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between the Old and New Testaments
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The 400 Years between the Old and New Testaments

by Ray C. Stedman

At the close of the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is back again in the land of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity, but they are under the domination of the great world power of that day, Persia and the Medio-Persian empire. In Jerusalem, the temple had been restored, although it was a much smaller building than the one that Solomon had built and decorated in such marvelous glory.

Within the temple the line of Aaronic priests was still worshipping and carrying on the sacred rites as they had been ordered to do by the Law of Moses. There was a direct line of descendancy in the priesthood that could be traced back to Aaron.

But the royal line of David had fallen on evil days. The people knew who the rightful successor to David was, and in the book of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, his name is given to us. It was Zerubbabel, the royal prince, yet there was no king on the throne of Israel; they were a puppet nation, under the domination of Persia. Nevertheless, although they were beset with weakness and formalism as the prophets have shown us, the people were united. There were no political schisms or factions among them, nor were they divided into groups or parties.

Now when you open the New Testament to the book of Matthew, you discover an entirely different atmosphere – almost a different world. Rome is now the dominant power of the earth. The Roman legions have spread throughout the length and breadth of the civilized world. The center of power has shifted from the East to the West, to Rome. Palestine is still a puppet state – the Jews never did regain their own sovereignty – but now there is a king on the throne. But this king is the descendant of Esau instead of Jacob, and his name is Herod the Great. Furthermore, the high priests who now sit

in the seat of religious authority in the nation are no longer from the line of Aaron. They cannot trace their descendancy back, rather, they are hired priests to whom the office is sold as political patronage.

The temple is still the center of Jewish worship, although the building has been partially destroyed and rebuilt about a half-dozen times since the close of the Old Testament. But now the synagogues that have sprung up in every Jewish city seem to be the center of Jewish life even more than the temple.

At this time the people of Israel were split into three major parties. Two of them, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were much more prominent than the third. The smaller group, the Essenes, could hardly be designated as a party. Not long ago, however, they came into great prominence in our time and took on new significance because they had stowed away some documents in caves overlooking the Dead Sea – documents which were brought to light again by the accidental discovery of an Arab shepherd boy and are known as *the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Now, what happened in these four hundred so-called “silent” years after the last of the inspired prophets spoke and the first of the New Testament writers began to write? You remember there is a word in Paul’s letter to the Galatians that says, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,” (Gal 4:4 RSV). In other words, the time of our Lord’s birth was God’s appointed hour, the moment for which God had been long preparing. Some of the exciting preparations took place during that time of “silence,” however, and you will understand your New Testament much better if you understand something of the historic events during the time between the Testaments.

After Malachi had ceased his prophesying and the canon of the Old Testament closed – that is, the number of the books in the Old Testament was fulfilled and the inspired prophets ceased to speak – God allowed a period of time for the teachings of the Old Testament to penetrate throughout the world.

During this time, he rearranged the scenes of history, much as a stage crew will rearrange the stage sets after the curtain has fallen, and when the curtain rises again there is an entirely new setting.

In about 435 B.C., when the prophet Malachi ceased his writing, the center of world power began to shift from the East to the West. Up to this time, Babylon had been the major world power, but this was soon succeeded by the Medio-Persian empire, as you remember from ancient history. This shift had been predicted by the prophet Daniel, who said that there would rise up a bear who was higher on one side than the other, signifying the division between Media and Persia, with the Persians the predominant ones (Dan 7:5).

At the height of the Persian power there arose in the country of Macedonia (which we now know as Greece), north of the Black Sea, a man by the name of Philip of Macedon, who became a leader in his own country. He united the islands of Greece and became their ruler. His son was destined to become one of the great world leaders of all time, Alexander the Great. In 330 B.C. a tremendous battle between the Persians and the Greeks entirely altered the course of history. In that battle, Alexander, as a young man only twenty years old, led the armies of Greece in victory over the Persians and completely demolished the power of Persia. The center of world power then shifted farther west into Greece, and the Grecian empire was born.

A year after that historic battle, Alexander the Great led his armies down into the Syrian world toward Egypt. On the way, he planned to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. As the victorious armies of the Greeks approached the city, word was brought to the Jews in Jerusalem that the armies were on their way. The high priest at that time, who was a godly old man by the name of Jaddua (who, by the way, is mentioned in the Bible in the book of Nehemiah) took the sacred writings of Daniel the prophet and, accompanied by a host of other priests dressed in white garments, went forth and met Alexander some distance outside the city.

All this is from the report of Josephus, the Jewish historian, who tells us that Alexander left his army and hurried to meet this body of priests. When he met them, he told the high priest that he had had a vision the night before in which God had shown him an old man, robed in a white garment, who would show him something of great significance to himself, according to the account, the high priest then opened the prophecies of Daniel and read them to Alexander.

In the prophecies Alexander was able to see the predictions that he would become that notable goat with the horn in his forehead, who would come from the West and smash the power of Medio-Persia and conquer the world. He was so overwhelmed by the accuracy of this prophecy and, of course, by the fact that it spoke about him, that he promised that he would save Jerusalem from siege, and sent the high priest back with honors. How true that account is, is very difficult at this distance in time to say; that, at any event, is the story.

Alexander died in 323 B.C. when he was only about thirty-three years old. He had drunk himself to death in the prime of his life, grieved because he had no more worlds to conquer. After his death, his empire was torn with dissension, because he had left no heir. His son had been murdered earlier, so there was no one to inherit the empire of Alexander.

After some time, however, the four generals that had led Alexander's armies divided his empire between them. Two of them are particularly noteworthy to us. One was Ptolemy, who gained Egypt and the northern African countries; the other was Seleucus, who gained Syria, to the north of Palestine. During this time Palestine was annexed by Egypt, and suffered greatly at the hands of Ptolemy. In fact, for the next one hundred years, Palestine was caught in the meat-grinder of the unending conflicts between Syria on the north and Egypt on the south.

Now if you have read the prophecies of Daniel, you will recall that Daniel was able, by inspiration, to give a very accurate and detailed account of the highlights of these years of conflict between the king of the North (Syria) and the king of the South (Egypt). The eleventh chapter of Daniel gives us a most amazingly accurate account of that which has long since been fulfilled. If you want to see just how accurate the prophecy is, I suggest you compare that chapter of Daniel with the historical rec-

ord of what actually occurred during that time. H. A. Ironside's little book, *The 400 Silent Years*, gathers that up in some detail.

During this time Grecian influence was becoming strong in Palestine. A party arose among the Jews called the Hellenists, who were very eager to bring Grecian culture and thought into the nation and to liberalize some of the Jewish laws. This forced a split into two major parties:

- There were those who were strong Hebrew nationalists, who wanted to preserve everything according to the Mosaic order. They resisted all the foreign influences that were coming in to disrupt the old Jewish ways. This party became known as the Pharisees, which means "to separate." They were the separationists who insisted on preserving traditions. They grew stronger and stronger, becoming more legalistic and rigid in their requirements, until they became the target for some of the most scorching words our Lord ever spoke. They had become religious hypocrites, keeping the outward form of the Law, but completely violating its spirit.
- On the other hand, the Hellenists – the Greek lovers – became more and more influential in the politics of the land. They formed the party that was known in New Testament days as the Sadducees, the liberals. They turned away from the strict interpretation of the Law and became the rationalists of their day, ceasing to believe in the supernatural in any way. We are told in the New Testament that they came again and again to the Lord with questions about the supernatural, like "What will happen to a woman who has been married to seven different men? In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" (Matt 22:23-33). They did not believe in a resurrection, but in these questions they were trying to put Jesus on the spot.

Now there was also a young rebel Jewish priest who married a Samaritan, went down to Samaria, and in rebellion against the Jewish laws, built a temple on Mount Gerizim that became a rival of the temple in Jerusalem. This caused intense, fanatical rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans, and this rivalry is also reflected in the New Testament.

Also during this time, in Egypt, under the reign of one of the Ptolemies, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated for the first time into another language, in about 284 B.C. A group of 70 scholars was called together by the Egyptian king to make a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Book by book they translated the Old Testament into Greek. When they had finished, it was given the name of the *Septuagint*, which means "70," because of the number of translators. This became the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. From it many of the quotations in the New Testament are derived. That is why New Testament quotations of Old Testament verses are sometimes in different words – because they come from the Greek translation. The Septuagint is still in existence today, and is widely used in various parts of the world. It is still a very important document.

