now. The only way you will fall is if I fall.”

In the same way we are held by God’s hand. The only way we can fall is if he falls; and he is greater than all. No man is able to pluck us out of his hand.

Peter declares, we “are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” (1 Peter 1:5). God not only saves us, but he keeps us by his power unto our final redemption. He not only saves us, but once we are saved, there is a special providence that watches over us to keep us saved to the very end.

Here, then, is the basis of our salvation and our security — not our goodness, but God’s guidance, God’s grace, and God’s greatness. That puts us on solid ground indeed. You need no greater assurance than that.

The key question in the whole issue of assurance and security is, “Have you been once saved?” Have you been born again? And if your relationship is secure, what about your fellowship? Is it in good order?

After hearing a sermon on this subject in a revival meeting in Mobile, Alabama, a man called the pastor for a counseling appointment. He had made a profession of faith in Christ as a child. He said, “I knew all of the right answers, but nothing happened on the inside. I was even made a deacon, but that didn’t help. What I need to do is to accept Christ as my savior and Lord for the first time.” He was religious, but not a Christian. How about you? Don’t live your life under an illusion. Be saved and be sure today!

An acquaintance of mine in San Marcos, Texas,

went through a spiritual enrichment program called, “A Walk to Emmaus.” When another friend asked him how the week went, he said, “It was wonderful.” When asked in what way, he responded, “I moved Jesus from here (pointing to his head) to here (pointing to his heart).”

That’s what it means to be saved, and once that happens, you are saved forever.

4

Nothing But Leaves

Mark 11:12-14; 20-22

I was driving down Highway 110, headed for Tyler, Texas, when I saw a church sign that captured my attention. It read, “God is looking for spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.”

Religious nuts abound everywhere, both in and out of the church. But spiritual fruit is scarce. The importance of fruit, however, can’t be overestimated. Jesus put it this way: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:20).

Early in my Christian experience I was told that there are three “F’s” in the Christian life — facts, faith, and feelings. Our Christian experience begins with facts — the fact of sin and the fact of God’s grace. We respond to these facts in faith, trusting Jesus only as Savior. Then come the feelings of joy and peace. Some people delay becoming Christians, waiting for a special feeling that never comes. It is not supposed to. It is out of sequence.

I had been a Christian for years before I

learned that there is a fourth “F” in the Christian life — fruit. Every New Testament leader talks about its importance. In fact, over fifty times the New Testament talks about fruit in the Christian experience. John the Baptist was the first. He came preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2 NASB). When people responded and requested baptism he demanded that they first bring forth “fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8).

Jesus said, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples” (John 15:8). And, the apostle Paul wrote of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23). The fruit they all spoke of had to do with conduct and character.

What the scriptures emphasize about fruit, Jesus dramatized in the experience of the barren fig tree (Mark 11:12-14). This incident occurred during the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. The week began with his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. This was a bold and deliberate announcement that he was the Messiah; it was the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9.

Once in the city, Jesus went immediately to the Temple. What he saw there distressed him. He saw stately buildings, elaborate rituals, dignified leaders, but an absence of real devotion to God. Israel’s religion had become mere form and ceremony.

The house of God had become a house of merchandise, a den of thieves, characterized by exploitation, graft, and abuse. Money changers

took advantage of thousands of pilgrims who had flooded Jerusalem for the Passover by charging exorbitant prices to exchange foreign currency into Temple coinage. And those who sold sacrificial animals charged inflated prices for animals that would meet priestly specifications. The priests were in on the exploitation and received a sizable rake-off from the profits.

Innocent worshippers were being gouged in the name of God and under the guise of religion. There was so much bickering over prices in the courtyard of the Gentiles that worshippers could scarcely think, much less pray. God's house had been perverted from its intended purpose.

That evening Jesus and his disciples went to the little city of Bethany, one and a half miles away, where they would spend the night. Early the next morning, as they headed back to Jerusalem, as they walked, Jesus grew hungry. Seeing a fig tree in the distance, he walked over to pick some of the fruit for his breakfast. The tree had all the outward signs of vitality. It was covered with leaves. But when he pushed back the leaves, there was no fruit. He found "nothing but leaves." When Jesus saw this he pronounced a curse upon the tree saying that never again would men eat fruit from it.

He and his disciples continued their journey to Jerusalem where he cleansed the Temple of the injustices he had seen the day before. He turned over the money changers' tables and drove out those who sold animals, declaring,

“My house shall be called the house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13).

That evening as they returned to Bethany, they found the fig tree withered, dried up from the roots. When the astonished disciples called Jesus’ attention to it, he responded by saying, “Have faith in God” (Mark 11:22).

This has been a troublesome incident to many. Two things make it so. First, it is the only totally destructive miracle that Jesus performed. This disturbed Bertrand Russell, an avowed atheist, to the point that he questioned the character of Christ, saying a good man wouldn’t have done such a bad thing.

The second thing many find disturbing about this incident is that, “the time of figs was not yet” (Mark 11:13). Why would Jesus be upset at not finding any figs on the tree if it was not the season for figs?

There is a reasonable explanation. The Pass-over was in the late spring. The fig season was usually a month or two later. But if a tree was in a protective ravine, such as those around the Mount of Olives, it would be sheltered from the cold and receive abundant moisture, and its fruit would come early. So it was altogether possible that the fig tree could have been bearing at this time.

But more importantly, in Israel, the fruit on the fig tree always preceded the leaves. Since there were leaves on the tree, there should have

been fruit. The tree gave an outward appearance of being productive but it wasn't. In a sense, it was making a false profession.

Without being told so, we just know that what Jesus saw in that fig tree was the same thing he had seen in Jerusalem the day before. It was a commentary on the religious life of Israel. It had all the outward trappings of religion but no real faith — no compassion for the poor, no holiness of life, no sense of mission to the world. Israel's religion was nothing but leaves — all show, no substance — ritual without reality; profession without practice; words without deeds.

There is a lesson here for us. It is the warning against a showy display in religion, against false professions, against a religion that becomes external, superficial, hypocritical.

The curse of the fig tree is the curse of present day Christianity. Many people have been baptized and gone through confirmation. They observe religious formality and are even regular in church attendance, but their religion is nothing but leaves. The challenge is clear: if we are not fruitful we court disaster. We invite the judgment of God. We will be cast off.

It is a dangerous thing when religion goes on stage. We cannot be satisfied with a religion of show or mere formality. What God looks for is fruit.

What is the fruit the Lord wants from our

lives?

- He wants the fruit of a holy life.
- He wants the fruit of a loving spirit.
- He wants the fruit of humble service.
- He wants the fruit of a personal witness.
- He wants the fruit of a simple faith.

Essential, Not Optional

First, he wants the fruit of a holy life. The scriptures are replete with a call to holiness. “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). And, “As he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation” (1 Peter 1:15). Holiness, then, is not optional in the Christian life, it is essential.

Neither God nor the world expects us to be perfect, but they do expect us to be different — in our speech, in our values, in our treatment of others.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu leader of the Indian people, addressed this. He attended a Christian church in South Africa for a number of weeks when he was a student there. He read the New Testament through several times. He had the highest admiration for Jesus Christ, the man, as revealed in the New Testament. But I want you to listen to what Gandhi said about those churches he attended, “I got the impression that they were just a group of worldly-minded people going to church for recreation

and conformity to custom.” And then he said, “I have the highest admiration for the Christian life and for the Christ of the Bible. And I might have become a Christian if I could have seen one.”

In Las Vegas, late in 1994, boxer George Foreman knocked out Michael Moorer in the tenth round of their match to regain the title of heavyweight champion of the world — just two months shy of his 46th birthday. He is the oldest man ever to win a title in any division.

Foreman had been the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world twenty years ago before losing the title to Mohammed Ali in Zaire. After he walked away from boxing in 1977, Foreman became a preacher. Before he made his comeback, he gave his testimony in the church where I was pastor. It was powerful in its simplicity. He told how he won a gold medal in the Olympics, how he won the heavyweight championship of the world, and how he had won millions of dollars in his career. But he said he didn't find true joy and peace until he found Jesus Christ.

With his conversion, he went on to say, came a call to preach. And he had been involved in Christian ministry since that time. Then he added, “A lot of people ask, ‘George, how can you be a preacher and a boxer at the same time?’ I tell them, ‘Hold my Bible and I'll throw a left jab and show you.’”

That's what the world needs — to be shown how a person can be an athlete and a Christian

at the same time, a student and a Christian at the same time, a businessman and a Christian at the same time. The world needs a flesh and blood demonstration of what it means to be a Christian.

The call of scripture is to be in the world but not of it. We are to come out from among them and be separate. When the world is at its worst God's people are to be at their best. If you are not living a holy life there's a good chance your religion is nothing but leaves.

Armpit Christians

Second, he wants the fruit of a loving spirit. Some people are what I call "armpit Christians." They carry Bibles as big as a Dallas telephone directory under their arms, they attend every conference and seminar they can get to, they listen to tapes without end, but they are the fussiest, crankiest people in the church. Any Bible study that does not create a more loving, accepting, forgiving Christ-like spirit troubles me.

It is not our Bible knowledge, our orthodoxy or our church attendance that marks us as his. It is our love. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). It is so easy for us to slip into Pharisaism. The Pharisees were the Bible experts of their day. But they were also the most critical, judgmental, self-righteous, and loveless people Christ encountered.

Bible knowledge alone is never the test of our spiritual maturity. Travis Berry, a former missionary to Argentina, said while he was a missionary he taught

theology in a seminary for a time. Some of the theology tests he gave his students, very few passed. He said his best student one year turned out to be a Communist plant. Then he added, "You can't determine who is the best Christian by theology tests."

It is possible to be as straight as a gun barrel theologically and as cold as a gun barrel spiritually. A Christianity that does nothing for your human spirit will do nothing for your eternal soul. Such a religion is nothing but leaves.

Clapping and Cheering

Third, he wants the fruit of humble service. Service to others is the hallmark of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul spoke of our salvation when he wrote, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." But why did he save? "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

We were not saved to sit and soak and sour until the second coming. We were saved to serve, and not just to serve on a church committee, but to serve the needs of others. Serving on a committee can be, and often is, a substitute for and an excuse for not serving others.

Years ago on the "Merv Griffin Show," Merv interviewed some bodybuilders. You know the kind I'm talking about. They were the kind of men who had muscles on their muscles. I mean they had muscles

in places I don't even have places. Merv asked a poignant question, "What do you use all those muscles for?"

One guy answered by flexing his muscles in one of those bodybuilders' poses.

"No, you don't understand me," Merv said. "What do you *use* all those muscles for?"

The guy said, "I'll show you." And he flexed again, posing in another way.

"No, no. You still don't understand my question. Read my lips. What do you *use* them for?"

And the guy posed again. Merv got the message.

Can you imagine all that work to build muscle just to flex, just to show off? They don't use them to lift anything, or to push anything, or to carry anything. Those muscles are there just to be admired.

Some Christians are like that. They keep building up their spiritual muscles, but they don't use them for any good purpose. Their lives are nothing but leaves.

Marie Curlin tells about a young boy trying out for a school play. His mother asked, "What is your part?" He answered, "I am supposed to clap and cheer."

What part do you play in the Christian drama? I assure you it is to be more than just a clap and a cheer. You are to be a part of the cast, one of the main characters. If you aren't, your Christian life will be nothing but leaves.

More Afraid Than Ashamed

Fourth, he wants the fruit of a personal witness. A man who was caught in the act of committing a crime appeared in court. The judge asked him if he needed a lawyer. He answered by saying that what he needed most was not a lawyer, but a good witness.

A lawyer can argue the fine points of the law, but a witness tells from his own experience what happened. That's what the Lord wants from us. He doesn't need people who know and can argue all the fine points of scripture. He doesn't need people who can answer every question raised about the Bible. What he needs is a good witness.

A pastor told of a call he paid to one of his members who was at the point of death. He was one of his finest members. It was a somber visit, almost like a Roman Catholic making his last confession to his priest. The man said, "Pastor, I've heard a lot of preaching in my lifetime and I've been in a good church for years. But now the doctor tells me I am going to die. And I know it's true. Pastor," he said, "I am not afraid to die, but I am ashamed to die. I have never brought a soul to Christ and now it seems too late for me. I am not so much concerned about what I have done; what bothers me are the things that I haven't done."

I hope you don't go to heaven empty handed. Let me ask you a sobering question, "If you died today, and your body were placed in the casket at the front of your church, is there anyone who could look upon your face and say, 'I thank God

for you. I am going to heaven because of your witness.’”

The hope of winning our world to Christ is in a dedicated, committed laity sharing a personal witness for Christ day-to-day. We cannot leave the work of missions and evangelism to be done by career professionals. Nor can it be done in the church house alone. Without the fruit of a personal witness, our lives are nothing but leaves.

Out of the Mouths of Babes

Fifth, he wants the fruit of a simple faith. Jesus closed out the teaching about the fig tree by saying to his disciples, “Have faith in God” (Mark 11:22). Faith is by far the most important fruit our Lord wants in us for “without faith it is impossible to please him.”

The disciples had just seen an example of the kind of faith Jesus was talking about. As he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the people greeted him with their hosannas. As he arrived at the Temple grounds, little children followed him, continuing to sing hosannas to his name long after the adults had stopped. The outraged Pharisees criticized Jesus for not silencing them (Matt. 21:15). He responded, “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise” (Matt. 21: 16), a reference to a passage in Psalm 8.

These little children thus stand through the ages as examples of the kind of faith the Lord wants from us — a faith that acclaims him and follows him as Messiah.

On another occasion Jesus asked, “When the

Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8 NASB). Let me ask you that question personally. When the son of man comes, will he find faith in you? Will he find you following him and confessing him? Our biggest danger is not that we shall regard Jesus as untrue, but that we shall regard him as unnecessary. It is that we shall trust ourselves instead of trusting him.

I end where I started. Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). Can your life bear fruit inspection?

Years ago a woman visited our church for the first time. The next day she called me for an appointment. She told me, "I was converted to Christ as a teenager, but I have been a drifting Christian for years. Today I want to become a one hundred percenter for Christ." Then she added, "This must be the happiest day of my life."

If you have been a drifting Christian, nothing finer could happen than for you to become a one hundred percenter also. And if you do, your life will bear much fruit.

5

The Tragedy of What Might Have Been

Matthew 26:14-16; 27:3-5

One of the greatest novelists of all time was Russian born Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevski. He began his writing career with a best seller yet ended up in the gutter. He was the child of a surgeon, a gifted intellectual, an up-and-comer of Czarist society, and a young socialist.

His first novel, *Poor Folk*, was a best seller, lauded by critics and the public alike. He was only twenty-five when it was published.

Fame and quick success went straight to his head, and he began to drink, party, and carelessly criticize the Czarist government.

Quickly arrested and jailed for anti-government activity, he was sentenced to be shot. At the last minute the Czar pardoned him and reduced his sentence to years of confinement in Siberia.