A little later on, about 203 B.C., a king named Antiochus the Great came into power in Syria, to the north of Palestine. He captured Jerusalem from the Egyptians and began the reign of Syrian power over Palestine. He had two sons, one of whom succeeded him and reigned only a few years. When he died, his brother took the throne. This man, named Antiochus Epiphanes, became one of the most vicious and violent persecutors of the Jews ever known. In fact, he is often called the "Antichrist of the Old Testament," since he fulfills some of the predictions of Daniel concerning the coming of one who would be "a contemptible person" and "a vile king." His name (which he modestly bestowed upon himself) means "Antiochus the Illustrious." Nevertheless, some of his own courtiers evidently agreed more with the prophecies of Daniel, and they changed two letters in his title, from *Epiphanes* to *Epipames*, which means "the mad man."

His first act was to depose the high priest in Jerusalem, thus ending the long line of succession, beginning with Aaron and his sons through the many centuries of Jewish life. Onias the Third was the last of the hereditary line of priests. Antiochus Epiphanes sold the priesthood to Jason, who was not of the priestly line. Jason, in turn, was tricked by his younger brother Menelaus, who purchased the priesthood and then sold the golden vessels of the temple in order to make up the tribute money. Epiphanes overthrew the God-authorized line of priests. Then, and under his reign, the city of Jerusalem and all the religious rites of the Jews began

to deteriorate as they came fully under the power of the Syrian king.

In 171 B.C. Antiochus invaded Egypt and once again Palestine was caught in the nutcracker of rivalry. Palestine is the most fought-over country in the world, and Jerusalem is the most captured city in all history. It has been pillaged, ravished, burned and destroyed more than 27 times in its history.

While Antiochus was in Egypt, it was reported that he had been killed in battle, and Jerusalem rejoiced. The people organized a revolt and overthrew Menelaus, the pseudo-priest. When report reached Antiochus (who was very much alive in Egypt) that Jerusalem was delighted at the report of his death, he organized his armies and swept like a fury back across the land, falling upon Jerusalem with terrible vengeance.

He overturned the city, regained his power, and, guided by the treacherous Menelaus, intruded into the very Holy of Holies in the temple itself. Some 40,000 people were slain in three days of fighting during this terrible time. When he forced his way into the Holy of Holies, he destroyed the scrolls of the Law and, to the absolute horror of the Jews, took a sow and offered it upon the sacred altar. Then with a broth made from the flesh of this unclean animal, he sprinkled everything in the temple, thus completely defiling and violating the sanctuary. It is impossible for us to grasp how horrifying this was to the Jews. They were simply appalled that anything like this could ever happen to their sacred temple.

It was that act of defiling the temple which is referred to by the Lord Jesus as the “desolating sacrilege” which Daniel had predicted (Matt 24:15), and which also became a sign of the coming desolation of the temple when Antichrist himself will enter the temple, call himself God, and thus defile the temple in that time. As we know from the New Testament, that still lies in the future.

Daniel the prophet had said the sanctuary would be polluted for 2300 days (Dan 8:14). In exact accordance with that prophecy, it was exactly 2300 days – six and a half years – before the temple was cleansed. It was cleansed under the leadership of a man now famous in Jewish history, Judas Maccabaeus. He was one of the priestly line who, with his father and four brothers, rose up in revolt against the Syrian king. They captured the atten-

tion of the Israelites, summoned them to follow them into battle, and in a series of pitched battles in which they were always an overwhelming minority, overthrew the power of the Syrian kings, captured Jerusalem, and cleansed the temple. The day they cleansed the temple was named the Day of Dedication, and it occurred on the 25th day of December. On that date Jews still celebrate the Feast of Dedication each year.

The Maccabees, who were of the Asmonean family, began a line of high priests known as the Asmonean Dynasty. Their sons, for about the next three or four generations, ruled as priests in Jerusalem, all the time having to defend themselves against the constant assaults of the Syrian army who tried to recapture the city and the temple. During the days of the Maccabees there was a temporary overthrow of foreign domination, which is why the Jews look back to this time and regard it with such tremendous veneration.

During this time, one of the Asmonean priests made a league with the rising power in the West, Rome. He signed a treaty with the Senate of Rome, providing for help in the event of Syrian attack. Though the treaty was made in all earnestness and sincerity, it was this pact which introduced Rome into the picture and history of Israel.

As the battles between the two opposing forces waged hotter and hotter, Rome was watchful. Finally, the Governor of Idumea, a man named Antipater and a descendant of Esau, made a pact with two other neighboring kings and attacked Jerusalem to try to overthrow the authority of the Asmonean high priest. This battle raged so fiercely that finally Pompey, the Roman general, who happened to have an army in Damascus at the time, was besought by both parties to come and intervene. One side had a little more money than the other, and persuaded by that logical argument, Pompey came down from Damascus, entered the city of Jerusalem – again with terrible slaughter – overthrew the city and captured it for Rome. That was in 63 B.C. From that time on, Palestine was under the authority and power of Rome.

Now Pompey and the Roman Senate appointed Antipater as the Procurator of Judea, and he in turn made his two sons kings of Galilee and Judea. The son who became king of Judea is known to us as Herod the Great:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?’ (Matt 2:1-2a RSV)

Meanwhile, the pagan empires around had been deteriorating and disintegrating. Their religions had fallen upon evil days. The people were sick of the polytheism and emptiness of their pagan faiths. The Jews had gone through times of pressure and had failed in their efforts to re-establish themselves, and had given up all hope. There was a growing air of expectancy that the only hope they had left was the coming at last of the promised Messiah.

In the East, the oriental empires had come to the place where the wisdom and knowledge of the past had disintegrated and they too were looking for something. When the moment came when the star arose over Bethlehem, the wise men of the East who were looking for an answer to their problems saw it immediately and came out to seek the One it pointed to. Thus, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, {cf, Gal 4:4}.

It is amazing how God utilizes history to work out his purposes. Though we are living in the days that might be termed “the silence of God,” when for almost 2,000 years there has been no inspired voice from God, we must look back – even as they did during those 400 silent years – upon the inspired record and realize that God has already said all that needs to be said, through the Old and New Testaments. God’s purposes have not ended, for sure. He is working them out as fully now as he did in those days. Just as the world had come to a place of hopelessness then, and the One who would fulfill

all their hopes came into their midst, so the world again is facing a time when despair is spreading widely across the earth. Hopelessness is rampant everywhere and in this time God is moving to bring to fulfillment all the prophetic words concerning the coming of his Son again into the world to establish his kingdom.

- How long?
- How close?
- Who knows?

But what God has done in history, he will do again as we approach the end of “the silence of God.”

Prayer:

Our Father, we are constantly encouraged as we see the fact that our faith is grounded upon historic things; that it touches history on every side. It is integrally related to life. We pray that our own faith may grow strong and be powerful as we see the despair around us, the shaking of foundations, the changing of that which has long been taken to be permanent, the overthrowing of empires and the rising of others. Lord, we are thankful that we may look to you and realize that you are the One who does not change. The One whose word is eternal. As the Lord Jesus himself said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall never pass away.” We pray in Christ’s name, Amen.

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BEHOLD YOUR KING
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The Message of Matthew: BEHOLD YOUR KING!

by Ray C. Stedman

Beginning in the New Testament we move from the realm of shadow, type, and prophecy, into the full sunshine of the presentation of the Son of God. The Old Testament speaks of him on every page, but speaks in shadows, in types, in symbols, and in prophecies – all looking forward to the coming of Someone. You cannot read the Old Testament without being aware of that constant promise running through every page – Someone is coming! Someone is coming!

Now, when we open the Gospels, that Someone steps forth in the fullness of his glory. As John says, “We have beheld his glory ... as of the only Son from the Father,” (John 1:14 RSV). I love the Gospels. They are to me one of the most perennially fascinating sections of the Bible. There you see Christ as he is. Remember that what he was is what he *is*; and what he *is* is what you have, if you are a Christian. All the fullness of his character and being and life is available to us, and we only learn what those resources are as we see him as he was and is. That is why the Gospel records are so important to us.