While there, the New Testament was the only book allowed him. And as though repenting for having embraced the socialist atheistic position, he read it at every opportunity. He rediscovered Christ and found spiritual sustenance in the message of the gospels. Only Christ could raise the sinner, comfort the fallen, and promise the humble of heart new life on earth. This faith brought him serenity and soothed the bitterness of prison life.

Not long after his release he wrote to a woman who had befriended him during this period. He said: "To believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more manly, and more perfect than Christ, and not only is there nothing, but I tell myself with jealous love that there can be nothing. Besides, if anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth."

His incarceration ended, Dostoyevski returned more tamely to Soviet social life. He wrote in rapid succession five solid classics that are still in print.

But Dostoyevski never seemed to grow as a Christian. He was careless with regular worship; Bible study was not a solid discipline with him. No mature Christian took him under his wing and taught him how to live the Christian life. He again began to drink too much. His wife died. He had an affair. He became a compulsive gambler and lost so much money that he was all but bankrupt. His book publishers

granted him author advances that were quickly spent. He fled Russia to live all across Europe, always keeping just one step ahead of his creditors. His writing became gloomy; hopelessness pervaded his plots.

Studying a succession of his portraits, one sees that his countenance changed from eager, bright refinement to a hollow, haunted, driven look. Only in his death mask is there a look of peace. Dostoyevski died a broken, penniless waste in 1881. He was a fellow sufferer of ours in this fallen world, a gifted writer, and a Christian convert. But he was never disciplined in Christ.

One editor wrote of him, "To read Dostoyevski today, to study his life, is to be impressed with what he was. But it is further to be haunted by what might have been."

What is said of Dostoyevski may be said of many people. John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote:

*"For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these, 'It might have been!'"*

These words are a sad commentary on many lives. People start with such great promise and have such golden opportunities. But they make the wrong choices, they miss their opportunities and never reach their potential. Their lives are the "tragedy of what might have been."

Judas was such a man. He was one of the privileged few of all time. He was chosen by Jesus to be one of his twelve apostles. Yet, in the end, he betrayed Jesus and sold him for thirty pieces of silver.

The Bible offers scant information on Judas. We

know that he was from Kerioth, a town in Southern Palestine, making him the only one of Christ's companions not born in Galilee and thus an outsider among the twelve.

Yet there is no reason to suspect that Judas joined the little band of disciples with treacherous intent. Like the rest of the disciples, he recognized Christ as a leader of tremendous stature, and like the other disciples, forsook his former life to follow him.

At first there was nothing to distinguish Judas from the other eleven brethren as they walked the roads of Palestine with their master. Together they shared the hardships and the intimacy, venturing into hostile villages, braving well-aimed stones. They ate out of the same dish, drank from the same cool springs, sat at night around the same fire listening to the master explain this phrase, that parable. They saw his miracles and they felt the power of his personality.

Judas was not just one of the twelve, but a trusted and respected member of the group. He was obviously the kind of man who could invoke the confidence of others for he was chosen as the group's treasurer, receiving all contributions and doling out cash for purchases and alms. This is remarkable when you know that men with bookkeeping experience, like Matthew the tax collector, were among the disciples. Clearly, if Jesus and the others had not trusted him, they would not have assigned him this job.

But with all his privileges, Judas came to a tragic

end. He heard that a price had been put on the head of Jesus, a contract had been let on him, and Judas went to bargain with the enemies of Christ. He eventually betrayed Jesus and sold him for the paltry sum of thirty pieces of silver, the going price for a male slave.

Having completed the transaction, Judas led the people out to the Garden of Gethsemane where he identified Jesus, who then was arrested and taken off for trial and crucifixion.

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he tried to return the money that had been paid, but the high priest would not accept it. He then turned away in despair to hang himself. For his deed his name will forever be one of infamy.

There is a lesson in all of this for us. It is not enough to have a knowledge of Jesus. Judas had first-hand knowledge. He knew the facts of Jesus' life as few men have known them. It is not enough to associate with Christian people, to have Christian friends, and move in Christian circles. Judas' closest associates were the apostles. It is not even enough to hold a position of honor and trust in the church. Judas was the treasurer of the apostles. And Judas could have talked religion with the best of them. But all of this was not enough. Without a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, all of this meant nothing. As Vance Havner said, "Having a case of athlete's foot doesn't make you an athlete." You must make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

That was Judas' downfall. He heard Jesus' teach-

ings, saw his miracles, and felt his power, and though he moved in Christian circles and associated with Christian people, he never made a commitment of himself to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Beware of a Judas heart. It happened once and it can happen again. His story, then, is the tragedy of what might have been. What led to the downfall of Judas? There are at least three steps in his downward journey:

- Misplaced values
- Wasted opportunities
- Lost hope.

The Worst of Sins

First, it is the tragedy of misplaced values. Oscar Wilde described a cynic as a man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing. That was Judas.

To him, money was the most important thing in life. And the time came when he put it above his master.

The revelation of his misplaced values hits us in the middle of a deeply moving scene. Jesus and the disciples were in Bethany, a peaceful village some two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus had a close friend there, Lazarus, whom he had miraculously raised from the dead. The Lord and his disciples were honored at a banquet at which the risen Lazarus was present. One of Lazarus' two sisters, Mary, anointed Christ's feet with precious ointment, wiping them with her hair.

Judas was vexed by her generosity. “Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?” he asked maliciously. The master cut him short, “Let her alone!” Mary’s gesture of devotion, he explained, was but a symbol of his own imminent death; dead bodies, rather than the living, are anointed.

Don’t be fooled by Judas’ seeming concern for the poor. The apostle John tells us that he was a “thief” — a pilferer of the funds he held in trust — and did not care for the poor whom Christ had given unto his charge. He wanted more money in the bag for himself. His concern for the poor was just a cover-up for his own greed, and it was from this attitude that his act of betrayal eventually comes.

Covetousness was the root of Judas’ sin and failure. If Judas had only listened to Jesus he could have avoided this. Jesus had often warned that money is more than a medium of exchange, it is a god that bids us worship it. Now it had such a grip on Judas that it was his master. He would sell Jesus and his own soul for it.

Lee Iacocca, in his book, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, tells of his inner struggles as president of Ford Motor Company, “I was seduced by the good life. I found it almost impossible to walk away from an annual income of \$970,000. Of the seven deadly sins, I’m convinced that greed is the worst.”

Chuck Colson, the former White House hatchet man who buried the hatchet on the road to the peni-

tentiary for a Watergate crime, described his pre-Christian years like this, “My life was the American dream fulfilled, the envy of today’s most zealous yuppie.”

But the “great paradox was,” he warned, “that when I had all of these things — an office next to the president of the United States, a six-figure income, a yacht, a limousine and chauffeur — I had only a gnawing, inexplicable hollowness inside. I embodied the truth of what someone once wrote, ‘The poor are better off than the rich because they still think money will buy happiness, while the rich know better.’”

Colson discovered that the “real legacy of my life is not my achievements but the fact I was a convict, a fallen political leader who went to prison.”

He also learned that “God doesn’t want our successes. He wants us. He doesn’t demand our achievements; he demands our obedience. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of paradox where, through the ugly defeat of the cross, a holy God is utterly glorified.”

Judas was not the first, nor the last, to sell his soul for the wrong values. And if we are wise, we will know that the bottom line should not be top priority with us.

With Judas, in all probability, it began with small discrepancies. The Greek word that John uses for “thief” does not describe the bold, brazen kind of man who walks into 7-Eleven with a Saturday night special to demand that the clerk hand over the cash. Rather it describes a sneaky, conniving kind of person who never has the boldness to come out into the open. Judas

pilfered out of the money bag when no one was looking, a little bit at first, then more and more, until he was willing to sell Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, the going price for a male slave. Greed gave him his final push.

Beware of small discrepancies. Beware of innocent flirtations. Beware of white lies. Big falls result from little sins. Beware of a Judas heart that resents any lavish spending on Christ and his church as a cover-up for his own greed. Beware of putting money over the Master.

The Choice is Ours

Second, the downfall of Judas is the tragedy of wasted opportunities. What happened to Judas was not preordained. It was the result of his own deliberate choices. It is always so. The future is not engraved in stone. We make our own future by our foolish or wise choices.

Even after Judas had agreed to betray Jesus, it was not too late. He could still have backed out.

At the last supper, the air was heavy with foreboding. Christ was aware by now that one of the disciples had contracted to betray him. Though he humbly washed Judas' feet, along with those of the others, he made a distinction, "ye are clean, but not all" (John 13:10). As he glanced around, his eyes came to rest on Judas. He revealed to Judas that he knew the

plot. We may fool our fellow men, but we never fool our Lord. He always knows our heart.

Throughout the meal Christ treated Judas with kindness and consideration, giving him a chance to back out of the conspiracy. As the meal came to an end, Jesus said, "One of you which eateth with me shall betray me" (Mark 14:18).

And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, "Is it I?" And another said, "Is it I?" (Mark 14:19).

Then Jesus gave them a warning. "The Son of man indeed goeth, as it is written of him: but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! good were it for that man if he had never been born" (Mark 14:21).

Though Jesus knew what Judas was up to, he would not let him go without a last appeal and warning. Here was love's last appeal to him.

But Judas' mind was set; there was no changing it. And there would be no compulsion from Christ. He has given us wills that are free — even to betray him. His love appeals to us and his truth warns us, but his power will not force us.

It is always so. No one ever goes away from Christ without repeated warning. He comes to us again and again, in a multitude of ways, to call us to himself. What an awful responsibility is ours. We are free persons — he never coerces — we choose. Our Lord seeks to woo

and win us, but never to coerce us. If we will not respond to love, he will not force us.

There is Still Time

Third, the downward journey of Judas is the tragedy of lost hope. Until the end it was not too late. After the supper, Judas knew that Christ would spend the night with his disciples in the rock-strewn olive grove of Gethsemane. To keep the soldiers from laying hold of the wrong man, Judas would walk up to Jesus and kiss him on the cheek. “Hail, Master!” It was the proper way to greet a rabbi and he undoubtedly had done it many times before.

To the traitor’s greeting, Christ graciously replied, “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” (Matt. 26:50a). Note how Jesus addressed Judas — “Friend.”

For a brief moment the two desperate groups confronted each other, weapons gleaming in the shifting light of torches. Peter struck a servant of the high priest with his sword and cut off the man’s ear. “Put up again thy sword unto his place,” Jesus commanded him, “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword (Matt. 26:52). The cup which my father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11). Christ was led away and there was nothing but silence and the chill wind of dawn among the olive trees.

Judas must have attended the trial of Jesus. We can’t be sure, but we do know that the shock of seeing Christ condemned unnerved Judas, and remorse overcame him.

Obviously Judas never expected the story to

end this way. Many believe that Judas was simply attempting to force Jesus' hand. Jesus was moving too slowly for him and he thought he might force him into taking action against Rome and declaring himself Messiah. When this didn't happen, he came to a point of despair. We may imagine him, the silver still jingling in his money bag, arriving at the Sanhedrin. "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood," he said (Matt. 27:4). The priests left to go to the temple. Judas followed them and flung the money onto the stone floor. Then the words of Matthew, who left us the only contemporary account of Judas' death, "he went away and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:5).

Judas had taken Jesus' destiny into his own hands. Now he had to do the same with himself. The situation was not hopeless, but Judas was. Even at this point, when Judas realized his mistake, that he had betrayed innocent blood, that he had sinned, it was still not too late. I have to believe that if Judas had thrown himself down at the foot of the cross and begged forgiveness, the Lord would have granted it.

If only Judas would have remembered the story of the prodigal son. If only he'd have remembered our God is the god of a second chance. If only . . . But Judas obviously didn't adequately understand the mercy and the grace and the forgiveness of God. So, he saw no hope and, in despair, committed suicide.

Judas, in his betrayal of Christ, was not the

only one who failed Jesus that night. Peter denied him and all the other disciples deserted him. But look at the contrast in what Judas did with his betrayal and what Peter did with his denial. One committed suicide; the other wept bitter tears of failure. One determined his own judgment; the other accepted the judgment of God. One put an end to himself; the other experienced what God did to put an end to self atonement. For one, failure was the ultimate hopelessness; for the other, failure was the fertile soil of ultimate hopefulness.

The ultimate tragedy of Judas is that while Jesus chose Judas, Judas did not choose Jesus. While Jesus reached out to Judas, Judas did not reach back to Jesus. So he came to a place of despair and saw no way out but suicide. But we know if he had come back to Christ he would have been forgiven.

How do we handle our mistakes and errors today? Like Judas or like Peter? The cross, which was the essence of one's denial and the other's betrayal, now looms as our only hope. Christ died for both Judas and Peter. Only Peter realized the gift and went on to become a fiery preacher and mediator of the grace he had experienced. For today and all my days, I want to choose Peter's confession — with tears and the joy of a new beginning.

Beware of the Judas' heart. Don't put anything or anyone above the Lord. Don't ignore his warnings. Don't hide behind religious trappings.

Having knowledge of Jesus is not enough. Having Christian friends and moving in Chris-

tian circles is not enough. Having a position in the church is not enough. You must make a personal commitment to Christ.

I quoted earlier the lines by John Greenleaf Whittier:

*“For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these, ‘It might have been!’”*

I believe Christ would turn that couplet to say:

*“Of all the glad words of tongue to me,
The gladdest are these, ‘It still can be.’”*

It is too late for Judas, but it is not too late for you. The life buoy is being thrown out to you today. It comes not from me but from God himself. In his word and through the Holy Spirit, God is reaching out to you right now. Our Lord will accept you if you will accept him.

6

The Solution to the Pollution

Acts 3:19-20

When my boys were young, like most boys, they enjoyed playing with ropes. Invariably they got them tied in knots that they couldn't untie. So they brought them to me to get the knots out. My experience with them gave me a fresh understanding of the saying, "Sin is a knot that only God can untie."

Sin and the guilt that it produces is one of the central problems of mankind. We sin, and the memory of our wrong comes back like a gray ghost out of the past to haunt us and to rob us of joy and peace. Only God can straighten out the twisted, knotted lives that we make for ourselves.

Several years ago I was involved in one of those late night confession sessions that one never forgets. It was with a friend I had known for years. He and his wife had had repeated marital problems and she had suffered chronic emotional difficulties. I had never

understood why until that night.

Over twenty-five years earlier he had consented to his wife having an abortion. They lived on a farm at the time and the abortion was performed in their home. He took the fetus which was clearly that of a little boy, put it in a burlap sack, and buried it deep in the field behind their house. He had never told anyone about that experience until he told me that night.

Now, twenty-five years later, he was weeping over it. He had done wrong, and though years had passed, and though no one else knew about it, the memory of it still haunted him. It was this experience that was at the root of his marital conflict and his wife's emotional problems.