People often wonder why we have four Gospels. There is a very good reason for this. It is interesting to note that each of these Gospels is a development of an exclamatory statement that is found in the Old Testament. Four different times – and only four times – in the Old Testament there was an exclamatory statement made concerning the Messiah, introduced always by the word *behold*: In one of the prophets we read, “Behold thy king, O Israel!” In another place we read, “Behold the man!” In a third place we read, “Behold my servant!” In still a fourth place we read, “Behold thy

God!” These four statements are amplified and developed in the four Gospels:

- Matthew, the Gospel of the King;
- Mark, the Gospel of the Servant;
- Luke, the Gospel of the Son of man; and
- John, the Gospel of God, the presentation of the Son of God.

These four Gospels give us four aspects of our Lord’s character and person. They are not, strictly speaking, biographies. They are really sketches about the Person of Christ – eyewitness accounts by those who knew him personally, or those immediately associated with them. Therefore, they have the ring of authenticity, and they carry to our hearts that first and marvelous impression that our Lord made upon his own disciples, and then upon the multitudes that followed him. No more amazing character has ever walked among men. As you read the Gospel accounts, I hope something of this fascination breaks upon your own heart as you see him stepping forth from these pages, revealed to you by the Spirit, when you see him as he is.

The first book of the New Testament is Matthew, and this is the place where most people start reading the Bible. I think more people begin reading in the New Testament than the Old, therefore, that would make Matthew the most widely read book in all the world. In fact, Renan, the French skeptic, said of this book, “This is the most important book of all Christendom.” He also said, “The most important book that has ever been written is the Gospel of Matthew.” But it has its critics, too.

There are those who claim that this book contains nothing but the early legends of the church

which grew up around Jesus, that these accounts are not historical, and that this book was not actually written until the fourth century A.D. Therefore, they say, we are uncertain as to how much is really true. Other critics make the claim that this is only one of many gospels that were circulated.

Now, it is true that there are other gospels besides the four in the New Testament. There is the Gospel of Barnabas, for instance, and the Gospel of Peter, and yet other gospels. They can be found in a book called *The New Testament Apocrypha* if you would like to read them. The critics say that it is mere chance that these four Gospels survived. There is a legend that began with a German theologian named Pappas in about the 16th century who said that the Gospels were selected at the Council of Nice in 325 A.D. by gathering together all the many gospels that were circulating at that time, throwing them all under a table, and then reaching in and pulling out four which happened to be Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The foolishness of such a claim is evident to anyone who reads the Gospels with thoughtfulness. They are stamped with the fingerprints of God. The very pattern of these books reflects the divine imprint, and you cannot read them or compare them with the Old Testament without seeing that they come from an inspired source. Furthermore, you have merely to compare them with the Apocryphal gospels to see how foolish such a claim is.

As you know, this Gospel was written by Matthew, otherwise known as Levi. He was a publican, and publicans were those men who took the taxes from the people. His name means “the gift of God,” and to call a tax collector by that name obviously indicates that he was converted. It was perhaps our Lord himself who designated him Matthew, just as he changed Simon’s name to Peter, and perhaps the names of others of the disciples as well. Tradition tells us that Matthew lived and taught in Palestine for 15 years after the crucifixion, and then he began to travel as a missionary, first to Ethiopia and then to Macedonia, Syria, and Persia. Finally he died a natural death in either Ethiopia or Macedonia, but this is not certain. It is one of the legends or traditions that have come down to us about Matthew.

The book obviously dates from a very early day. The idea that it was written in the fourth century is pure poppycock because there is much evidence that dates it in the early part of the first

century. It is quoted, for instance, in the well-known *Didache*, which is the teaching of the twelve apostles which dates from early in the second century, so it obviously precedes that. Papias, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, says “Matthew composed his Gospel in the Hebrew tongue, and each one interprets it as he is able.” This was confirmed by Irenaeus and Origen, two of the early church fathers, all of whom were well acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew.

Even in the first century itself we have Jewish voices that prove the existence of Matthew. Two Jewish people, Gamaliel the Second, who was a prominent rabbi, and his sister, Immashalom (which, incidentally, means “woman of peace,” though she was far from that) pronounced a curse upon the Christians in these terms: “A curse upon the readers of the evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament.” Now, the only evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament that were extant in their day (about 45 or 50 A.D.) were the Gospel of Matthew and, perhaps, the Gospel of Mark, so that the date of writing of this Gospel is about 45 or 50 A.D. It was probably first written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek.

There are many who think that the Gospel of Matthew is one of the most difficult books of the New Testament to outline, but I would like to challenge that. I think there is no book in the Bible that lends itself more easily to outlining than the Gospel of Matthew. The reason is that the Holy Spirit himself has given the outline within the book. This occurs in several of the books of Scripture, and if you are observant, you can see these marks.

The major divisions of Matthew are given to us by the repetition of a particular phrase that appears twice and divides the book into three sections:

First of all, there is an introductory section which takes us to Chapter 4, where we have the first occurrence of this phrase. It says (Verse 17):

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” {Matt 4:17 RSV}

That marks a major turning point in the argument and presentation of this book.

Then you find a similar phrase occurring in Chapter 16, introducing the third section. We read (Verse 21):

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. {Matt 16:21 RSV}

That is the first mention of the crucifixion in Matthew. From here on it is the aim and point of development of this book.

Now, there are subdivisions given to us in the same way by another kind of phrase. You will find the subdivisions marked for you by a verse which appears five different times:

The first occasion is in Chapter 7, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount. We read (Verses 28, 29):

And when Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. {Matt 7:28-29 RSV}

In Chapter 11, Verse 1, you find another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. {Matt 11:1 RSV}

Look at Chapter 13, Verses 53, 54 where you have another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" {Matt 13:53-54 RSV}

In Chapter 19, we read (Verses 1, 2):

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. {Matt 19:1-2 RSV}

Again, in Chapter 26 (Verses 1, 2):

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified." {Matt 26:1-2 RSV}

You notice that each one of these introduces a complete change of direction – a new subject. These mark the divisions of this book.

The first division is all about the preparation of the King for his ministry. "Lo, your king comes to you;" the prophet Zechariah has said, "humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass," {Zech 9:9b RSV}. Matthew, then, is the Gospel of the King, and that prophecy was fulfilled in the triumphal entry when our Lord entered the city of Jerusalem in exactly that manner. It is Matthew's task to present him as the King. The book opens, therefore, with the genealogy of the King. Every king has to have a genealogy. The ancestry of a king is the most important thing about him. He has to go back to someone; he has to be in the royal line. Therefore, Matthew opens with that exhaustive and somewhat exhausting genealogy that traces from Abraham on down to Joseph, his stepfather, who was called the husband of Mary. Joseph was in the royal line of David. It is from Joseph that our Lord gets his royal right to the throne, because he was the heir of Joseph. It is through Mary, who was also of the royal line of David, that he gets his genealogical right to the throne. His legal right comes through Joseph; his hereditary right through Mary. Joseph, of course, was not really his father, but Mary was really his mother.

The first chapter also recounts his birth. The second chapter describes events which ensued, including the flight into Egypt. In the third chapter we read of the baptism of our Lord. The first two chapters thus relate him to earth. His genealogy ties him to the earthly royal line of David. But his baptism relates him to heaven and gives his heavenly credentials – his heavenly authority – for the heavens opened, and in an amazing way, the Father's voice spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son." There the royal line is declared according to the heavenly standard.

In the fourth chapter you have the testing of the King. This is his experience of temptation in the wilderness, where he is related to all the powers of darkness; where hell is loosed upon him. Now, the testing of our Lord is the key to the Gospel of

Matthew. He is tested as a representative man. He goes into the wilderness as the Son of man, and is tested as to whether he can fulfill God's intention for man. Man is made up of three divisions – body, soul, and spirit, and it was on these three levels that our Lord was tested:

- You will notice, first of all, that he was tested on the level of the body's demands. The dominant passion of the body is self-preservation. Our Lord's first temptation came on that level. Would he continue to be God's man, even when he was faced by an extreme challenge on the level of self-preservation? For 40 days and nights he had not eaten, and then the temptation came subtly to him: "Change these stones into bread, if you are the Son of God. Preserve your life," {cf, Matt 4:3}. But he insisted upon walking in the will of God despite the intensity of this pressure. What would you have done after 40 days of fasting if someone offered you bread?
- Then he was tested on the level of the soul – that is, through the dominant passion of the soul, which is self-expression. On this level, we all want desperately to reveal ourselves; to show what we can do, or as we put it, to express ourselves. This is the drive that is the primary function of the human soul. Remember, it was during this testing that our Lord was taken up to the top of the temple, and given the opportunity to cast himself down and thus capture the acclaim of Israel. Such temptation plays upon the urge for status, for manifesting the pride of life. But he proved himself true to God despite the pressure that came to him in that way.
- Finally, he was tested in the deepest, most essential part of his humanity – the spirit. The dominant passion of the spirit is to worship. The spirit is always looking for something to worship. That is why man is everywhere essentially a religious being, because the spirit in him is craving, crying out, for an idol, someone to follow, a hero, something to worship. It was on this level that the Devil came to him and said, "All these kingdoms of the world will be yours if you will fall down and worship me," {cf, Matt 4:9b RSV}. Our Lord's answer was,

"... it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve,'" {Matt 4:10b RSV}. So he passed the test. He revealed himself fully and adequately to be man as God intended man to be.

Then, in the Sermon on the Mount, he begins to put this same test to the nation Israel. Israel had been chosen of God through the centuries to be his channel of communication with humanity, and they had regarded themselves as his favored people. Now the nation is to be put to the test, in the Gospel of Matthew, as to whether they can pass the same test our Lord did. This is the essential story of Matthew. He is tracing how the Son of God – God's King – came into the world, and offered himself to be King of Israel, first on the level of the physical, then on the level of the soul. When he was rejected on both these levels, he passed into the realm of the mystery of the human spirit. In the darkness and mystery of the cross, he accomplished the redeeming work that would capture man again for God, body, soul, and spirit.

Redemption, therefore, begins with the spirit. That's why the work of Christ in our own hearts – though we may be attracted to him on the level of the body, for the supply of physical need; or on the level of the soul, for the need of self-expression and improvement in our lives – will never really change us until it has reached the level of the spirit, the place of basic worship, wherein we have committed ourselves, body, soul, and spirit, unto him. Then the change begins to show.

Now you see this worked out in the Gospel of Matthew, with the nation Israel as the recipient. The first ministry begins, as we saw, in Chapter 4, with the mark, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" {Matt 4:17 RSV}. Then follows the Sermon on the Mount, where we have the presentation of the King and the laws of the kingdom. This covers the rest of Chapters 4, and 5 through 7. In these rules of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount there is an obvious emphasis on the physical life. Notice this as you read through it the next time.

This is one of the most penetrating, most incisive messages ever set before human beings, but it approaches us on the level of our ordinary, physical, material life. There are two physical sins dealt with – murder and adultery. The life of God is il-

lustrated for us in the realm of giving alms and of fasting – physical acts. God is offered to us as One who so cares for us that we do not need to think of tomorrow – how to be fed, how to be clothed – the worries that come to us on the physical level. Our Lord is saying, “If you discover me and receive me as your King, you will discover that I am the answer to all your physical needs.” He is offering himself to the nation, and to us, on this level.

Then this is followed by a section on miracles, and, in Chapters 8 through 12, you have the miracles of the kingdom. These are illustrations of the benefits that our Lord can bestow on the level of the physical. There is no spectacular display here, but a representation of our Lord’s power over everything affecting the body – disease, demons and death. His authority in this realm is that of King.

This, in turn, is followed by a section of parables of the kingdom, where the rejection of the kingdom is declared in a mystery form. It is apparent even before this time that the nation is going to reject our Lord’s offer of himself as king on this physical level, and so a new word appears. In Chapter 11 he begins to utter the word *woe* – “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! Woe to those who have not believed!” {cf, Matt 11:21 ff RSV}. He pronounces judgment upon the nation on this level. The mysteries of the kingdom are in Chapter 13, where the parables are given with truth hidden beneath a type of symbol. Then we have a section that is simply instruction to individuals – to those among them who will believe, who will receive him on this level.

All of this section, by the way, beginning with Chapter 13, Verse 54 through Chapter 16, Verse 20, has to do with bread. There is the feeding of the 5,000 in Chapter 14; the questions on what defiles a man in Chapter 15; and then the incident of the woman who came and asked for crumbs from his table, and he said, “The bread belongs to the sons of the kingdom,” {see Matt 15:22-28}. Then there is the feeding of the 4,000 in Chapter 15; the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Chapter 16, and, finally, the revelation of our Lord’s person to Peter in that wonderful time when Peter was given the first insight that here, indeed, was one who would go beyond the level of the physical and even of the soulish, into the depths of man’s spirit.

Beginning with Chapter 16, Verse 21 (we have already noted this major division), we have the sec-

ond ministry of our Lord to the nation, this time on the level of the soul. He is offering himself on this level. His first revelation is to the disciples only, for they are the nucleus of the coming church, and this takes us up to Chapter 18, Verse 35. Here is the transfiguration and the first intimation of his death. This is followed (as in the first section) by parables of the King. These are addressed first to the disciples, and then to the nation. All are parables presenting him as the King who has the right to command and to determine the character of individuals. Nothing is said now about their physical lives, but rather, their soulish lives. Are they willing to follow him; are they willing to let him mold and shape their lives and characters?

Soon we have the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which becomes the judicial entry, when our Lord judges the nation, passes into the temple, stops the offerings, and drives out the money changers. Once again you hear the word *woe* coming in. In Chapter 23, Verse 13, he says, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, ...” {Matt 23:13a RSV}. In Verse 16, “Woe to you, blind guides, ...” {Matt 23:16a RSV}. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” {Matt 23:23a RSV}. All through the chapter, like the knell of death, this word *woe* rings out again and again.

This is followed by a section in Chapters 24 and 25, where we have instructions to individuals again. This is what we call the Olivet discourse – instructions to the believing remnant on what to do until he comes again. It reveals how world history is going to shape up; what will happen in the intervening years; what forces will be loosed upon the earth; how the forces of darkness are going to take God’s own people and test them, try them, and shake their foundations. He declares that they can only stand as they learn to reckon upon the inner strengthening of the Holy Spirit.

Finally we arrive at the last section, where we have the betrayal, the trial of the Lord Jesus, the agony, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, when our Lord, in the mystery of darkness, passes out into the blackness of death. There, alone, forsaken by his friends, he entered into a death grapple with the powers of darkness. In the mystery of the cross, he laid hold of the forces that have mastered the human spirit and he broke them there. In the wonder of the cross, he vanquished the powers that have been against mankind. As Paul puts it later, he mastered them and made an open show of them,

triumphing over them, and leading them behind him as a conqueror would lead a train of captives in open display before the people {cf, Col 2:15}.

In the crucifixion story you see him standing as a lone prisoner before Pilate in judgment, and then passing into the darkness of the garden, from there to the whipping post, and then to the cross where he was nailed up to die. In the anguish and haze of that awful six hours, he grappled with these forces of darkness and vanquished them. Thus, the only crown he ever had as an earthly king was a crown of thorns; the only throne he ever mounted was a bloody cross; the only scepter he ever wielded was a broken reed.

But this is followed by the resurrection, when he broke through into the realm of the human spirit. Up to that time, in effect, God had never been able to move into the spirit of man – on the ground of faith he could – but now the way into the very center of man’s being is opened wide. As we come to know the Lord in our spirit, we discover that the worship of our hearts is given to him there. The spirit is the key to the mastery of the whole man. When you get a man’s spirit, you have all that he is. By means of the cross and the resurrection, our Lord has made it possible to pass into the very holy of holies of man, and to dwell within him.

The great message of the Gospel, then, is that God is not up yonder on some throne; he is not waiting in some distant judgment hall to pass judgment upon us. He is ready and waiting to pass into the center of a hungry, thirsting person’s heart, and there to minister the blessing of his own life, his own character, his own being, pouring them out for us. When the King is enthroned in the life, the kingdom of God is present. That is the message of Matthew – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heaven does not mean some place out in space; it means the realm of the invisibilities, where

God reigns in the spirit. That kingdom is at hand in the presentation of the King.