Strange, isn't it, that things so far in the past should trouble us in the present? But that's the way sin is. Therefore, if we are going to live happy, joyous lives, we must learn how to deal with sin and the guilt it produces.

But how do we do that? How do we deal effectively with our sin? Some people rationalize their sin. They minimize it, make light of it, and justify it. Others repress their sin. They shove it back into the dark recesses of their mind and act like it never happened. But trying to forget your sin is like trying to forget that you are walking with gravel in your shoe.

Some people try to conceal their sin, to cover it. They think if no one knows about it, nothing will come of it. But the Bible warns, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh

them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

Some people try to escape from their sin through alcohol or drugs, or through the ultimate escape, suicide.

Others try to atone for their sins. I toured a school for mentally retarded children years ago. In the dormitory section there was one beautifully furnished suite different from all the other rooms. When I commented about how exquisite it was, our host said, “Guilt built this room.” I asked what he meant by that. Then he told me that the young lady who occupied it was there as a result of brain damage she suffered in an automobile accident that occurred while her father was driving intoxicated. Now he was trying to pay for his sin by buying her the best of everything. Many memorials are established in love, but guilt also has put many a stained glass window in a church.

None of these efforts work ultimately. Sin is a knot that only God can untie. The answer to our guilt is his grace. Until we bring our sins to God, until we repent of them, confess them, and experience his cleansing, we have not dealt with them effectively or permanently.

The solution to our pollution is found in the scripture: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you” (Acts 3:19-20).

These two verses tell us three things about God's forgiveness of sin. They speak of:

- the conditions of forgiveness
- the completeness of forgiveness
- the consequences of forgiveness.

Get Converted, Not Adjusted

The conditions of forgiveness are presented first: "Repent ye therefore and be converted." Repentance refers to an exercise of the mind. It literally means "to care afterwards, to regret." It carries with it the idea of doing something or saying something and then changing your mind about it and being sorry for it. It is a change in attitude that leads to a change in action.

Jesus told the parable that illustrates this. It was the story of a man who had two sons. He said to the first, "Son, go work to day in my vineyard" (Matt. 21:28). The boy replied, "I will not." In defiance he refused to do what his father had told him to do. Later he reflected on his behavior, and was sorry for it. He repented and went into the vineyards to work.

The father said the same thing to his second son. This boy replied, "I go, sir." But he did not go. Jesus then asked the religious leaders with whom he was talking, "Which of these two boys did the will of the father?"

The answer is obvious: the first, the one

who changed his mind and obeyed his father. That's what repentance is. When we repent of our sins we loathe what we once loved and we detest what once delighted us.

The poet expressed repentance this way:

*Repentance is to leave the things
that we have done before,
And prove that we in earnest
grieve,
by doing them no more.*

Repentance then is a change of mind about sin that leads to a change of behavior. Until you repent, there can be no forgiveness. Augustine, one of the early church fathers, spent the early years of his life in drunkenness, debauchery, sexual licentiousness, and carousing. For years he spurned the church, barking against it and God, flaunting his wit in blasphemies before man.

Then conviction began to come upon him. On the verge of becoming a Christian, he would pray, "God grant me chastity, but not yet."

Sin is enjoyable. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Even the Bible acknowledges this (Heb. 11:25). And sin gets a grip on us. We love it and want to keep doing it. So many people are like Augustine. They still enjoy their sins, and they are reluctant to abandon them. But until you are willing to acknowledge your sin and turn from it, to give it up, there can be no forgiveness. As Spurgeon said, "You and your sins must part or you and God cannot be

friends.”

Then you must be converted. The word converted meant “to turn about.” This refers to turning to Christ in faith. Repentance and conversion are both parts of the same process. We turn from our sins and turn in faith to the Savior who is empowered to forgive sin.

There are a lot of people today trying to get adjusted when they need to get converted. They are trying to get their sins explained when they need to get them forgiven. Forgiveness is no light and easy matter. It demands that you repent and be converted.

We need not only the initial cleansing from sin that comes through repentance and conversion. We also need a continual cleansing. Someone has said, “We could sooner find a man who has never sinned as to find one who has not committed the same sin twice.” When we have repented and been converted, we are not forever through with sin. We must then have cleansing on a daily basis.

The scriptures speak of this in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

What is the condition for continual cleansing from sin? It is “confession.”

The word “confess” literally means “to say the same thing as, to agree with.” God convicts us of sin in two places — in the Bible and

in our conscience. To “confess” means that I agree with what God says to me and about my sin in the Bible and in my conscience. I say the same thing about myself that he says to me. I say to God, “You are right. I am wrong.”

This is not easy to do. It is against everything in our nature. The hardest three words there are to say, and to say correctly, are the words, “I have sinned.” But we must do it if we want to be cleansed.

If we confess our sins to God, what assurance do we have that they are forgiven? Our assurance is based on the character of God. He is “faithful and just” to forgive us and to cleanse us. Our assurance is in the fact that God is reliable. He tells the truth. He will do what he says he will do. I need no greater assurance than that.

Salvation in Three Tenses

The scriptures also speak of the completeness of forgiveness. If we repent and are converted, our sins will be “blotted” out. The word “blotted” goes back to the time when ink had no acid in it. Modern ink has acid in it and thus bites into the paper. That’s why to erase it you almost have to rub a hole in the paper. But ancient ink was not that way; it had no acid in it. It just lay on top of the page and dried. Because paper was very valuable in those days, it was used again and again. All that was needed to remove the old ink was to moisten it by

wiping a wet sponge across the page. The page would then be as good as new. The word “blotted” describes that process of wiping old pages clean and making them new again. It pictures for us just how complete God’s forgiveness and cleansing are.

Salvation comes to us in three tenses: the past, the present, and the future. The future tense of salvation is eternal life, the hope of heaven. The older you grow, the more of your loved ones who have died, the more precious this aspect of salvation becomes.

But there is much more to salvation than future hope. There is also present help. As one preacher put it, “I’m not interested in pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by. I want a chicken in my kitchen today. I want ham where I am now.”

Salvation in the present tense is peace and power — the ability to live the abundant life. Jesus is good not only for the sweet by-and-by, but also for the nasty here-and-now.

But that’s still not all. There is also a past tense to salvation. God forgives all my past sins. Listen! What we need is not just to turn over a new leaf in life. We need to have the old leaves wiped clean. The good news about sin is, Jesus came to rub it out, not to rub it in.

It is possible, however, for us to repent, be converted and have our sins blotted out, and still be plagued by the memory of them. As Alfred Korzybski said, “God may forgive your sins but your nervous system won’t.” How, then, do we deal with the memory of the past that won’t go away?

First, remember that when God forgives our sins he forgets them. That means that he will never bring them up again. Therefore, if they are ever brought up again, it is not God who does it. It is our adversary, Satan. He will, if he can, use the memory of past sins to rob us of our present joy and usefulness by causing us to focus on our past failures.

Satan's first effort is always to keep us from becoming Christians. If he fails at that, his second effort will be to keep us from being effective Christians. If he can keep us focusing on our failures of the past, he renders us ineffective for God in the present. So be aware of who is responsible for the haunting memory of forgiven sins.

Second, when the memory of past sin comes, instead of dwelling on your past, let it serve as a springboard to bring you to the cross. Focus on Christ's accomplishment, not on your failure. Remember what he did for you and thank him for it.

Don't keep confessing the same sin over and over unless you keep committing it again and again. I have counseled with people who have said of their wrong, "I have confessed that sin a thousand times." I always tell them, "That's nine hundred ninety-nine times too many." You need not confess the same sin more than once. Thereafter, when the memory of past wrongs comes, thank God for his grace and forgiveness. Praise and thank him for his grace that has taken away your sin. If you will repeatedly thank him instead of confessing to him, victory will soon be yours.

You Can't Unscramble an Egg

Finally, consider the consequences of forgiveness. When we repent and are converted, there comes a time of “refreshing” from the presence of the Lord.

The word “refreshing” means “to cool,” “to relieve.” What a cool breeze is on a hot day, what a cold drink of water is to parched lips, what a damp cloth is to a fevered brow — that’s what forgiveness is to the soul. With it comes a new joy, a new zest in life.

If life has grown stale for you, I’ve got good news. You can have a refreshing new life in Christ. With the forgiveness of sin, God sweeps into your life and leaves you refreshed, invigorated.

One-half of the hospital beds in America are occupied by people with mental and emotional problems. Billy Graham said a leading psychiatrist told him that fully one-half of his patients could be released if they could just have the assurance that their sins were forgiven.

Listen, either your sins have been forgiven or you are yet in your sins. Which is it? There is no middle ground. There is no other alternative. Don’t let your sins drive you to despair. Let them drive you to Jesus Christ and the greatness of God, who alone, can deal with them.

You can’t unscramble an egg. You can’t unbreak a glass. You can’t undo your sin. Sin is a knot that only God can untie. Repent and be converted and God, through Christ, will wipe the pages of life clean for you and you can be-

gin to write anew.

There is beautiful story in the book of Luke of a harlot whose life was wonderfully changed when she met Christ. Out of a sense of deep gratitude, she found Jesus at a banquet in the home of a Pharisee one evening and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to wipe them dry with her hair.

When the Pharisee saw this, he reproved Jesus for allowing it. If Jesus was really a prophet, he thought, he would know what kind of woman she was and would have nothing to do with her.

But Jesus said to him, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven” (Luke 7:47b). Look at those two phrases side by side: “are many — are forgiven.” That’s the whole gospel. Through what Jesus Christ did on the cross, our sins, which are many, can be forgiven.

7

Follow Thou Me

John 21:18-22

A young man went to the office of John D. Rockefeller, seeking a job. Mr. Rockefeller asked, "Young man, are you a leader?" The applicant, whose virtues ran to simplicity and honesty, answered after a moment of hesitation, "I can't really say, but I can tell you this: I'm a good follower."

The great man grinned and said, "I've got a raft of leaders out there already. I sure can use one good follower. You're hired."

When I read the Bible, what I find Jesus looking for is followers. He walked by the Sea of Galilee where Peter and Andrew were washing their nets and said, "*Follow me*, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19).

He walked by the seat of customs where Matthew was collecting taxes and said to him, "*Follow me.*" A rich young ruler came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded, "Go and live by the command-

ments.” The young man answered, “All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?” (Matt. 19:20). And Jesus said, “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, ...and *follow me*” (Matt. 19:21).

A group came to Jesus, wanting to follow him without first counting the cost. He cautioned, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and *follow me*” (Matt. 16:24). In John 10:27 Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they *follow me*.” And again, in John 12:26 he said, “If any man serve me, let him *follow me*.”

In all of these encounters our Lord bid these people, as he bids us, to do one thing: give up our old way of life, make him lord and master, and begin to walk after him. The call “follow me” is the call to be a Christian. It is the call to be a disciple. It is the call to service.

We get our best understanding of this call, I believe, in Simon Peter’s last encounter with Christ recorded in the gospels. It occurred as they walked by the Sea of Galilee following the Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection.

In the upper room the night of his arrest and trial, Jesus told his disciples, “One of you shall betray me” (Matt. 26:21).

Simon Peter answered “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (Matt. 26:33 NASB). Then Jesus warned Peter, “before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times” (Matt. 26:34 NASB). Simon Peter, in his usual

impetuous and boastful way said, "It won't be me. These other disciples may fail you but I will be faithful even unto death."

Then Jesus and his disciples left the upper room for the Garden of Gethsemane. While they were there, and as Jesus agonized over the cross, the soldiers came to arrest him. The other disciples fled into the night, but Simon Peter followed the mob as they took Jesus to Caiaphas for the mockery of a trial. Someone had built a fire in the courtyard and Peter stood beside it, observing the proceedings. It soon became evident that the mob wanted blood. As Peter watched and listened, the night grew cold, the fire grew hot, and he grew lukewarm.

A servant-girl approached him from out of the darkness saying, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." But Peter denied it and responded, "I do not know what you are talking about."

In a while another servant-girl saw him and said, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Once again Peter denied any knowledge of the Lord. "I do not know the man." And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away. Then, with cursings and swearings, as if that was the surest way to convince his accuser he was not a disciple, Peter said, "I do not know the man!" (Matt. 26:69-74 NASB).

Just then the rooster crowed and Peter cried. He remembered the words of his Lord, "Before a cock crows, you will deny me three times." He had failed the Lord whom he loved.

Jesus was then condemned, crucified on the old rugged cross, buried in Joseph's tomb, and on the third day raised from the dead.

Now the disciples, who had gone back to their fishing on the Sea of Galilee, were returning from an unsuccessful night of fishing when they found Jesus waiting for them on the shore. He singled out Peter and, with his arm around his shoulder, walked with him along the seaside. Jesus asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" And Peter responded, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee."

Jesus then said, "Feed my lambs."

Jesus asked a second time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" And a second time Peter responded, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." Again Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep."

Then a third time Jesus asked Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" It grieved Peter in his heart for the Lord to ask him the third time if he loved him. It brought back bitter memories of his night of denial. He responded, "Lord, thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love thee."

And Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

It was following that experience that Jesus said to Peter, "When you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, ... someone else will gird you and bring you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18 NASB).

Jesus was referring to the nature of Peter's death, that in the future his commitment to Christ would take him to the cross where he would die as a martyr for his faith.

Jesus then said, "Follow me."

Just then Peter turned around and saw John, the apostle, following them. He asked Jesus, "What shall this man do?" It was a natural response. If Jesus was calling him to martyrdom, it was reasonable for him to want to know what would happen to John.

Jesus' response was sharp, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" (John 21:22 NASB)

The call that came to Peter, "Follow me," is the call that comes to every one of us. And in his experience we can understand the nature of that call, perhaps better than any other place in scripture. It teaches us three things about Jesus' call to commitment:

- He bids us follow him regardless of our past.
- He bids us follow him regardless of the cost.
- He bids us follow him regardless of what others may do.

Hope for Failures

First, Jesus bids us follow him regardless of our past. Peter was a man with a past. I think he must have been a strong-willed child, for all his life he was characterized by hard-driving, impulsive, and aggressive behavior. That's how he built "Simon Peter Enterprises" into the best fishing business on the Sea of Galilee.

From the moment Peter met Jesus, the Lord changed his desires and his attitudes. But that didn't

erase his old nature and it didn't break the old habit patterns of his life immediately. Peter would struggle with his impulsiveness and aggressiveness the rest of his life.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" (Matt. 16:13). They gave him the scuttlebutt. Some people were saying he was John the Baptist, others Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

Then Jesus asked, "But whom say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Peter, without permission, spoke for the whole group, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

Jesus then told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and "suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed" (Matt. 16:21). Peter's response was astounding. He took him and began to rebuke him saying, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee" (Matt. 16:22).

In one instance Peter is acclaiming Jesus; in the next, he is reproofing him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword and attacked, cutting off the ear of a servant of the high priest. With one sword, he would have taken on the whole army. And, of course, in the upper room Peter boasted of his loyalty and devotion, not realizing that the Lord knew his heart better than he knew himself.