The great question to which Matthew demands an answer is, “Is Jesus Christ King of your life?” Have you received him only as Savior of the body, or Savior of the soul? Then he is not yet King. The question that Matthew brings before us is, “Has he become King? Has he penetrated to the spirit? Has he mastered your heart? Has he laid hold of your worship as an individual, so that he is the one single most important person in all the universe to you?” That is when he becomes King. That is the fulfillment of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me, for you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your strength, and all your mind,” {Deut 6:5, Matt 22:37 RSV}. The result will be that you will “love your neighbor as yourself,” {Matt 22:39}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that as we look at this Gospel of the King we may see the majesty and the glory, the greatness of this One who has come to master us, who is not interested in merely helping us, but who has come to direct us. He has not come to take sides, but to take over. Lord, we pray that you would make us understand this and yield to him the throne of our lives; that in this very moment, as we worship before you, our hearts may be saying to him “Lord Jesus, come and reign in my heart; be the King over every area of my life; master me in all the aspects of my being; plant your bloody cross as a throne in my heart, and rule unchallenged.” We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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The Gospel of Mark: HE CAME TO SERVE

by Ray C. Stedman

The Gospel of Mark, the second book in the New Testament, is sixteen short chapters long, the briefest of all the Gospels, and therefore easy to read in one sitting. Its brevity is probably the reason it is the most often translated book of the New Testament. The Wycliffe translators, I understand, almost invariably begin their translation work with the Gospel of Mark because it is so short and gives the whole story in one brief compass.

This Gospel has a completely different atmosphere from the Gospel of Matthew. If you go on to read Luke and John, you will see that they are still different from Matthew and Mark. Matthew, Mark and Luke are more similar to each other than any of these three are to the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, they are all different. There is a reason for this, designed deliberately by the Holy Spirit. We make a mistake if we think these four Gospels are four biographies of the Lord. They are not biographies at all. They are character sketches, intended to be different, intended to present different points of view. Therefore, they constitute four distinct views of our Lord and of his work.

The Gospel of Matthew is written to present Christ as the King. The Gospel of Mark presents his character as a servant. The Gospel of Luke presents him as the Son of man – as man in his essential humanity. The Gospel of John presents him as the Son of God, that is, his deity, and there you find the greatest claims for his deity.

Someone has pointed out that the very clothes our Lord wore indicate this. His robe is the mark of a king, because in those days the king wore a robe, as kings do even today. The towel that he girded about himself as he washed the disciples'

feet at the Lord's supper is the mark of a servant. The fact that his robe was seamless is a mark of his humanity – perfect, without flaw, without seams – not the joining together of two things, but a perfect, unbroken humanity. The fact that on the Mount of Transfiguration it became a shining garment is a mark of his Godhood – his deity – the Glory of God enshrined in a human temple, so that John could write of him, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father," {John 1:14 RSV}. He came and tabernacled among us. Yet within that human tent, the glory of God shone forth.

It is also noteworthy that the recipients of these Gospels were quite different:

- Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for the Jews, and it is filled with references and quotations from the Old Testament. There you have the fulfillment of the sacrificial feast with which the Jews were so familiar.
- But Mark writes his Gospel for the Roman mind. This is the Gospel that has the most Latin words in it – the Gospel of haste and action, characteristics of Rome.
- Luke writes for the Greek mind, the philosophical mind. Here you have our Lord's table talk, as he sat with his disciples in intimate fellowship – the Greeks loved this. His discourses are here, his philosophical utterances, the representation of his thoughts and wisdom as a man.

- But John writes for the Christian, and therefore, the Gospel of John is dearest to Christian hearts. There you have the deity of Christ emphasized. There you have the teaching of the rapture of the Church first brought out. The hope of the Church and the intimacy of the fellowship of communion between the Lord and his own, the Holy Spirit's ministry, are all emphasized in the Gospel of John.

So there are four distinct purposes for writing these Gospels.

This is true of the work of Christ as well. There are four aspects of the cross. If you are familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament about the feasts of Israel, you will remember that five feasts were especially marked out for them, and these are reflected in the Gospels:

- One of the five, the sin offering, is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, where you have the sacrifice of our Lord and its effect upon human sin.
- Then in Mark the trespass offering is emphasized; that is, the effects of sin, the manifestation of it, the deeds of men.
- In Luke you have what answers to the peace offering.
- The burnt offering is in John. To Israel, the burnt offering was the expression of utter and complete dedication and devotion, commitment to the work of God. All of the burnt offering had to be consumed, every bit of it. None of it was eaten by the priest. All of it speaks of a life totally given to God. This is exemplified so beautifully in the Gospel of John, where you have the devotion of our Lord, how he pleased the Father.

All four of these speak of the meal offering, that is, the perfect humanity of our Lord, sinless being that he was.

Now, if you know these things about the Gospels, it will explain certain questions that are sometimes asked. For instance:

- Why is there no account of the struggle of our Lord in Gethsemane in the Gospel of John? You find the record of Gethsemane's agony in Matthew and Mark, but no mention of it is in John. It is because in the garden he cried out and questioned the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," {Matt 26:39 RSV, cf, Mark 14:34-35}. Now, the Son of God does not question the Father, but it is as man that he does this, and therefore the account of the garden is found primarily in the Gospel of Luke. There, where he is presented as man, we have the fullest detail of his human struggle, but in John, where he is presented as the Son of God, the account is left out.
- This is also why, in Matthew, the wise men are recorded as coming to offer their gifts, while in Luke it is the coming of the shepherds that is recorded. Now both of them came, but Matthew is the Gospel of the King, and the wise men brought gifts fit for a king. But common, ordinary shepherds came to see the perfect man, the One who came to be one of us, equal with us, on our level. And this was Luke's emphasis.
- Why is there no account of the ascension of our Lord in Matthew? Well, because as King, he came to rule on earth. Matthew's emphasis is on the kingdom on earth. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." The ascension is not mentioned in John, because Jesus is the Son of God, and God is everywhere. God is omnipresent and does not go from earth to heaven or heaven to earth; therefore, there is no account of the ascension in John.
- Why is there no genealogy of our Lord in Mark and in John? There is a genealogy in both Matthew and Luke, but none in Mark nor John. Well, kings require genealogies; you have to know their descent in the royal line. A man is interested in his ancestry; thus the genealogy in Luke, but no one cares about the ancestry of a servant, and God has no ancestry, therefore, there is no genealogy in Mark and John.

Now, all of this shows the supervision of the Holy Spirit. These Gospels are not merely copies, one

based on another, as the critics tell us, but they are designed of the Holy Spirit especially to present the different aspects of the Lord Jesus.

That brings us to the Gospel of Mark.

The author was a young man named John Mark, the man who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey and proved to be an unfaithful servant. He could not take the pressure, and turned back to go home. It is interesting that the Holy Spirit chose this man, an unfaithful servant, to record for us the faithfulness of the Servant of God, the Lord Jesus. Mark was a companion of Peter, and, therefore, the Gospel of Mark contains primarily the thoughts, teachings and viewpoints of Peter. Matthew was a disciple; Luke got his Gospel through the Apostle Paul; John was a disciple, but Peter himself wrote nothing as far as a Gospel was concerned. Through his son in the faith, Mark, the Gospel according to Peter came to us.

In the tenth chapter of Acts, Peter gives a very brief summary of all that is recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark. Speaking in the home of Cornelius, we read that Peter stood among them and told them “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him,” {Acts 10:38 RSV}.

If you would like to meet Mark personally, turn to the 14th chapter of this little Gospel for the only account of Mark’s appearance among the disciples. This is the account of the passion of our Lord as he is moving to the cross, just after he was captured in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the middle of the account, we suddenly read these words (Verse 51):

A young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. {Mark 14:51 RSV}

No other Gospel tells us that, and it is almost certain that this is Mark. He was the son of a rich woman in Jerusalem and it is very likely that his mother owned the house in which the disciples met in the upper room. Mark, therefore, was present at some of these events. Almost certainly this incident is included because he himself was involved.

The whole Gospel is summed up for us in a phrase about the Lord in Chapter 10:

“For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve,” {Mark 10:45a RSV}

That is the servant, come to give his life as a ransom for many, or as the King James Version puts it, “not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” {Mark 10:45b KJV}. In this short verse, you have the divisions of the Gospel of Mark:

1. There is a brief introductory section that presents the credentials of the servant in the first thirteen verses of Chapter 1.
2. Following that is the ministry of the servant, from Chapter 1, Verse 14, to Chapter 8, Verse 30.
3. The rest of the book is concerned with the ransoming work of the servant.

In the section of **the ministry of the servant**, two things are stressed primarily:

First, *the authority of the servant*: Those who listened to him were filled with astonishment. They said, “He doesn’t teach like the scribes and Pharisees, but he speaks with authority, power” {cf, Mark 1:27 RSV}. What he says comes home to the heart. That is because as a servant he knew the secrets of God. He takes out of the treasury of God the secrets of God and makes them known unto men. Since we are men, we hear his words with a sense of awareness that this is reality. There is a note of genuineness about what he says which carries its own convicting power with it. That is why the Gospels and the words of our Lord, as they are read, have power in themselves to convict men.