Peter's life is a record of one blunder after another. You would think after all those failures the Lord would

wash his hands and be through with him forever. But that is not the way of our Lord.

There is an interesting passage that describes the character of the Messiah and explains his way with us. It says, "A bruised reed shall not he break, and a smoking flax shall he not quench" (Matt. 12:20a).

Nothing could be more helpless than a bruised reed. It can't even stand by itself. Nothing could be more useless than a smoking wick. It can't even give off adequate light. But our Lord is tender and compassionate. It is not his way to discard broken things, but to restore them.

Peter's life is good news for failures. It is the gospel of the second chance. It says that no person has to stay the way they are.

Like Peter, we are people with a past. Our sins may not be his sins, but they are sins nonetheless. The scriptures say, "There is not a righteous man on the earth that doeth good and sinneth not." I assume that includes you. Again it says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23 NASB).

Some people think too highly of themselves. They are like the man who said, "I've got just one fault. I cuss a little when I get drunk." He had more faults than he knew about. So do most of us.

Others think too lowly of themselves. Four men in the church felt they should confess their sins in the presence of their pastor. When they finished, one of them said, "Preacher, you know, our sins are so vile, I don't know how God Almighty can use any one

of us. I don't know why God doesn't just kill us and be rid of us."

The pastor, with great insight, said, "Men, remember, God is a potter and he works with mud."

The good news is no matter how deep into sin we may have gone, no matter how many scars there may be on our soul, no matter how many smudges there may be on our past, the Lord is not through with us.

The promise of the Bible is, ". . . and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 7:37). Regardless of what you may have done in days gone by, the Lord will not discard you. He will give you a second chance. He will take you back. This very day he bids us, "Come, follow me."

Ready for Either

Second, the Lord bids us follow him regardless of the cost. Before the Lord said to Peter, "Follow me," he spoke to him of his approaching death. This was a prediction of Peter's death by crucifixion. Tradition indicates that Peter was crucified for his faith — upside down — because he did not feel worthy of dying as his Lord did. Despite what the future held, Jesus asked Peter to follow him.

He says the same to us. He bids us count the cost, then come and follow. No one can ever accuse Jesus of calling people under false pretenses. As Vance Havner said, "Our Lord never put discipleship in fine print in the contract. He calls on us to forsake all, to take up our cross, to deny self, and love him more than all else."

The cost of following Christ would be high for Peter. To say “yes” would cost him his life. That made it hard to do. After all, Peter had denied the Lord out of fear of death. Now he was called upon to accept it readily as a part of his discipleship.

Many Christians today have not been told, but it still costs to follow Christ. It doesn’t cost to join the church. It takes little to get in the church and nothing to stay in. It doesn’t cost to call yourself a Christian. But it costs to follow him.

If you say “yes” to Christ today, it’s doubtful, at least in the United States, that you will be called on to die for him. But you will be called on to live for him. And sometimes it’s harder to live for him than it would be to die for him.

General George S. Patton once asked a soldier, “Private, what’s a soldier’s first duty to his country?”

The young man responded, “Sir, a soldier’s first duty is to die for his country!”

General Patton fired back, “No! A soldier’s first duty is not to die for his country. It’s to make the enemy die. His first duty is to live for his country.”

Just so, you may not be called on to die for Christ, but you are called on to live for him. Either way it costs you your life.

At one time the symbol of the Moravian church was an ox with an altar on one side, a plow on the other, and underneath, the words, “Ready for either.”

When Christ calls us, we must be ready to die on the altar or ready to pull at the plow. We must be ready for either.

Discipleship is not to be taken lightly. A longtime

friend of mine, Charles Tope, retired after 30 years of missionary service in east Africa. When I first met him, he was the promising young pastor of a beautiful church in a county seat town. One day I noticed on the wall of his study the picture of a nail-pierced hand with blood dripping from it. Underneath were the words: "Dedication is dangerous, it nailed Jesus to the cross."

Charles and his wife, LaVerne, dared to take the call to discipleship seriously and, as a result, gave up the comfort and ease of America for the dangers and hardships of Africa.

Where will he lead us if we follow him? We do not know — nor do we need to. Jim Ungaro said he once asked God for a three-year plan for his life. "Just a little blueprint, Lord," he asked. "What is life going to be like? I just want to be a good steward of my time and talents."

Later a friend asked him, "Well, did he give you an answer?" Jim said, "I got an answer, all right. He said simply and firmly: 'Follow me.'"

And that's all we need to know. If he calls us, like Peter, we may be uncertain and fearful about our future. But we are assured that God is in control and we can confidently follow Christ.

Be It Resolved

Third, he bids us to follow him regardless of what others may do. When Jesus spoke of the suffering Peter must endure to follow him, Peter's natural response was, "What about John? What shall this man do?"

He wanted to know how John would die. Jesus replied that Peter should not concern himself with that. We tend to compare our lives to others, whether to rationalize our own level of devotion to Christ or to question God's justice. Jesus responds to us as he did to Peter: "What is that to you? You follow me!"

Thus, Jesus emphasized individual responsibility and personal accountability. What happens to others is not our problem. What they do or leave undone does not excuse us. We have only one concern. That is to follow him.

If you consult Jonathan Edwards' diary — one of the quaintest and most inspirational diaries any man has left for the after generations to read — you will come across this double resolution: "Resolve first, that every man ought to obey Christ without hesitation or reservation. Resolve second, whether anybody else does it or not, I will, so help me God." That is exactly correct. Whether anybody else does his duty or not, whether anybody else is devout or not, whether anybody else is punctual and conscientious or not, I must be. Regardless of others you are to follow.

That's resolve we all need.

Years ago another friend, Al Cummins, felt the call to missions. But he couldn't or wouldn't decide to go. He said to his friend, Jim Walker, "Jim, if you'll just go with me, I'll go." Jim said, "But, Al, I don't feel called."

For two years Al struggled with his decision. If Jim would go, he would go with him. When he gave his testimony to the Houston pastors conference, Al

said one day he read the scripture passage where Peter asks, “What about John?” And for the first time he understood what Jim did didn’t matter. He had to go whether anyone else did.

Jesus is passing by now, and as he does, he bids you follow him. Will you do it?

Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta, said that one day his daughter came in from college, bright-eyed and excited, saying, “Dad, I’m going to Uganda.” He asked her, “What for?” She replied, “They need me over there. I am going to help.” He said to her, “There are plenty of people to help right here.” She said, “But they need me over there.”

He replied, “You don’t know what you are doing. It is dangerous over there. You could be killed.” She replied, “Yes, I do. I know what I’m doing.”

He said he put her on the plane and as he walked away he thought, “I always wanted my daughter to be a respectful Christian. I never wanted her to be a real one.”

The difference between a respectful Christian and a real one is in our response to his call, “Follow me.” What our Lord asks is not our admiration; he asks for commitment. He bids us to follow him regardless — regardless of our past, regardless of the cost, and regardless of what others may do.

8

The Unchanging God in a Changing World

Malachi 3:6

We don't know everything Adam said to Eve as they left the garden, but one thing he must have said was, "My dear, the world is changing." And it has been changing ever since, but never more so than today.

Our world is more dynamic today than it has ever been in history. It took from the beginning of time until the time of Christ to accumulate the sum of human knowledge. Then it took from the time of Jesus until 1760, just shortly before the American Revolution, for human knowledge to double. The number of facts people knew about the universe and its workings doubled only once in 1,760 years. By 1880, in just 120 years, human knowledge doubled again; then by 1914, in 34 years, it doubled again; by 1941, in 27 years, it doubled again; by 1952, in 11 years, it doubled again; by 1959, in 7 years, it doubled again;

and by 1962, in 3 years, it doubled again. By 1985, human knowledge was doubling every six months — and now it doubles in even less time.

More information has been produced in the last thirty years than in the previous 5,000 years combined. More than half the scientists who have ever lived are alive today. One trip of the space shuttle Challenger produced enough information to fill 44,000 books.

Ninety percent of all the items in the supermarket did not exist ten years ago. It is estimated that fifty percent of college graduates are going into jobs which did not exist when they were born. And, it is estimated that ninety percent of the businesses in the United States were started in the last 25 years.

These kinds of changes are taking place in every field. For example, in the field of medicine alone, by the year 2000, the knowledge base will double each year. That's 100 percent obsolescence annually. In time, by genetic engineering, doctors may be able to design out all genetic defects. And, in time, they may be able to replace any part of the body artificially.

Travel has seen the same kind of change. More than two hundred years ago George Washington traveled from Virginia to Washington, D.C. by horseback. If he was in the southwest part of the state it took him ten days, traveling at a speed of 25 miles per day. Today, astronauts can enter a space shuttle and travel at 25,000 miles per hour. At that speed you could fly from New York City to San Francisco in eight

minutes.

One man put it this way: “My great-grandfather rode a horse, but was afraid of a train. My grandfather rode a train, but was afraid of a car. My father rode in a car, but was afraid of an airplane. I ride in an airplane, but I’m afraid of a horse.” That’s making a full cycle.

With all these advances, it is possible today to have breakfast in New York City, lunch in Dallas, and dinner in Los Angeles . . . and have your bags wind up in Mexico City.

Improvements in electronics technology are equally startling. Recently a device was invented that will soon enable you to get as many as 750 channels on a television set. The problem is, by the time you find the program you want to watch, it will be over.

Social structures are changing rapidly, too, today. In recent years, every major city in Texas has had a woman as mayor. Many states have female governors. And, increasingly, women are ruling countries around the world — Canada, Great Britain, Argentina, Turkey, India, Israel, and the Philippines, to name a few.

Women hold most of the wealth of the world, but it has been managed by men. In the future, women will be controlling wealth more and will play a more definite role in every aspect of life. I read recently that women spend 76 percent of the world’s wealth. And men spend 24 percent . . . on women.

The rate of change is so great today that we can

hardly acclimate ourselves to the constant upheavals it causes. The result is we are suffering from a version of constant cultural shock.

I know one thing — we need either a tranquilizer or a stabilizer. In the midst of all these changes it is good to know that there is one thing that does not change — the Lord. He is constant and abiding. In this ever-changing world, he is an anchor for our soul, a fixed point of reference for our moral decisions, an axis around which our lives can revolve.

The scriptures speak of the changeless God in our changing world when they say, “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6).

These words were spoken in a time of great change. Worship had become flippant and casual as people gave their second-best to God. The moral law of God was being disregarded, especially concerning marriage. Divorce was rampant. And the Lord’s command to tithe was being ignored to the economic detriment of the nation. And neither priest nor people took seriously the threat of approaching judgment.

In that kind of world, the Lord warned his people that he had not changed. The only reason his judgment had not come on them was his previous promise to protect Israel. It was his consistency, his changelessness, that saved them. He had never broken any promise spoken. That is the only reason they were not consumed.

There is a corollary passage to this in the New

Testament. The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as “the same yesterday, to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8).

These words were also written in a time of great change. Old structures were crumbling and new ones were emerging. Persecution was intensifying. To assure God’s people that he would never leave them nor forsake them, and that they did not need to be afraid of what any man would do to them, he emphasized the changelessness of Christ.

So, in the context of both warning and comfort, we are reminded that we serve a changeless God in this changing world.

Because God does not change, there are at least four other things that do not change:

- The Christian faith
- Ethical precepts
- Personal accountability
- Final hope.

Cutting Edge or Bleeding Edge

First, because God does not change, the Christian faith does not change. Jude tells in his book that he had intended to write a theological treatise on our common salvation. But, because of things that had happened, he decided to write to encourage us to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

The word “faith” refers to the whole scope of Christian doctrine without addition or deletion. The word “once” means “once and for all.” The revelation of God was full and complete in Jesus Christ.

That doesn’t mean our faith does not need to be

reexamined, re-expressed, and reapplied. Every generation needs to do that. Our challenge is always to have a deeper understanding, a clearer expression, and a broader application of our faith. But it was and is complete. There is nothing to be added to or taken from it.

“But,” you ask, “should I believe what my father and my grandfather believed?” The answer is, “yes.” If they understood God’s revelation correctly, then you should believe the same as they did. All the changes in modern society do not affect eternal truth.

“But,” you say, “that’s old fashioned.” Yes, and so is the sun but it still warms the earth. So is water, but it still quenches our thirst. So is the soil, but it still produces food.

One of the glories of the church, I believe, is that it does not change too much or too fast. There is something stabilizing about coming to church and singing “Amazing Grace” and “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” the same kind of hymns that my grandfather and my great-grandfather sang. In this changing world, we’ve got to figure out how to stay on the cutting edge, without being on the bleeding edge, of life. We’ve got to learn to accommodate our message without compromising it.

What can a person believe in today’s changing world? What is the faith that was once delivered to the saints? It is: Jesus is Lord and Savior; the Bible is true in all its parts; every soul is competent under God; and every believer is a priest.

It is that the Holy Spirit is the power for Christian

living, the church is God's instrument for world redemption, and that the return of Christ is the only hope of the world. These are a part of the unchanging core of our faith. If God never changes, neither does the Christian faith.

The Moral Meltdown

Second, if God does not change, ethical precepts do not change. There is no area of our life where change has been more drastic and more disturbing than with our morals. We are like a sailor trying to navigate the sea of life without a compass. We are like an engineer trying to run his train on time without a clock. We are like a businessman trying to operate without a standard set of weights and measurements.

Confusion and inconsistency can be seen everywhere. For example, the National Football League would not allow the 1993 Super Bowl to be played in Phoenix because the state of Arizona did not observe Martin Luther King's birthday. However, they did allow the 1994 Super Bowl to be played in Atlanta, although Georgia does not observe Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

In our kind of world, people often believe both in women's rights and animal rights. They may support the right to abort a human fetus for personal convenience, yet oppose the right to destroy a rabbit for cancer research. In our kind of world it's not unusual to be invited to attend a seminar on alcohol and drug abuse, only to have the seminar preceded by a cocktail hour.

The results of our hypocrisy have been devastating. In fifty years, movies have gone from silent to unspeakable. There is so much nudity in films these days that next year's Oscar for costume design ought to go to a dermatologist.

And television talk shows have become just one big gab-bag of dysfunctional people talking to dysfunctional hosts about their miserable lives.

Fifty percent of our marriages now end in divorce. Odds are, when a couple walks down the aisle to be married, their marriage will not last seven years. One of them will walk out before the warranty on their washer and dryer runs out.

Forty-two percent of our young people say they are sexually active. One out of every four households in the U.S. will be touched by theft or a violent act this year. And one out of five women of child-bearing age will have an abortion.

One of every sixteen teenage girls has a baby each year. Every four seconds a woman is violently assaulted somewhere in America. And one in every four members of a church or synagogue is a victim/survivor of sexual or domestic violence.

Drug abuse, suicide, venereal disease, and AIDS are major problems that confront every one of us. So serious is the problem that school and government leaders are saying we must return to teaching values in the public schools.

The church must accept part of the responsibility for the moral meltdown of our society. We have become a self-seeking church in a feel-good

society. Out of fear of being labeled old fashioned, prudes, or holier-than-thou, we have developed a cavalier attitude toward sin. One well-known television preacher put it this way, "I never use the word sin in my sermons. That's negative and there's too much negative in the world already." We have often sacrificed revelation for relevance. The result is we have turned God's sheepfold into a zoo.

Those who oppose the truth desire a church which will not interfere. In Germany, Nazi Joseph Goebbels said: "Churchmen dabbling in politics should take note that their only task is to prepare for the world hereafter."

Too many Christians have, albeit unknowingly, taken Goebbel's advice. "There is nothing," writes William Barclay, "that the world would like so much as a silent Church."

If America is to have a rebirth of morality, we must return to preaching the gospel of the narrow way. We must call sin what it is. We must treat it like a rattlesnake instead of a cream-puff. We must have pulpits aflame with righteousness. We need men of God who are preachers, not politicians.

But where do we find a basis for morality? Schopenhauer, the German philosopher said, "It is easy to preach morality but difficult to establish any basis for it." Ultimately, right and wrong must be rooted in God — not in public opinion, not by popular vote, not through a Gallup poll.

No less a historian than Will Durant, in his book *Lessons of History*, said, "There is no significant example in history before our time of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion."

If we are going to find our way out of our moral maze, we must return to God. Right is right because God said so. And wrong is wrong because God said so. And, if God never changes, then neither do right and wrong. If a thing was right yesterday, it is right today. And it will be right tomorrow. If a thing was wrong yesterday, it is wrong today, and if the world shall last for a thousand years, it will still be wrong.

If a hundred people say a foolish thing is good, it is still foolish. Numbers have nothing to do with it. It is all related to God.

And these time-tested laws have not been handed down arbitrarily by a doting old man out of touch with reality. They are how life works best. The Bible is our manufacturer's operations manual. If we will follow it we will find life at its best.

Because God does not change, ethical precepts do not change.

The Most Awesome Thought

Third, because God does not change, personal accountability does not change. The attempt to evade personal responsibility for our actions is not new. Ever since Adam was caught red-handed with forbidden fruit in his hand, people have tried to blame

their choices on someone else. Adam said, “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (Gen. 3:12). And, when Eve was confronted, she said, “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat” (Gen. 3:13).

Our age has taken evading personal responsibility to new heights, or perhaps I should say, new depths. We now have no fault divorce, no fault insurance, and we would like to have no fault sin. We would like to blame everything on heredity, environment, our parents, or the schools.

There is such a thing as sin that is not a disease. There is sin that cannot be blamed on our genetics, our environment, our parents, our schools, our society, or on poverty. We can only take responsibility for it ourselves.

Albert Schweitzer, German missionary and Nobel laureate, said, “Man must cease attributing his problems to his environment, and learn again to exercise his will — his personal responsibility in the realm of faith and morals.”

The Bible states succinctly, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7).

As individuals or as a nation, we must realize we can't have our “heyday” without a “pay day.” As Ruth Graham said, “If God spares America, he's going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Because God does not change, personal accountability does not change.

Hope and Air Force One

Fourth, because God does not change, our ultimate hope does not change. Our hope is not in education or science or politics. Our hope is in the Lord.

When Lyndon B. Johnson was president he said, “At the desk where I sit, I’ve seen that the answer to all our problems, indeed the answer to all the problems of the world, comes down to one word — that word is education.”

Was Lyndon Johnson right? At the turn of the century people were saying, “Open the schools and close the jails.” We opened the schools, but we haven’t closed the jails. They are more crowded than ever before. And, in many schools today the primary concern of the administration is not education but security. Metal detectors and armed guards are now commonplace.

In the 1950s, the major discipline problems in our public schools were cigarette smoking, skipping school, running in the halls, spit balls, chewing gum, and whispering in class.

Today, according to a recent survey, the major problem is deadly weapons — kids carrying guns, knives, and even assault weapons. This is followed by arson, drugs, vandalism, and drunkenness.

Our hope is not in science. Science has made the world a neighborhood, but it cannot make it a brotherhood. Our hope is not in politics. As Charles Colson said, “Just because a politician quotes scripture, don’t believe the kingdom of God will arrive on

Air Force One.”

What then is our hope? The scriptures give us the answer. Peter writes, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:13).

It is only in new heavens and a new earth that everything will be right. That makes his return our ultimate hope.

But what about the meantime? That interim between now and when he returns? He is still our hope. A pastor friend said early in his ministry he and a layman in his church worked together in a number of revival meetings. He did the preaching; the layman led the music.

His friend began to have throat problems and checked into a hospital for tests. The results revealed he had throat cancer.

The man’s wife called the pastor to the hospital. When he arrived, she told him the diagnosis and said, “My husband doesn’t know. I need you to help me tell him.”

When they walked into the hospital room, the layman said to his wife, “Honey, why don’t you get us a Coke? I imagine the pastor is thirsty. We can drink while we talk.”

When she was gone, the layman said to his pastor, “Preacher, I know I’ve got cancer and they don’t know how to tell me. But it’s okay. All these years we’ve been telling people Jesus is enough. Now he is going to give me a chance to prove it.”

Sometime later, just before he died, the layman

said to my friend, “Pastor, wherever you go, as long as you live, you can tell people Jesus is true to his word. Jesus is enough.”

We, too, must rest our hope in the fact that our Lord is true to his word. In the final analysis we have nothing else. But we need nothing else.

What does this mean to you and me? It means there can be stability to our lives in this changing world. We can trust Christ as a little child and know that he holds our hand as we walk through life. As we grow to the teenage years and struggle with moving into adulthood, we can know he is constant and abiding. When we become adults with family responsibilities, God will still be with us. Then, when we move toward the sunset years of life, God will still be there. And when we walk through the icy waters of the river of death, we will be able to say with David, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23).

Those are some things you can count on. It will never change.

9

Foundations for a Christian Home

Ephesians 5:22 - 6:4

The single greatest mark of success in life, I believe, is a good marriage and a happy home. Far more important than the money you make, the positions you hold or the honors you receive, is the relationship you have with your spouse and your children. And this is more difficult to achieve than almost anything else you will ever do.

It is harder to be a good husband or wife or good parent than it is to be a good physician, or a good teacher, or even a good pastor. This is partly because, to be good in our professions, we know we must make a conscious effort, while we think a good marriage and a happy home come automatically. And the home is the one place where we are really ourselves; there is no pretense, no hypocrisy there.

A lot of people do not recognize how impor-

tant the home is. They are like the young man who said, “What do I need with a home? I was born in a hospital; they took me out of the hospital and put me in a nursery; they took me out of the nursery and put me into kindergarten; they took me out of kindergarten and put me in a boarding school; they took me out of the boarding school and put me in the university; now that I’ve finished the university I’m a traveling salesman. Man, I don’t need a home. All I need is a garage.”

Many people look at the home as a place to park the car, to spend the night, to eat their meals, and beyond that, it has little significance in their lives.

But the scriptures tell us marriage and the home are central in the plan of God for the individual and for society as a whole. Having made man in his own image, the Lord stepped back, observed his creation and said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

Prior to this, God saw that everything he had made was good. He brought light out of darkness and he “saw that it was good.” He separated the land from the sea and he “saw that it was good.” He created grass and trees, and he “saw that it was good.” He set the sun and the moon in their orbits, and he “saw that it was good.” He created the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and he “saw that it was good.” And he created creeping things and the beasts of the earth, and he “saw that it was good.”

The first thing God named as *not* being good was loneliness. He made the animals pass in review be-

fore Adam, like a giant circus parade, but none met Adam's needs; they were all inferior, too different from him. So the Lord said, "I will make him an help meet for him." The term "help meet" means a companion suited to his needs. Man needed someone like himself, someone with whom he could communicate on the deepest level, someone who could understand him, someone with whom he could share his life, someone he could love and who could love him in return.

So God caused a deep sleep to come upon Adam and, taking one of his ribs, created Eve. And in the Garden of Eden the Lord performed the first marriage ceremony when he said, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto a wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

Thus marriage and the home came into being — before any government, before a school, and before the church. The home came before government because it is in the home that a basic respect for law and authority is learned, a respect without which no government can long exist. The home came before the school because it is in the home that the first and most basic lessons of life are learned. And the home came before the church because it is in the home that the seed of faith is to be planted, nurtured, and brought to fruition.

Because of the home's importance, God did not leave us to guess at what it takes to have a good home. He gave us, in scripture, the blueprint for a Christian home. The apostle Paul gives us the four foundation stones of a Chris-

tian home in Ephesians 5:22 - 6:4. They are: submission, love, respect, and discipline.

You will notice that he says nothing about the house in which you live or the income you earn or the decor you choose. What he emphasizes are values, attitudes, and relationship.

It takes all four foundation stones to build a strong, stable home. Without any one of them, the home will lack the stability necessary to survive and to thrive.

What are the foundations of a Christian home?

- Submission is one of the foundations of a Christian home.
- Love is one of the foundations of a Christian home.
- Respect is one of the foundations of a Christian home.
- Discipline is one of the foundations of a Christian home.

The Head and the Heart

The first foundation stone of a Christian home is submission. Paul begins his instruction on the home by saying, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands” (Eph. 5:22). In a day when the emphasis is on equality and women’s liberation, this is not a popular concept. In fact, I have searched myself for a better, more contemporary way to express the truth given here, but I cannot think of an acceptable alternative.

The word “submission” suggests a voluntary

recognition of God's assignment of leadership in the family to the husband. It in no way suggests that the husband is superior to the wife or that the wife is inferior to the husband. There is no hint of coercion or condescension in this word. It is but a recognition that God has given to men and women different strengths, different temperaments, and different gifts — thus they have a different role in the home. And the home, like any other institution, must have order.

God did not make woman a servant. He did not make her a slave. He did not make her a pet. He made her a companion, a partner. Do you question this? Then note that Paul began this passage with the admonition, "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (v. 21). The submission in marriage is a mutual submission. It is the voluntary relinquishing of rights to one another for the good of everyone. Peter describes husbands and wives as "heirs together of the grace of life." And Paul declares that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female."

"Woman was made," someone has said, "not from the head of man that he might rule over her, nor from the foot of man to be trampled on by him, but from his side that she might be equal to him, from under his arm that she might be protected by him, from near his heart that she might be loved and cherished by him."

It helps to recognize that being the head of the home is not a privilege to be abused, it is a responsibility to be accepted. It does not mean

the man runs the home, but rather that he leads the home. He is not to give the orders but to set the example.

For a husband to head the home, he is to do more than just put bread on the table, clothes on the back, and a roof over the heads of his family. He is also to be the spiritual leader of the home.

Far too long the idea has persisted that if children are to be taken to church or if they are to be taught the Bible or if they are to say their prayers at bedtime, it is the wife's responsibility to see to it. Nowhere in scripture is that idea ever suggested. Rather, the responsibility of being the spiritual leader of the home, as well as the material provider, is laid squarely upon the shoulders of the husband.

If the husband is the head, the wife is to be the heart of the home. Now who is to say which is more important to my body, my head or my heart? They are equally essential. I can't live without either one. They simply have different functions. It is the same in the home.

One of the tragedies of today is that not only have many of our homes lost their head, but many have lost their spiritual heartbeat, too. Nothing finer could happen to a man or his family than that he resolve, as a husband and father, to lead his family spiritually (e.g., take them to church, and see to it that Bible reading and prayer take place in the home), and that a wife would help her husband in every way.

Without submission, and the order implied by it,

you can't have a Christian home.

The Key to Everything

The second foundation stone of a Christian home is love. Here is an example of the wonderful balance in scripture. If there were any fear that man would abuse his place as head of the home, Paul quickly removes it by adding that husbands should love their wives "even as Christ also loved the church" (Eph. 5:25), and they should love their wives "as their own bodies" (Eph. 5:28).

Love, in the biblical sense, is not something you feel, it is something you do. It means to care more about another person than you care about yourself. But rather than try to define love, Paul illustrates it. Definitions are soon forgotten while illustrations linger and become indelible. He gives us two examples of how husbands should love their wives.

First, they are to love their wives "as Christ loved the church." How did Jesus love the church? He loved it enough to die on the old rugged cross for it. He cared more about the church than he cared about himself. Thus, the cross becomes an eternal pattern for how a husband is to love his wife.

When a husband loves his wife like this, submission is never difficult. As one woman said to me, "It is never hard to submit to love."

Second, husbands should love their wives "as their own bodies." One man, hearing that, said, "I'm not sure my wife could stand that much affection."

Paul amplifies, “for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph. 5:29 NASB). The word “nourish” means “to feed, to care for, to meet the needs of.” When my body is hungry, I feed it. When it is cold, I warm it. When it is tired, I rest it. When it hurts, I comfort it. That, then, is the way I should treat my wife.

To nourish your wife means more than meeting her physical and material needs. It includes her spiritual, emotional, and social needs also. It means to encourage her and help her in every way to become everything God created her to be.

And husbands are to cherish their wives. The primary meaning of the word “cherish” is “to warm.” It means to treat gently, warmly, to foster with tender care. Picture a mother hen covering her young brood with her wings to protect them from the elements or from danger.

I saw a man cleaning his car. He was not just washing the outside or wiping the windows. He was working inside the doors and around the mirrors and license plates. He was cleaning and polishing those little places that no one ever sees. That’s what it means to cherish. It means to pay attention to the little things.

To cherish your wife means to pay attention to the little things. Some men don’t do that. One wife said, “My husband pays so little attention to me, if I died, I don’t believe he could identify the body.”

In many marriages there is little nourishing and cherishing. Many homes are like that of the three bears. Father bear sat down at the table, looked at

his empty bowl, and said, "Somebody's been eating my soup and they've eaten it all up." Baby bear sat down at the table, looked at his empty bowl, and said, "Somebody's been eating my soup, and they've eaten it all up." Mother bear said, "Shut up, you yak-yak, I haven't poured the soup yet."

If you want to build a Christian home you need to have less "yak-yak" and more nourishing and cherishing of one another.

High Chair or Electric Chair

The third foundation stone of a Christian home is respect. It is important for fathers to realize their place in the home; it is important for mothers to realize their place in the home; and it is also important for children to realize their place in the home. The child's place is to honor and obey.

Paul writes, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:1-3).

Obedience is an act. Honor is an attitude. It's not enough to do the right thing. You need to do it in the right spirit. Some children keep their home from being right because of their stubborn and rebellious attitude. Children can obey their parents, but do it with such a sullen, bitter, resentful spirit that they keep the home from being a place of peace and harmony.

The home does not exist solely for the gratification of children and young people. It's there to meet

the needs of every person in the family. Adults have needs also. And their needs are just as important as those of the children. The home is for everyone.

The scriptures give us two reasons why children are to obey and honor their parents. First, because it is right (i.e., it is according to God's plan). Children need guidance, limits, restrictions. God has ordained that they get these from their parents.