The scribes and Pharisees needed constantly to bolster themselves with references to authorities and quotations from others, but not our Lord. He never quotes anything but the Scripture. He always speaks with the final word of authority. He never apologizes, never says he made a mistake, never repeats. He speaks always with utter authority.

In this section his authority over the powers of darkness, the demon world, is emphasized. Halloween represents men’s awareness of the existence of evil spirits. It has been distorted and twisted to become a pantheon of goblins, spooks, and witches who ride on broomsticks, which is really a basic attempt to destroy its effectiveness among men.

Behind this facade of clownish humor is the reality of a world of demonic powers that control and affect the minds of men.

As you read through the Gospel of Mark, you see again and again the authority of the Servant of God over the mysterious forces of darkness. The world of the occult was open to him. He knew the black powers, the dark passions that work behind the scenes in men's thinking and minds. Demonic powers, "seducing spirits," they are called later by Paul {1 Tim 4:1 KJV}.

His power in teaching, then, came from his understanding of the minds and hearts of men (remember that John says that no man needed to tell him anything about men because he knew men). Because he knows what is in man, he is the world's greatest psychologist. He knows our basic structure and all that God intended to be wrapped up in the human heart and life. That is why he analyzes so precisely, and why his teaching comes with power.

As you read the Gospel of Mark, you will see that these demonic powers have strange abilities to influence men in remarkable ways, and it is apparent that such influence is always negative:

- They have, for instance, the power to isolate men from one another, to drive a man in madness out into the desert and wilderness to live alone, to be cut off from the rest of humanity.
- They have the power to render him a lawless human being, with his fist against every other man and his face against the world. Lawlessness is always a mark of demonic influence.
- They also have the power to torment men and make them torment themselves. In describing a demonic person in his Gospel, Mark says that he was "beside himself" {Mark 3:21}. Now, that is a significant phrase, isn't it? Imagine standing beside yourself – a split personality; in other words, a schizophrenic, separated from himself and set against himself. This is one of the marks of demonic influence.
- Finally, they have the power to make men become a menace to society, to be against all the social structure of their day.

Over all these influences our Lord had complete power.

Mark also reveals his power over disease:

- The first account of that power at work is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. That has always been a touching thing to me. It is significant that he would begin with a mother-in-law. We make so many jokes about mothers-in-law, but Peter was evidently very concerned about his. Our Lord touched her fever, and it left her. Then all the people of the city gathered about his door, and he healed every one of them.
- The next account is that of a leper. He did the unheard-of thing; he not only healed him, but he touched him. Now, no one ever touched a leper in those days. The Law of Moses forbade that they be touched, and the lepers had to go about crying, "Unclean! Unclean!" No one would remotely think of touching a leper, but the compassion of the servant's heart is revealed as he touched him, healed him, and sent him to the priest, the first instance in all of Scripture of a leper ever being healed according to the Law of Moses and sent to the priest, as the Law demanded.

As a second emphasis, the Gospel of Mark highlights *the various attitudes toward our Lord* that became apparent as his ministry among men developed. A servant is always affecting people. As he performed his ministry and went about doing good, men developed certain attitudes toward him:

In Nazareth, his own home town, they were offended by him. They did not like what he said. They wanted him to do miracles, but he did not do any. Instead, he spoke to them rather sharply, and they were offended.

Then there was Herod the King, who was superstitiously attracted to Jesus, as well as afraid of him. He even wondered if he was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

The account goes on to reveal the attitude of his disciples, after he broke the bread and fed the five thousand, and then amazed them by walking on the sea. We read (Chapter 6, Verses 51-52):

He got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. {Mark 6:51-52 RSV}

This hardening of the heart is characteristic of the attitudes of many toward our Lord in his ministry as a servant.

Then you find the hypocrisy and critical attitude of the Pharisees, in Chapter 7, and the acceptance, then, of many at the close of Chapter 7. They were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak," {Mark 7:37b RSV}. That is the mark of a believing heart, one who can say of him, "He does all things well."

There is a very significant act recorded of our Lord in Chapter 8, Verses 22-26, where we read:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; {Mark 8:22-23a RSV}

Why did he lead him out of the village?

...and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. And he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." {Mark 8:23b-26 RSV}

Why? Well, what village was it? Bethsaida. In the Gospel of Matthew, Bethsaida was one of those cities Jesus had pronounced judgment upon, saying,

"... woe to you Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago ..." {Matt 11:21b RSV}

Here is a city that has rejected his ministry and his person, and our Lord will not allow any further testimony to go on in that city. He led the blind man out before he healed him. This is the only case where our Lord did not have an instantaneous, complete healing the first time he spoke. When the

healing was complete, he would not even allow him to go back into the village, for here was a village devoted to judgment, having rejected the ministry of the Servant of God.

That incident ends the first division of the Gospel of Mark.

Now we have the introduction of the second theme: He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and **to give his life a ransom for many.** Chapter 8, Verse 31:

And he began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. {Mark 8:31 RSV}

From here on, our Lord's face is set toward Jerusalem and toward the cross. He is going now to be the offering of God, the sacrifice, the servant who gives himself completely for the ransom of those he came to save. The revelation of his program is given in this verse. He came to suffer, to be rejected, to be killed, and after three days, to rise again. That is the way he is going to do it.

Remember Peter's reaction then? He took him and rebuked him; "Spare yourself, Lord." That is always the way of fallen man. The philosophy of the world is "Spare yourself. Don't take on anything you don't have to. Don't get involved. Don't do anything that is not necessary for your comfort." Is that not the philosophy of our age? Our Lord said, "Peter, I recognize where that comes from." He said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" {Mark 8:33b RSV}. And then:

... he called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." {Mark 8:34 RSV}

That is the way. Sparing yourself is the way of the Devil. Giving yourself is the way of God. This is the program that carries through the rest of this section of Mark.

The account of the Transfiguration follows, where Jesus reveals his intention for man. The very first verse in Chapter 9 suggests it. He said to them:

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.” {Mark 9:1b RSV}

Then he led Peter, James, and John up on the mountain top, and they literally did not taste of death till they saw the King coming in glory. Peter refers to this, remember, in his letter. He says,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ... we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. {2 Pet 1:16, 1:18 RSV}

It suggests here that God’s intention for man and the purpose of our Lord’s redemptive work is that men should not taste of death. He came to deliver us from the sting of death, from the awful taste of death. Christians die, but they never taste death. Death is a doorway into life. Why is it true that Christians can stand with Paul and say, “Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory?” {1 Cor 15:55 KJV}. Because Hebrews tells us that Jesus tasted death for every one (Heb 2:9).

In Chapter 10 he speaks of the family, of the children. He goes into the junkyard of human life and takes these gifts of God that men have twisted and misused and strips them of all the encrustation of tradition, the selfishness of man, and beautifully restores them to the purpose God intended.

In Chapter 11, you have the beginning of the passion week, our Lord’s last week as he moves to the cross. In this chapter, another very significant act that only Mark records is given to us (Verse 15):

They [that is, he and his disciples] came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; {Mark 11:15 RSV}

Now this is not the same act John records in his Gospel, (John 2:13-16). In John’s Gospel, this happened at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry.

But now, at the end of his ministry, for the second time, he overthrows the tables of the money-changers, cleanses the temple; and Mark says, “He would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple,” {Mark 11:16 RSV}.

What does that mean? Well, the only ones who carried anything through the temple were the priests. According to the Mosaic Law, it was their duty to catch the blood of the animals sacrificed on the brazen altar in the outer court and to bear that blood into the holy place and before the altar. Then once a year the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle that blood on the golden altar of the mercy seat. It was a very significant ritual.

But our Lord stopped all this. He would not allow any man to carry anything through the temple. In other words, he ended the sacrifices. The Jews resumed them until the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., but they did so without divine authority. The sacrifices are meaningless from here on, because he is standing now as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From this account he moves right on out to the Mount of Olives, from there to the upper room, into the Garden of Gethsemane, and on to the cross.

The last chapters are concerned with the questions that people asked him:

- In Chapter 11 he answers the questions of the priests and the elders who come out of hatred for him and try to trap him with their questions.
- In Chapter 12 he answers the questions of the Pharisees and the Herodians who likewise try to trap him with their questions, and he sees through their hypocrisy.
- Also in Chapter 12, the Sadducees come and try to trap him. They were the materialists, the ones who did not believe in a resurrection or a spirit life.
- Then a scribe with an honest heart asked him the only honest question so far. He came to him and said, “Which commandment is the first of all?” {Mark 12:28b RSV}. Immediately and forthrightly our Lord answered him.