Second, because the stability of society depends on it. Paul points out that this was "the first commandment with promise," meaning the first of the Ten Commandments with a promise attached to it. The command was "Honour thy father and thy mother." The promise was "that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Ex. 20:12).

When this command and promise was given, the Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land, and God was forging them into a new nation. They were going to a new land to begin a new life and he was giving them a new law. If they wanted their nation to be strong and to endure, their children must be taught to honor their fathers and their mothers.

Why does God link national security to children's respect for their parents? It's because no nation can long endure without a respect for law and authority. And that respect must be learned at home.

One of the reasons some young people cannot live under the authority of the law is be-

cause, as children, they did not learn to live under authority in their home. One reason some young people can't live under the authority of the school is because they didn't learn to live under the authority of their parents. And one reason so many people will not live under the authority of God is because they didn't learn to live under any authority in the family. If they miss respect there, they will probably not learn it anywhere in life.

We've got to wake up and realize that the prevention of crime does not begin in the electric chair. It begins in the high chair.

Conquer, But Don't Crush

The final foundation stone of a Christian home is discipline. Paul adds, "And, ye fathers provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). To us, discipline is often thought of as punitive. In the biblical sense it means to teach and to train.

Once again we can see the wonderful balance in scripture. This admonition contains both a positive and a negative command. First the negative: "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath." You must not be so hard on your children that they become bitter and rebellious against all authority. A child's spirit must be conquered, but not crushed. Their backs must be made to bend, but not to break. Their minds must be laced, but not so tight it stifles their growth.

And there is never, ever, an excuse for child abuse. Andrew Vachss, who has written extensively about

child abuse, said, “There are three kinds of people who abuse their children. There are people who are inadequate, people who are mentally ill, and people who are evil.” In any instance, if you abuse your child, you need help.

The scriptures say in another place, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). The words “train up” mean to “press in, to make narrow, to set limits.” Have you ever seen an undisciplined child that was really happy? But I remind you, rules without relationships lead to rebellion. If you want your children to turn out well, spend half as much money on them and twice as much time with them.

There is also the positive aspect to this teaching. Parents are to bring their children up “in the nurture (teaching) and admonition (discipline) of the Lord.” How do you do that? Four things are necessary.

- You need a family altar. A family altar is not a place, it is an event. It is not a plaque on the wall, a Bible on the table, or a niche in the corner. It’s a time when the family prays and reads the scripture together. It need not be for a long period of time. In fact, it’s best if it is not long. But it’s a specific time, perhaps at meal time, when the family prays and reads God’s word together. Mark it down somewhere: a family altar will alter your family.
- You need a family example. We need to live our faith in the home. John Wesley said, “I

learned more about Christianity from watching my mother than all the theologians in England.” Chances are your children will learn more about Christianity from watching and listening to you than from all the preachers who ever stand in the pulpit of your church.

- You need a family pew. The family needs to worship together in the house of God. Your children shouldn't be sent to church; they should be taken. They need to hear their parents sing, see them bow their heads and pray, and watch them open their Bibles and read. They need to see their parents worship regularly.
- You need a family faith. By this I mean, every person who has reached the age of accountability needs to have a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is always a personal and decisive act. No person is born a Christian. No person is a Christian just because he or she grew up in a Christian home or was taken to church as a child. If a person becomes a Christian, it's because he has personally put his faith in Christ. And the home is the place for that to happen.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great English pastor, wrote:

*'Ere your child has reached to seven
Teach him well the way to heaven.
Better still the work will thrive
If you teach him before he's five.*

Parents, teach your children early about Christ because they begin early to sin.

A Christian home is within the reach of every one of us. But we have to decide we want it and that we will work toward it. And when we have a Christian home, it will be characterized by submission, love, respect, and discipline.

As the children of Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land after 40 years of wilderness wanderings, Joshua, their leader, stood before them and challenged, “. . . choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell. . .” Then he makes a rousing commitment of his own: “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

That’s the resolve we need today — men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, who will stand up and step out to say, “As for me and my house, as for my part in the home, we will serve the Lord.”

Will you do that today?

10

Putting the Pieces Back Together

Hosea 3:1-3

A young minister was asked to conduct his first wedding. Since he had no experience, he sought the counsel of an older minister to help him. Step by step his elderly friend walked him through the ceremony until he thought he knew exactly what to do and what to say.

As he was leaving, the elderly minister gave him one last tip: “Sometimes, when you are performing a ceremony, your mind goes blank. You can’t remember what to say next. At such times, it’s always appropriate to quote scripture.”

The time for the wedding came and everything was going according to plans until, just as he had been warned, the young minister’s mind went blank. He couldn’t remember what to say next. But he did remember the advice of the old minister, that it was always appropriate to quote scripture.

So he quoted the first verse that came to his mind, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

With the failure of so many marriages today, we sometimes feel that way. Interestingly, the Bible gives the tragic example of a calamitous marriage. And, of all people, it is the marriage of a preacher.

Early in his life Hosea met, fell in love with, and married a beautiful young woman named Gomer. In all probability he knew very little about her character or her family. Love has a way of causing us to forget such considerations. We do know, however, that he loved her devotedly and was willing to take a vow he intended to keep the rest of his life.

It was seemingly a marriage made in heaven. The problem with marriages made in heaven, however, is they must be lived out on earth. And trouble was ahead.

In due time, Hosea and Gomer had children. Of the first it is said, she “bare *him* a son.” Of the next two it merely says, she “bare *a* daughter,” and she “bare *a* son,” leaving some doubt as to whether Hosea was really their father.

One day Hosea came home from work and Gomer was gone. She had left him for another man. No details are given so we really don’t know what happened. Maybe she decided she had married too young and had missed out on much of life. Maybe she felt she needed to find herself. Maybe she thought that, on a prophet’s salary, Hosea could not provide the

material things for her that other men were providing for their wives. Or perhaps she just didn't like being a preacher's wife. It's not easy being the wife of a public figure. Only the best adjusted come through the experience unscarred emotionally.

Whatever the reason, Gomer left Hosea with a broken heart. We have no way of knowing the intensity of his pain or the hurt and humiliation he must have felt. Rejection is always hard, but especially when it comes from someone you love and trust. Being a preacher made it doubly hard. Preachers aren't supposed to be like other people. They aren't supposed to have troubles with their marriages or their children.

Daily Hosea longed for her and wished for her return, in spite of her unfaithfulness. In time Gomer became so entangled in the web of sin that she became a prostitute and eventually a slave. One day Hosea heard that a slave trader with a group of new women to sell was in town. They would go on the auction block the next day. One of them was his former wife, Gomer.

Though she had disgraced him and been unfaithful to him, still he loved her and wanted her back. When the bidding began, he paid the price demanded for a common slave and purchased her for himself.

In so doing, Hosea takes his place as one of the great lovers of all time. Out of this experience Hosea came to understand the awfulness of sin and the constancy of God's love. As he had chosen Gomer for his

wife, so God had chosen Israel for his people. As she had rejected his love and become unfaithful, so Israel had rejected God's love and been unfaithful to him. As his heart was broken and grieved at Gomer's waywardness, so God's heart was broken over Israel's sin. And as Hosea sought Gomer and bought her back, so God sought to redeem his people again.

While the primary message of Hosea is the love of God, there is a secondary truth about calamitous marriages.

Hosea's experience teaches us three things in this regard.

- First, good people sometimes have bad marriages.

We can assume Hosea was a good man. He was, after all, a prophet for almost half a century, although this fact alone is not a guarantee he was good. God gave him fourteen chapters in the Bible. So, it's reasonable to assume Hosea was a good man. Through no fault of his own, his wife left him for another man. He was the innocent victim of an unfaithful woman. That kind of thing still happens today.

Good people sometimes have bad marriages. Sometimes they just marry the wrong person. There are no perfect people in marriages, but there are innocent people in divorces. Sometimes people leave their spouses for no good reason.

- Second, a bad marriage does not necessarily disqualify a person from God's service.

I can imagine that Hosea would have welcomed

release from his prophetic ministry. But nowhere did God ever say, “I’m sorry, Hosea, but you can’t keep your marriage together so I can’t use you anymore.”

Far from disqualifying Hosea from the ministry, his bad marriage enabled him to be a more effective minister. It was his calamitous marriage that helped him understand the hurt and the heart of God as no other prophet in the Old Testament.

As Christians today, we need to search and find the heart of God in dealing with modern day Hoseas. A young woman who had gone through a divorce said to me, “I never realized there were so many people who come to my church Sunday after Sunday who are so unforgiving.”

Frederick Buechner must have had this in mind when he said, “The trouble with religious people is that they try to be more spiritual than God himself.”

- Finally, a bad marriage can sometimes be put back together by God’s grace and God’s forgiveness.

How do you put the pieces back together again? Better still, how can you keep what happened to Hosea from happening to you? To this end, I offer six suggestions.

- Spend quality time together.
- Communicate for information and understanding.
- Develop a healthy sex life.
- Respect your spouse as an equal.
- Handle anger and conflict quickly and justly.

- Share your spiritual journey.

Keep Up-to-Date With One Another

First, spend quality time together. A friend and his wife, who had reared three daughters, became foster parents to a troubled teenager and were considering adopting him. But the man said, “He constantly works at dividing us. When we are alone he asks me questions that I wonder if he already hasn’t asked my wife. He forces us to keep up-to-date with one another.”

There are many things that work to divide us in marriage — children, careers, hobbies, social activities, and even television. To have a good marriage, then, you must work at keeping your relationship up-to-date.

One of the common misconceptions many of us grow up with is that a successful marriage comes naturally and effortlessly. But it doesn’t. It takes work to make it so.

A man dreamed that he came to the great storehouse where God keeps the marvelous gifts he bestows on mankind. The man said to the angel in charge, “I’m tired of the miseries of life on earth! Instead of wars and affliction, lust and lies, we need love and joy, peace and justice. Please give me some of these things!” The angel smiled and answered, “We don’t stock fruits — only seeds.”

It is the same with marriage. At best we bring potential into marriage. We must then work at cultivating it. This involves spending quality time together.

And quality time requires quantity time. It would be good for every couple to plan a date together once a week, a night away from the children once a month, and a weekend away at least once a quarter. It may be difficult to arrange and it would be expensive, but so is a divorce. In our busy world, we must plan for quality time together.

If we neglect our marriage relationship it will wither and die. A friend of mine, who was a football coach, spent untold hours at his job. His hobby was working in the yard. As soon as he got home from his coaching duties, he changed into his work clothes and went to work in the yard. And his yard was a show place.

But he did these things at the expense of his wife and daughter. He spent almost no time with them. In time they grew tired of his neglect and left him. When he told me the story, he said, "I should have spent more time with my family. I neglected them and lost them. But," he said facetiously, "I do have the best kept yard in our neighborhood." There is no such thing as "benign" neglect. Marriages die when we take one another for granted.

The most important thing in your marriage is your relationship to one another. Don't neglect it. Shirley Scott tells about visiting a friend who had just celebrated her fifty-fourth wedding anniversary. The husband came in the house in his work boots, leaving clods of dirt behind him on the spotless kitchen floor. Expecting the wife to be upset, she said, "His

boots certainly do bring the dirt in.”

“Yes,” she said with a smile as she got up to get the broom, “but they bring him in, too.”

More important than a spotless house, more important than dressing in the latest fashions, more important than living in a posh neighborhood, more important than driving a Porsche automobile, is the relationship between husband and wife. Neglect that and you may lose all.

Watch the Zingers

Second, communicate for information and understanding rather than manipulation, control, and hurting. The communications system is the heart of marriage. In a day of world-wide communication, it is sad that many couples cannot communicate across the breakfast table.

We communicate in many ways — a frown, a lifted eyebrow, a clearing of the throat. Ann Landers said a slammed door is worth 5,000 words. We even communicate by silence. A husband and wife drove for miles in silence after a terrible argument in which neither would budge. The husband pointed to a mule in a pasture. “Relative of yours?” he asked. “Yes,” she replied, “by marriage.”

Words, however, are the most common way to communicate. The Bible speaks of the power of words when it says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it (to use) shall eat the fruit thereof” (Prov. 18:21).

Psychologist John Gottman, in his book, *What Pre-*

dicts Divorce, said research reveals that the relationships most likely to end in divorce are not necessarily those where spouses fight passionately or often. It is not anger and disagreements that are harmful to marriage. It is when the anger is blended with contempt and defensiveness that it becomes destructive. It is chronic criticism that destroys relationships. "It's the zingers or negative behavior that are far more predictive over time. As they say, 'One zinger erases twenty positive acts of kindness.'"

So, keep the communications system of your marriage in good repair. And use it to communicate information and understanding.

The Language of Love in Action

Third, develop a healthy sex life. We humans did not invent sex; God created it. And, as of every other part of God's creation, the scriptures say of it, "behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

It is clearly a natural and a desirable act because God made it so. But for many couples, "it is not good." According to the research of Dr. Gottman, the three top problem areas in marriage appear to be communication, sex, and money. Obviously many couples do not develop a happy, satisfying sex life. They do not make time for sexual encounters.

We need to think of sex as an expression of tenderness for each other and a desire for each other's happiness, as a way to communicate the deepest kind of intimacy. It was intended to be the language of love in action.

The physical intimacy of marriage should be the culmination of other intimacies. Sex is the celebration of your relationship. It is not the establishment of it. We need to plan for sexual encounters. Spontaneity is highly over-rated, but it is nice when it happens. If one partner is a night-owl, he or she should turn the television off early in the evening to help the other partner who may need an early bedtime. This part of marriage, like every important aspect of a relationship, needs to be planned for. It is vital to building an intimate relationship.

A Partnership of Equals

Fourth, respect your spouse as an equal. Marriage was intended to be a partnership. And to the degree that one dominates the other, intimacy is limited.

The first thing in creation God named as not being good was loneliness. He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Adam needed a companion. He needed someone to love and someone to love him in return. He needed someone with whom he could communicate and share his life. He needed someone who could understand him.

The Lord caused all the animals to pass in review before Adam so he could name them. Could he find a companion among them? There was none with whom he could share his life.

The Lord then created Eve and brought her to him and gave her to him. In the garden the Lord performed the first marriage ceremony when

he said, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

From the beginning man and woman were equal and their marriage was to be a partnership. When he blessed their union he blessed both Adam and Eve. When he gave the command to have dominion over creation he gave it to both of them. And when he gave the instructions to be fruitful and multiply, he gave it to both Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28).

The apostle Paul commanded husbands and wives to submit themselves to one another (Eph. 5:21). And he declared that in Christ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).

The over-under relationship does not permit full emotional intimacy. So treat your spouse as an equal.

Simmer Down Before Sundown

Fifth, handle anger and conflict quickly and justly. Some conflict in marriage is normal. As Ruth Graham said, “When two people agree on everything, one of them is not necessary.”

While some conflict is inherent in marriage, it need not be destructive if we handle it constructively. To that end, I offer several suggestions.

- Keep the lines of communication open.

A young woman was filling out a job application. On the blank where it asked, “Marital status,” she wrote, “Not speaking.” That’s the

worst thing that can happen in conflict. Almost any problem can be solved if people continue to talk about it.

- Attack the problem, not each other.

After being married a short time we know our mates' area of greatest vulnerability. We know what to say to hurt them most. The temptation, then, in an argument is to attack the person, not the problem.

- Lower your voice instead of raising it.

The more excited and angrier we become, the louder we usually get. To lower your voice can change the whole atmosphere in a heated discussion.

- Seek an early armistice.

As soon as possible, arrive at an acceptable solution to the problem and move on. The scriptures say, "let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). A free translation of this verse is, "Always simmer down before sundown." Don't let your quarrels canker into bitterness. If you do, your "better half" may become your "bitter half."

- Apologize when you're wrong.

In the book, *Love Story*, there is a line that says, "Love is never having to say you're sorry." That's a beautiful thought, but it's not true. Love says it's sorry again and again — and readily.

- Finally, never consider divorce.

Hang on to the principle of permanence. Determine, no matter what happens, you're going to work through your problem.

Quarrels need not be destructive to a relationship. If handled correctly they can leave the marriage stronger, sweeter, better.

The Sun and the Son

Sixth, share your spiritual journey. Our solar system is held together by the sun. The stars and the planets revolve around it and it is the cohesive force of the universe. If something happened to the sun, our solar system would explode into a hundred billion pieces.

In the same way, your marriage has a better chance of holding together if it revolves around the S-O-N — Jesus Christ.

The Bible says, “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it” (Ps. 127:1). Many marriages are crumbling today because Christ is not involved in them.

J. D. Erwin put it this way, “Marriage can’t reach its fullest maturity unless both people share an allegiance to some purpose outside themselves and which they consider to be ultimately more important than the relationship.”

No human relationship is more satisfying than a good marriage. A young couple was visiting with an older couple celebrating their 50th anniversary. “Fifty years!” one of the young people exclaimed. “That’s a long time to be married to one person.” The old gentleman looked over at his wife and, with a twinkle in his eye, said, “It would have been a lot longer without her.”

I wish for you that kind of relationship. And it can be yours if you will commit your life and your marriage to the Lord. If your marriage is troubled, he can help you put the pieces back together again. And, better still, he can keep them from falling apart in the first place.

11

How God Helps Us

2 Timothy 4:16-18

What the unbelieving world wants to know about Christianity is, does it work? When the chips are down, when the heat is on, when the pressure mounts, can it stand the test? When the storms of life come, does faith in God make a difference?

The answer of both scripture and experience is a resounding, “Yes! Christianity works!” The Lord does help us in life. But how? The apostle Paul tells us how.

In 2 Timothy 4:16-18, Paul relates an experience out of his own spiritual autobiography to show us how the Lord helped him and how the Lord, in turn, can help us. Paul is in his second imprisonment when he writes these words about an experience that occurred to him during his first imprisonment. At that time Paul was required to stand trial for his life before a Roman court. The charge? Sedition. He was accused of being the ringleader of a group of insurrectionists. When the outcome of that

trial was acquittal, he was set free to continue his missionary work. Years later, back in prison a second time and facing almost certain death, he reflects on that first trial and tells us how God helped him.

Paul's testimony is filled with legal, technical language. It is language used in a courtroom and trial proceedings. Paul begins, "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me" (2 Tim. 4:16).

The word "answer" means to make a verbal defense in one's own behalf. The word "stood" refers to the appearance of one person in a court of justice in behalf of another as a character witness.

At his trial, when Paul was called on to defend himself against the trumped up charges alleged against him, no one came to his defense. No one stood with him or spoke up for him. All of his friends deserted him and he was left to face his accusers all alone. Then he adds a most amazing statement. He says, "I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge" (2 Tim. 4:16).

Paul then turns to the bright side of this difficult ordeal. He declares that while everyone else forsook him, the Lord stood with him and strengthened him so that he was able to turn his trial into a preaching opportunity. He used his defense arguments as a means of making the gospel fully known to his accusers. If Nero presided over the trial of the apostle Paul, he heard the gospel that day.

Paul then says that the Lord delivered him out of the mouth of the lion. Who or what is the lion Paul refers to? It is not Nero, the emperor, for he ulti-

mately won over Paul. It was not the lions of the arena because Paul was a Roman citizen and Roman citizens were never thrown to the lions. The lion referred to here was Satan himself. Remember, Peter described Satan as a “roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

At his trial Satan would have liked nothing better than to have silenced the apostle Paul so that the gospel could not have been preached. That would have been a decisive victory for Satan. But the Lord stood with Paul. He strengthened him, empowering him to preach the gospel under the most trying of circumstances. Thus, God through Paul, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

Paul concludes his testimony by saying, “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:18).

In these words the apostle Paul describes how the Lord helped him, and how, in turn, the Lord helps us. If you examine Paul’s testimony carefully you will note there are three ways the Lord helped him. If you are wondering, “Does Christianity work? Will it stand under the stress and strain of life?” the answer is an emphatic, “Yes! It worked for Paul and it will work for us.”

How did God help Paul, and how does God help us? In three ways:

- He gives us grace for the disappointments of life.
- He gives us strength for the trials of life.

- He gives us hope for the end of life.

Getting Even or Getting Ahead

First, God gives us grace for the disappointments of life. At his trial, when he was called on to make a defense of himself against the false charges of sedition, Paul declares, “No man stood with me, but all men forsook me.” The word “forsook” is the same word Paul used earlier in this chapter to describe the actions of Demas. It means “to desert, to abandon.” Demas was one of Paul’s missionary companions. In the heat of battle, in the thick of conflict, he deserted Paul and the work of Christ because of the lure of the world (2 Tim. 4:10).

In the same way that Demas had deserted him, so Paul’s other friends deserted him at his trial. No one stood with him; no one spoke up for him.

Obviously, there were some people whom Paul had reason to believe could have and should have come to his defense. They knew full well that he was not an insurrectionist. They could have attested to his innocence. But, for some reason, perhaps out of fear for their own lives, they didn’t. At a time when Paul needed them most they let him down.

This had to be a great disappointment to Paul. It could easily have made him bitter and resentful. But there is none of that in Paul. He would not allow the fact that his friends had let him down get him down. Instead of trying to get even with them, Paul rises above them and prays for their forgiveness. He writes,

“I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge.”

The prayer of Paul was not an original with him. He had heard the very same prayer prayed in his own behalf years earlier. Before he became a Christian, Paul had been an accomplice to the stoning of Stephen. He hadn't actually thrown any rocks but he had held the coats of those who did. As Stephen died, he prayed for his executioners using the same words Paul would later use here, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60).

But this prayer didn't even originate with Stephen. Jesus was the first to pray it himself when he cried from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

This prayer of forgiveness is nothing less than the work of grace in Paul's life. The same love of God that flowed from Calvary to Stephen now flowed to Paul, enabling him to pray for those who disappointed him and let him down.

What happened to Paul can happen to us. People disappoint us and hurt us. At a time when we need them the most, they let us down. Sometimes it is a spouse. Sometimes it is a child. Sometimes it is a parent. Sometimes it is a best friend. Sometimes it is a Christian brother. It may even be your pastor.

When that happens we can become so disappointed in them that we become angry and resentful toward them and toward God. We can nurse and rehearse our hurts until they smolder into bitterness. One of the sure signs a hurt has turned into

bitterness is that we relive it, rehash it, and retell it again and again. We have not dealt with our hurts sufficiently until we dismiss them first from our conversation and then from our minds, first from our talking and then from our thinking.

Bitterness is an emotional cancer. If you do not rid yourself of it, it will ultimately consume you. It will shrivel your soul like a raisin. Carrying resentments in your heart is like carrying a bag of stones. The longer you carry them, the heavier they become. And if you aren't careful, you will eventually stumble beneath the weight of them and be crushed by them. So, collect postage stamps or coins if you will, collect autographs or bubble gum cards if you must, but don't collect resentment.

Dale Carnegie, in *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, said, "When we hate our enemies, we give them power over us — power over our sleep, our appetites, and our happiness. They would dance with joy if they knew how much they were worrying us. Our hate is not hurting them at all, but it is turning our days and nights into hellish turmoil." (Pocket Books, Inc., New York, 1953, p. 114.)

Bitterness is the fruit of an unforgiving heart. We must, therefore, never allow our disappointments in others to canker into resentment by harboring them in our hearts. We must rise above resentment at all costs. We must remember the best and forget the rest. If we spend our time trying to get even we will never get ahead.

But how do we do that? Is it possible for us to

really forgive those who hurt us? Yes. Yes, it is. There is a way. It is by God's grace.

By God's grace we can forgive, as Paul did, those who let us down; we can forgive, as did Stephen, those who knock us down; and we can forgive, as did Jesus, those who nail us down.

The same grace of God that flowed from Calvary can flow to our hearts, just as it did with Paul, and enable us to rise above the disappointments and hurts of life and pray for those responsible for them. This grace to forgive is one of the ways God helps us.

Let the judges judge. Let the prosecutors prosecute. Let the juries condemn. You forgive, and pray for those who hurt you. Never let the failures of others make you bitter or a quitter. God's grace will enable you to do that. That's one of the ways he helps us.

The Word of a Gentleman

There is a second way God helps us; he gives us strength for the trials of life. While his friends forsook him, Paul declared the Lord "stood" with him and strengthened him, so that he might preach the gospel to that pagan court, and in so doing, defeat Satan who was trying to silence him.

The word "stood" in this instance means to stand beside another in order to assist them. So the Lord stood beside Paul and enabled him successfully to fulfill his mission of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentile world.

Note that the Lord did not save Paul *from* his trial. He strengthened him *in* his trial. He did not get him *out*, he got him *through*. That is most often the way of God with his people. He does not *isolate us from* life, he *insulates us in* life.

The Lord didn't save Daniel from the lion's den; he saved Daniel in the lion's den. He shut the mouths of the lions to keep them from devouring Daniel.

God did not save the three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace; he saved them in the fiery furnace. He entered into the furnace with them and became their shield to keep the fire from consuming them.

God did not route David on some outer loop around the valley of the shadow of death; rather he became David's shepherd and walked with him through it.

God did not save Jesus from the cross; God saved him and us through the cross.

There is no promise from the Lord in scripture that we, as his people, will be exempt from any of life's trials. Christians get cancer. Christians suffer heart attacks. Christians are involved in automobile accidents. Christians lose their jobs. Christians go broke. Christians die young. Christians experience every heartache imaginable.

Health and wealth are not our automatic birth-right. Strength and success are not fringe benefits that come with salvation. We are promised no exemptions from and no explanations for the trials of life. What we are promised is that the Lord will be with us in them and see us through them.

A World War II veteran was hobbling toward a

religious shrine in the French Pyrenees mountains. The veteran had lost a leg in the war and was going to the shrine to pray. A skeptic standing nearby saw the man and said, "What is he going to do? Ask God to give him his leg back?" The veteran overheard the man and said, "No, I'm going to ask God to give me the strength to live without my leg." That's God's way. He doesn't save us from the difficult experiences of life, but he does sustain us in them.

Listen to the promise of Isaiah, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Is. 43:2).

The favorite text of David Livingstone, the early English missionary to Africa, was the promise of Jesus, "lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

For 32 years he planted his life in that dark continent. At times he was surrounded by hostile and infuriated natives. At times his life was in imminent peril. At times his body was so racked with pain he could hardly keep going. At times he was the victim of merciless and scandalous gossip. Disease and death, and disappointment and discouragement, were his constant companions. But again and again Livingstone came back to this text on which he staked his life. A thousand times or more he would put his finger on that verse and say, "It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so there's an end of it!"

He anchored his life to the promise of Jesus and so must we. We may have to sleep in the lion's den. We may have to go through the fire. We may have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We may even have to die on a cross. But if we do, he will be with us and strengthen us. And, I believe that if he is with me, he and I can handle anything life brings. I can count on his promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5). That is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so that's the end of it.

The Lord strengthened Paul and he will strengthen you. That's how he helps us.

Horizons Now — Heaven Then

There is a third way the Lord helps us. He gives us hope for the end of life. Hope is not mere expectation. It is a well-founded, well-grounded expectation for the future. What then is our hope? It is the hope of heaven.

Having affirmed that the Lord had delivered him out of the mouth of the lion, the apostle Paul then declared, "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18).

When Paul penned these words, his own death was imminent. Earlier in this chapter he had said, ". . . the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid

up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Paul had run out of time, but he had not run out of hope. He looks beyond this life and sees heaven awaiting him. Time eventually runs out for all of us. Augustine of Hippo once said, “As when medical men examine an illness, and ascertain that it is fatal, they make this pronouncement, ‘He will die, he will not get over this,’ so from the moment of a man’s birth, it may be said, ‘He will not get over this.’”

George Bernard Shaw was right, “Life’s ultimate statistic is the same for all men, one out of one dies.” But while we do run out of time, we never run out of hope.

As a part of a Baptist Student Union vesper service at East Texas Baptist University, a young man named Danny shared his testimony. For three summers he had been a part-time youth director at a church in Lake Jackson, Texas. His first summer there he met a vivacious, dedicated young girl named Joy. Her name fit her well because she radiated the love and joy of Christ.

During the next three summers Danny saw Joy grow and mature in her faith until she became one of the finest young people in the group. After he returned to school following the third summer, he received word that Joy had cancer of the pancreas and was not expected to live past the Christmas holidays. As soon as he could, he went to Lake Jackson to visit

with her. She was in the hospital by now, her body already emaciated by the ravages of cancer. They chatted about a lot of things for a while and then Joy said to him, “Danny, do you know what it’s like to be without hope?”

Danny said he was speechless. He couldn’t even look Joy in the eye. He just ducked his head, dug the toe of his shoe into the carpet, and finally said, “No, Joy, I’ve been very fortunate in life. I really don’t know what it’s like to be without hope.”

Then Joy replied, “Neither do I.”

That’s the way it is with the people of God. We do run out of time. We never run out of hope.

Bishop William Quayle boarded a train one day and sat down near a group of salesmen. They did not know he was a minister and so one of them turned to him and asked, “Sir, what do you sell?” He replied, “I sell horizons now and heaven then.”

Heaven then! That is our hope. And it is well-founded and well-grounded. It is founded on and grounded in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because he lives, we shall live also (John 14:16).

At a revival in Gladewater, Texas, I met a man named John who, for 27 years, was H. L. Hunt’s chief confidant. H. L. Hunt was a wheeling-dealing Texas oil man who made millions and millions of dollars. In accumulating his vast wealth, H. L. Hunt made many a trade. John said time had little meaning to Hunt, who would

call at any hour of the day or night. John said his phone rang about two o'clock one morning. On the other end of the line was H. L. Hunt. He said, "John, I have just made the greatest trade of my life. I have just traded the here for the hereafter." That was the night H. L. Hunt became a Christian. The trade H. L. Hunt made you can make also. You can trade the here for the hereafter. And, it all begins at the foot of the cross.