- In Chapter 13 the disciples come with a question, and in his answer our Lord unfolds the whole revelation of the age to come. This is the great predictive section, closing with his return in glory.
- In Chapter 14 you have two acts that show the gracious character of the servant. Mary came and offered her sacrifice of expensive perfume which she poured out at his feet, and then Judas went out and betrayed him for money. One an act of utter selflessness, and the other an act of complete selfishness.

Beginning with Chapter 15, you have the account of the cross. In Mark's account, this is an act of almost incredible brutality done in the name of "justice." The Lord outwardly seems to be a defeated man, a tragic failure, his cause hopelessly lost. He is hounded, bludgeoned and spat upon; as he himself said, "The Son of man will suffer many things," {cf, Mark 8:31}. Finally, he is crucified. It seems so unlike the picture of the wonder-worker of Galilee that begins this letter – the mighty man of power, the servant with authority.

No wonder the high priests, as they saw him hanging there, say of him, "He saved others; he cannot save himself," {Mark. 15:31b RSV}. That is a strange statement. Yet it is one of those remarkable words that reveal how God is able to make even his enemies praise him, because they are both right and wrong. They were wrong in what they meant by those words, "He saved others; he cannot save himself" {Mark 15:31b RSV}, but they were perfectly right in what they said.

As I read this account, I am impressed with the three things that they could not make our Lord do:

- First, they could not make our Lord speak:

Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. {Mark 15:4-5 RSV}

- And they could not make him drink; "They offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it," {Mark 15:23 RSV}. Why not? Well, because he could have saved himself if he had. If he had spoken before Pilate, he could

have saved himself. The high priests were right; he saved others, but himself he could not, would not, save. Had he spoken, he could have delivered himself before Pilate, but he could not. Had he drunk, he would have saved himself the effect of the agony of the cross and the weight of the burdens of the world coming upon his shoulders, but he would not. He would not spare himself.

- Then, finally, they could not even make him die. We read, "Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last" {Mark 15:37 RSV}, which is really an interpretation. What the Greek says is, "He unspirited himself." He dismissed his spirit. He didn't die at the hands of the murderers; he let his spirit go, dismissed it, for he himself said, "No man can take my life from me. I lay it down of myself," {cf, John 10:18}. He could have refused to die, and they could not have taken his life from him. He said so. He could have hung on the cross and taunted them with their inability to put him to death, but he did not. He died, he unspirited himself.

When you come to the last chapter, the resurrection of our Lord, you learn his reason. He was silent and refused to appeal to Pilate or the crowd, because he was laying the basis for a coming day, when in resurrection power he would appeal to a far greater crowd, when every knee should bow and every tongue should proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. He would not drink to dull his senses because he was laying a basis by which even those who stood about the cross might enter into a life so wonderful, so vigorous, so abundant, that the most zestful moments of earth would pale by comparison.

He would not let men take his life, but he voluntarily laid it down himself in order that he might overcome man's greatest enemy – death – and forever deliver all who would believe in him from the power and awful sting of death. That is the gospel. "He saved others, but himself he could not save," {cf, Mark 15:31b}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for your suffering Servant, the One who came not to be ministered unto, as we so frequently de-

mand for ourselves, but to minister and to give his life as a ransom for many. May the impact of that holy, selfless sacrifice imprint itself upon our minds and hearts,

that we may never forget that there is One who saved others, but himself he could not save. In Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Gospel of Luke:
THE PERFECT MAN
By: Ray C. Stedman
Scripture: Luke 1 - 24
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The Gospel of Luke: THE PERFECT MAN

by Ray C. Stedman

The third Gospel presents Jesus as the Son of man. That was our Lord's favorite title for himself, one he used more frequently than any other name. As you read the Gospel of Luke, the one you meet here is, of course, the same person you read about in Matthew and Mark. However, in Matthew the emphasis is upon his kingliness; Matthew is the Gospel of the King. And in Mark you see him as the servant of God, busy in his ministry, constantly giving himself. But in Luke, the emphasis is quite different. Here is the Gospel of the Son of man – Jesus, the man. His essential manhood is constantly being set forth throughout this Gospel.

The key to the Gospel, which forms a brief outline of the book, is found in Chapter 19, Verse 10. This is a very well-known passage spoken by our Lord, in which he said of himself, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" {Luke 19:10 RSV}. Or, as the King James version has it, "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost" {Luke 19:10 KJV}, which is really a bit more accurate. He is not talking only about coming to save lost people; he has come to save that which is lost.

Well, what is lost? Perhaps you say it is men who are lost. No, it is man, the secret of our humanity. We no longer know how to be what we were intended to be. The whole dilemma of life is that we still have, deep within us, a kind of racial memory of what we ought to be, and what we want to be, but we do not know how to accomplish it. Man has never forgotten God's commandment to

subdue and master the earth and to discover all its forces. This is what drives him continually in scientific endeavor to unveil the secrets of nature, master them, and turn them to his own use. But we do not know how to be man. The secret of humanity is lost.

I remember reading some years ago of a group of astronomers who were discussing the progress of the science of astronomy. They were facing the many theories that have to do with the expanding universe and trying to explain some of the phenomena they had discovered in the far reaches of space. No one can work in that field without at times feeling something of the littleness of men and sensing, perhaps, the full thrust of David's question in the eighth Psalm, "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man...?" {Psa 8:3-4a RSV}. What is man? In this group of astronomers someone posed that question: "Astronomically speaking," they said, "what is man, compared to the vastness of this universe with its impossibly large distances and its great whirling bodies thousands of times bigger than our sun? Someone stood up and said, "Man is the astronomer." That is the mind of man. Even in its puniness, it is nevertheless coming to grips with these vast questions and issues. That marks something of the mystery of man.

There is something unaccountable about man. One of the questions we are puzzling about is, "What is the difference between man and animals?" We are aware that there is a vast gap, but no one

can quite put his finger on it. There is a deep and unexplainable mystery about man. It is this lost secret, this impenetrable mystery, that our Lord came to reveal and which he particularly set forth in the Gospel of Luke.

Look again at that sentence: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost,” {Luke 19:10 KJV}. In it you have the divisions of this Gospel. First, the Son of man came, and, in the beginning of this Gospel, Luke tells us how he came into the race. Then, he came to seek. The first part of his ministry consists of seeking man out – of moving into the heart of humanity, penetrating into the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of mankind, discovering the innate centers of human motivation, putting his finger upon them, and showing his mastery over these areas. Finally, he moves on to save by means of the cross and his resurrection. You can see these divisions clearly:

- The first three chapters and beginning of the fourth give us the entrance of the Lord into the race, beginning with his genealogy; how he was born and made one of us.
- Then Chapters 4 through 19 trace for us the first part of his ministry among men, and especially, his journey toward Jerusalem:

When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. {Luke 9:51a RSV}

The record of this journey occupies Chapters 9 through part of 19, and recounts incidents along the way.

- Finally, we read:

And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. {Luke 19:28 RSV}

That marks the close of his ministry of penetrating into the character and nature of man, and the beginning of his work to save man. It introduces the last section of the book, in which he enters the city, comes to the temple, goes up to the Mount Olives, then to Pilate’s judgment hall, to the cross, to the tomb, and to the resurrection day.

Now, as you know, the author of this book is Luke, the great physician, the companion of Paul. It is fitting that Luke should be the one to write this Gospel of the manhood of our Lord. He is writing, as you see in his introduction, to another man, a Greek, about whom we know little or nothing, but who was evidently a friend of Luke (Chapter 1, Verses 1-4):

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely [or accurately] for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. {Luke 1:1-4 RSV}

Here is his explanation for writing. Theophilus is evidently someone who had become briefly acquainted with the Christian faith, and Luke now attempts to explain it more fully to him. Luke was a Greek himself, and is writing to a Greek. This is most interesting, for the ideal of the Greek was the perfection of humanity. They sought constantly to discover ways to achieve a perfect humanity. And it is this which is so fully unfolded in the Gospel according to Luke.