An unknown poet expressed this hope when he wrote:

*The hands of Christ
Seem very frail.
For they were broken
By a nail.
But only they
Reach heaven at last
Whom these frail, broken
Hands hold fast.*

No matter what happens to us in this world, as the people of God, we are never without a future hope. The promise of eternal life is always before us, "He shall preserve us unto his heavenly kingdom."

And with that hope we can cope!

12

His Sustaining Power

Psalms 55:22

Eleanor Hammond described a host of people when she wrote,

*“Like snails I see the people go
Along the sidewalks row on row
And each one on his shoulder bears
A coiling shell of heavy cares,
The spiral of his own affairs . . .
Some peer about, some creep on blind,
But not one leaves his load behind.”*

Burdens are a part of life. We all have them. If we are to live victoriously, we must know how to handle them.

The psalmist tells us how when he writes, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee” (Ps. 55:22). It is as simple or as profound as that.

This great affirmation is couched in the context of a lament. It was first spoken by a man who was being harassed, troubled, oppressed by an enemy (Ps. 55:3). We do not know what his enemy was doing to

him, only that he was sorely distressed by the situation.

What makes matters worse is that this enemy was someone he thought was his friend. He was someone he had known well, had trusted, and in whom he had great faith. They had even gone to church together. If his problem had been with an avowed enemy he could have handled that. But someone he thought was a friend let him down.

In that situation he cries out to God, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest" (Ps. 55:6). His first inclination was to run away from life. Who among us has not felt that way? But as he thought about it, he realized that peace is not a matter of position but of disposition. What he needed was not wings to fly away but feet to stand, strength and grace to stay.

It was then that he came to this conclusion: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you." There are two words in this promise that need special attention. The first is the word "burden." The root meaning of this word is "to give" or "what comes." It carries with it the idea of what is given to us by providence or what comes to us as our lot in life. It may refer to sickness, to an accident, to financial reverses, or to anything that is beyond our control. Whatever life hands us, we are to lay it upon the Lord.

The second word is the word "sustain." This word means "to keep," "to nourish," "to strengthen." It is a word that is used three other times in the Old Testament. It is used first by the Lord when he told Elijah

to go to the widow of Zarephath and she would sustain him (I Kings 17:9). Elijah went and the widow provided him food and shelter to meet his needs in a difficult time in his life.

The word “sustain” is used a second time by Nehemiah when he recounts Israel’s wilderness wanderings (Neh. 9:21). During the forty years the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness they lacked nothing they needed. Neither their clothes nor their shoes wore out, and their feet did not swell. Rather, God sustained them. The mention of Israel’s shoes not wearing out and their feet not swelling seems strange to me. What does it mean? It suggests, I think, that God got Israel through the wilderness on her feet. She didn’t limp or hobble into the promised land. She marched in victoriously.

The third time, “sustain” is used by Solomon when he writes, “The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity” (Prov. 18:14).

In the same way Elijah’s needs were supplied in his time of distress, in the same way that God saw Israel through the wilderness on their feet, so the Lord will sustain us, or see us through, if we cast our burdens upon him. The “how” will be individual, personal, according to each need.

The writer does not tell us how God will sustain us, and we do not need to know. He only assures us that he will, and that is enough. If we can live by faith in the word of God then we can cast our burdens — whatever life hands us, whatever is given to us by providence — on the Lord in full confidence that he

will strengthen and sustain us.

There are at least five of life's burdens we need to cast upon the Lord.

- We need to cast the burden of sin and guilt on the Lord.
- We need to cast the burden of suffering and sorrow on the Lord.
- We need to cast the burden of disappointments and hurts on the Lord.
- We need to cast the burden of pressure and responsibility on the Lord.
- We need to cast the burden of worry and anxiety on the Lord.

I Don't Like Myself

First, we need to cast the burden of sin and guilt on the Lord. Sir Oliver Lodge once said, "Modern man is not worrying about his sins, still less about their forgiveness." I don't know how many times Sir Oliver Lodge was right in what he said, but in this instance he was dead wrong.

People fail and they know it. They are not good parents, they are not good husbands, they are not good wives, they are not good children, and they know they ought to be. They feel guilty about their failures and they want forgiveness.

The kind of burden sin and guilt bring was expressed by a leading government official who was sentenced to four years in prison and fined \$5,000 for passing insider information to a stockbroker. After his conviction he said, "I have destroyed a life of

achievement based on trust and integrity. The last two years have been a living nightmare. I don't like myself as well as I used to" (Time, May 20, 1985, page 24).

Sin and guilt always chip away at our self-image. If you are carrying around a load of guilt, I'll bet you don't like yourself as well as you used to.

I received a letter from a television viewer once that reveals how our sin haunts us. The woman wrote, "I know that God hates divorce, hates adultery, just as he hates all sin. But how does one contend with this sin once it is in the past, once one has become a believer and has been baptized?"

The writer went on to disclose that her husband was married when she met him. His marriage was not a happy one and they had had an affair. In time, he divorced his wife and they were married.

Later they both became Christians, joined a church, and were baptized. But still the memory of past wrongs haunted them.

She concluded the letter by writing, "Now, the problem — how does one, mostly my husband, contend with bouts of depression over past mistakes?"

This is a burden that clearly must be cast upon the Lord. There is only one quick and healthy way to forgiveness and cleansing from sin and that is the way offered by the Lord: repentance, confession, restitution, forgiveness. That is God's method and it works. God wants to forgive us and to alleviate our guilt. He doesn't want us saddled down with the past the rest of our lives.

God promises to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west. I have been almost around the world and I've never found an east pole or a west pole. So if you give your sins to the Lord, you need never run into them again.

A Broken Heart in Every Pew

Second, we need to cast the burden of suffering and sorrow upon the Lord. Joseph Parker, a prominent preacher of the last century, used to say to the young ministers in his congregation, "Men, preach on suffering and you will never lack a congregation. There is a broken heart in every pew."

Albert Schweitzer said each man must bear his share of the world's sorrow. And we must. Sometimes it is a bad or broken marriage. Sometimes it is an overbearing boss. Sometimes it is a chronic illness. Sometimes it is an economic struggle. Sometimes it is a wayward child. Sometimes it is a boring job.

The scriptures say of Jesus, "he was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3) So are we. It may be that your spouse has died and it is as if a part of you is gone forever. It may be that you have lost a child in death. This is, I believe, in some ways, the greatest of all losses. As one man in my congregation said, "Preacher, we are not supposed to bury our children. They are supposed to bury us."

It may be the death of a parent after a long and difficult bout with cancer. In my congregations there was always someone dying but it was especially dif-

ficult to see my friends and loved ones slowly wasting away.

How can we bear such burdens? God's promise includes sorrow and suffering. To our broken hearts he says, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:1-6).

The apostle Paul tells of God's sustaining grace in suffering when he wrote, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Paul had some kind of painful infirmities. Three

times he banged on heaven's door asking God to remove them. But the answer came back, "No, they are for your good." They helped Paul stay humble, a virtue so essential to usefulness in God's service.

Then there came a marvelous transformation. The thorn was not taken away but Paul's attitude toward it was changed. Realizing the good that came from it, he rejoiced in it. Paul's experience can be ours also.

Pain and suffering are hard to bear, but by God's grace we can do it. They, too, come under the canopy of this verse, "Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you" (Ps. 55:22 NASB)

Old Mrs. McDonald

Third, disappointment and hurt are burdens we should cast upon the Lord. It is inevitable as we go through life that we will be hurt by and disappointed in people. Sometimes people do things and say things intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, but we are wounded nonetheless.

Some people become angry, bitter, and resentful toward those who hurt them. And in the process they end up being hurt twice — once by the person who wronged them and again by their own anger and bitterness.

A few years ago I was vacationing at an historic village near a place where I once was a pastor. Our waitress was an elderly woman who looked familiar. Since I had spoken in the area before, I thought she might be someone I knew. So I asked, "How long

have you worked here?"

I suppose she thought I was trying to find out how old she was because she responded firmly, but kindly, "None of your business." My wife and I laughed at her answer and continued our meal.

The next night we were eating in the same restaurant, but in a different room and with a different waitress. I asked our new waitress, "Do you know Mrs. McDonald?" She said yes. I asked, "How old is she?" The waitress replied that she didn't know. I said, "When you see her, will you tell her that someone in here is asking her age?"

The woman replied, "You had better ask her yourself. I haven't spoken to Mrs. McDonald in twenty years."

Can you imagine that? Two women in a small town, working in the same restaurant, passing each other numerous times each day in the kitchen, and yet not speaking for twenty years. What misery they must be experiencing in their lives!

There is a better way to deal with life's hurts and disappointments. I recently received a letter from a woman in Illinois who had read a book I wrote, *When the Hurt Won't Go Away*. My book dealt with Job's suffering and his response to all his tragedies. She wrote, "I was molested by my stepfather from the age of ten to age seventeen. Four years ago I was raped during the burglary of my house. To me, that was the final straw. That's when I turned against God. I had to blame someone for all the bad things that had happened to me. But your book made me realize how

wrong I was to blame God. Or maybe I should say, Job made me realize how wrong I was to blame God. I'm glad to tell you I am now back in church every Sunday, praying all the time, and happy once again."

That's what the Lord can do with the burden of hurt and disappointment we give to him. As long as we bear the burden ourselves, we stagger under the weight of it. But, once we give it to him, the burden is lifted and we are free to live again.

If you have been hurt by or disappointed in others, I have good news for you. The Lord can take away that burden. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:14, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: The Lord reward him according to his works."

We don't know what Alexander did to Paul. He didn't feel it was necessary for us to know. And he was not interested in dwelling on it. Paul's only interest in writing about Alexander was to warn Timothy about him. The phrase, "The Lord reward him for his works," was not a wish. It was an expression of faith. Paul was so convinced of the ultimate justice of God that he didn't have to try to get even. God, he was sure, would ensure justice. And he was perfectly content to leave any retribution to him.

Lincoln once said, "I don't relish playing God." Neither should we. But that's what we do when we try to get even with people who hurt us. You can trust the justice of God. By his grace you can forgive and forget.

As the Lord helped Paul, so he will help you with the hurts and disappointments of your life.

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Fourth, we need to cast the burden of pressure and responsibility upon the Lord. Life is filled with both — rearing a family, making a living, maintaining a business, building a practice, growing up, and resisting temptation are just a few.

Some of the people who have more than their share of pressure and responsibility are single parents — especially single mothers. My wife and I saw one such mother and her children in a restaurant recently and had the same thought. When we sat down at our table we talked about the burden that young woman faces to provide for her family and guide her family all alone. I am enormously proud of many singles I know for the way they handle life. It is not easy.

When I was a child we used to sing, “Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream . . . merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.”

That’s a joke! You don’t row downstream; you have to row upstream. And life often is not a dream, it can be a nightmare. To get through it we don’t row gently, we have to labor vigorously. We have to buck the currents of life and that’s tough.

We sometimes feel like General George S. Patton, who commanded the Third Army as it swept across Europe in the closing days of World War II. The day before he was to return to the states he was involved in an automobile accident that paralyzed him from the waist down. For days his life hung in the balance. One day he had a terrible coughing spasm. The doctor said to him, “Hang on, General. Hang on.”

And General Patton replied, "I am so tired of just hanging on."

Just how does God lift this burden? Well, often not by taking it from us. God does not pamper his children. He does not appeal to our softness but to our strength. He does not weaken us by doing everything for us. God may not lighten the load we are bearing; he always strengthens us with his spirit in the inner person so that we can straighten up under it.

Phillips Brooks wrote, "Do not pray for a task equal to your powers, pray for power equal to your task." This is the help which God is able and eager to supply. We cannot escape our many duties and responsibilities. But we can be free from the strain and stress which accompany them if we will commit ourselves to the heavenly father's care.

The great invitation of Jesus is, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Those familiar with farming know that both single yokes and double yokes were used on animals for pulling a load. The single yoke hitched one animal to a plow so that it pulled the load alone. The double yoke hitched two animals together so that they shared the load.

The Lord never intended us to bear life's load with a single yoke. He invites us to yoke up with him and

let him help us bear life's load.

The promise, "Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you," covers the pressures and responsibilities of life.

Too Wound Up

Finally, we should cast the burden of worry and anxiety upon the Lord. A woman went to the doctor and complained, "I am run down." The doctor responded, "Madam, your trouble is not that you are run down but that you are all wound up."

A lot of people are all wound up — tense, nervous, afraid, anxious. An oppressive anxiety about what may happen in the months and years ahead rests heavily upon all of us in these uncertain days. To live nobly, victoriously, we must learn to cast the burden of worry and anxiety upon the Lord, and to trust him to sustain us.

Someone has defined worry as, "A thin stream of fear trickling through our mind. If it is encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all our thoughts are drained."

Bulstrode Whitelocke, the British Ambassador to The Hague during the days of Oliver Cromwell, was tossing on his bed one night, unable to sleep for anxiety about the future of his country. An old servant, lying in the same room, addressed him. "Sir," he whispered, "may I ask you a question?" "Certainly," replied the ambassador. "Sir, did God govern the world before you came into it?" "Undoubtedly." "And will he govern the world well when you have gone out of

it?” “Undoubtedly.” “Then, sir, can you not trust him to govern the world well while you are in it?” There was no reply, but the harassed ambassador turned on his side and fell asleep.

Let us commit the whole of our uncertain future into God’s strong hands. Let us trust his power, wisdom, and grace.

If God cares for the fowl of the air and the flowers of the field, surely he will care for us. Paul’s words are fitting here. “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7).

I once got through a dark time in my life following this verse. I recited it when I went to bed every night and when I got up every morning. It literally saved me. It will save you from fear and worry also.

Just one other word: we are told to cast our burden upon “the Lord.” The Hebrew word for Lord is the name “Jehovah.” It means the eternal one, the one who was, the one who is, the one who evermore shall be. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the one who parted the waters of the Red Sea, who enabled David to slay Goliath, and the one who raised Jesus from the dead.

Cast your burden on him — the eternal God — and he will sustain you.

James Jeffrey, former all-American football player and a leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes,

spoke at one of Baylor University's homecoming activities. A few months earlier he had learned he had pancreatic cancer. The doctor had given him less than a year to live. As he spoke to us that night the ravages of his cancer were already evident in his once strong body. In his testimony he said, "I've told people all my life, 'Jesus is all you need.' But you never know Jesus is all you need until you get to the place where he is all you've got. And when he's all you've got, then you know he's all you need."

There is a complementary verse in the New Testament that expresses this same truth. Peter writes, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Don't ever forget that. He cares for you and that's why you can safely trust him with life's burdens.