In this introduction there is one word to note particularly, because it is obscured by the way it is usually printed. Luke is writing about a person, as much as John wrote in his Gospel about a person. Though it is often obscured, Luke uses the same name that John does. Do you remember how the Gospel of John begins? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” {John 1:1 RSV}. Now notice this, Verse 2:

as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, {Luke 1:2 RSV}

It is not capitalized here, as it is in John, but there is no good reason why it should not be; it is the same person. Here, evidently, the translators have thought Luke meant the spoken word, but Luke is

writing about the final Word from God who reveals the mystery of manhood.

It is impossible to read the Gospel of Luke thoughtfully, and perceptively, without noting some very remarkable similarities in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is very significant, for it my personal conviction that Luke wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. At least he wrote it in its final form. It is my belief that Paul was the author of the thoughts of Hebrews, and that he probably wrote it originally in the Hebrew language and sent it to the Jews of Jerusalem. But Luke, wanting to make these same marvelous truths available to the Gentile world, translated it from Hebrew into Greek, partially paraphrasing it rather than actually translating it, so that many of his own expressions are found in it. Scholars recognize immediately in dealing with the original language that the thoughts of Hebrews are Paul's, but the words and manner of expression, in the Greek, appear to be Luke's. If that is true, then we have an explanation of some of the remarkable parallels between Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke.

The message of Hebrews declares the amazing fact that Jesus Christ became a man in order to possess men, in order to enter man. It is built around the symbolism of the Old Covenant and, especially, the tabernacle in the wilderness. Now, the tabernacle was God's picture of something, and the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us what this is. When Moses went up onto the mountain he was given a pattern which he was to follow explicitly in making the tabernacle, a pattern of heavenly things. That does not mean something off in space somewhere, but realities which are invisible to us – these are the heavenly things, of which the tabernacle was a picture. As you read Hebrews, you find that the tabernacle was a very remarkable picture of man himself. The tabernacle was built in three sections: there was the outer court, which even the Gentiles could enter, available to everyone; then there was a building in the center divided into two sections – the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. The sacrifices took place in the outer court. The priest took the blood and carried it into the Holy Place, where it was sprinkled on the altar there. But once a year, the high priest, only under the most precise conditions, was allowed to enter behind the veil, into the Holy of Holies. Apart from that single entrance no one was ever permitted to enter the Holy of Holies on pain of death, for the

mystery of the Shekinah, the strange presence of God, dwelt in that sacred, awesome place.

Now, what does all this mean? It is a picture of man – man in his fallen state – we are that tabernacle in which God was intended to dwell:

- We have an outer court – a body – which is made of the earth, and which puts us in touch with the earth and the material life around us.
- We also have a Holy Place – the soul – the place of intimacy, where the intimate functions of our being take place; the functions of mind, conscience, memory and other mysterious things. It is very difficult to understand what takes place in the soul and men have been struggling for centuries to study this *psyche* (the Greek word for soul). Psychology, psychiatry – these are the attempts of man to probe the mystery of the Holy Place.
- Then there is that other place, the Holy of Holies, behind the veil, impenetrable. We cannot enter there. We know there is something more, something deeper, underlying the soulish aspects of our lives. Some of the great thinkers of today are recognizing this very fact. Some of the leaders of psychological thought are telling us that we have not explained man when we deal only with the soul – there is something underneath, but we cannot touch it; it is deep, mysterious, impenetrable. It is behind the veil. That is the place where God intended to dwell, and which is the intended center of human life. It is the spirit of man. Because it is largely inoperative in fallen man, men act like intelligent animals. Yet there is something mysterious, reserved, lying deep in an area which they cannot enter.

In the Gospel of Luke we trace the coming of one who at last penetrates into the secret place, who enters the spirit of man, the place of mystery, and rends the veil, opening it up so that man might discover himself and the mystery of his being, and thus fulfill himself. That is what man everywhere is desperately looking for. There is nothing more exciting than a sense of fulfillment, of achieving the possibilities of personality. That is what we are all striving for, but we have lost the key, until that key

is placed in our hand again by the Son of man who came to reveal and redeem man. This is the good news of Luke.

First, the Lord comes to the outer court, and in the first section, through Chapter 4, Verse 13, we have his entrance into this world stage. Luke records three things of him there:

- The first is his virgin birth. We hear a great deal of this today. There are those who openly deny the virgin birth, and who even stand in the pulpits, having taken vows to defend the sacred truths of Christian faith, and openly deny this truth, declaring that it is unimportant and un-historical. But it is extremely important, it is supremely important. Luke (who was a doctor and, as such, put his physician's seal of approval on this remarkable biological mystery) tells us that here one entered the race who was born of a virgin; because Mary had never known a man. Yet she had a son, and his name was called Jesus. The wonder of that mystery is given in the simple, artlessly told story that Luke presents to us. There we have it linked with his human genealogy. Have you noticed the difference between Luke's genealogy and Matthew's? Matthew traces him back to the King, to David, but Luke sweeps on into the past and does not stop until he arrives at Adam, whom he calls the son of God – the first man, the first Adam. Thus he links the first Adam with the second Adam in this Gospel of the Son of man – the Good News of the solving of the mystery of man.
- The second item Luke gives us is the story of our Lord's presentation in the temple at the age of 12, and the way he astounded the doctors with his ability to answer questions – his mental acumen. Here is the revelation of amazing mental ability – his mind presented to us as perfect. Just as his body was perfect, sinless, through the virgin birth, so he is revealed as having a mind that is perfect.
- Third, he gives us the story of the temptation in the wilderness, where the Lord was revealed as perfect in the innermost recesses of his spirit. That is indicated in advance by the announcement at his baptism, when he was pronounced

to be, "my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." {Luke 3:22b RSV}.

Then we see him passing into the Holy Place, beyond the outer court now, into the center of man's being, life, and thinking, where (as Hebrews tells us) he was "made like his brethren," {Heb 2:17b RSV}. This section begins with the amazing account of his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth, where the book of Isaiah was brought to him, and he found the place and read where it was written,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good
news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the
captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord."** {Luke 4:18-19 RSV}

He is declaring here what he came to do – to enter into the poor, the oppressed, the blind, the captives, and to set them free. The whole story of the following chapters is of his entering into the commonplace experiences of man, where men live in darkness, slavery, and death. Soon he begins his journey to Jerusalem, as we have already noted, when he begins to enter fully into the soul of man.

At last, in Chapter 19, Verse 28, we see him preparing to enter as the great high priest into the Holy of Holies of man, to restore that which has been lost for all these many centuries. You remember that in the Holy of Holies there were only two articles of furniture. There was the Ark of the Covenant, with its mercy seat under the overarching wings of the cherubim, where God's Shekinah glory dwelt. Then there was the golden altar of incense by means of which the nation was to offer its praise up to God. These two are symbolic of that which is hidden in the depths of man.

The mercy seat speaks of man's relationship with God. Hebrews tells us that it is blood alone which can make that relationship acceptable:

**without the shedding of blood there is no
forgiveness of sins. {Heb 9:22 RSV}**

It was the blood upon the mercy seat that released the forgiveness and grace of God. Our Lord now

prepares to enter into that hidden spirit of man and offer his own blood. As we are told in Hebrews:

he entered once for all into the Holy Place, [the Holy of Holies] taking ... his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. {Heb 9:12 RSV}

The altar of incense speaks of the communication between man and God – the place of prayer. Prayer is the deepest function of the human spirit. There is nothing that goes deeper than that. When you are driven to your knees by despair, or defeat, or need, you discover that you are dealing with the rock-bottom elements of your spirit – unto God. That is what prayer basically is. Thus in the cross our Lord enters into that very foundational area of human experience.

As you continue through Luke, you see the Lord moving from the Mount of Olives down into the city, cleansing the temple, teaching and preaching in it, returning to the Mount to deliver the Olivet Discourse. Then he goes on to the upper room, to the Passover feast, from there to the Garden of Gethsemane, to Pilate's judgment seat, and from there to the cross, followed by the mob as they take him outside the city gates to nail him on the tree.

As we come to the closing chapters, we learn a remarkable thing:

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. {Luke 23:44-45 RSV}

Why? Why was this curtain torn? Because the Holy of Holies was now opened up for the first time to the gaze of men. When the Son of man died, God ripped the veil wide open. He entered into the Holy Place, into the Holy of Holies, and the secret of man, the secret of humanity, was unveiled.

Then we have the wonder of the resurrection morning and the account that Luke gives us of the two men who were walking on the road to Emmaus when a stranger appeared to them and talked with them. Oh, the things he said – the most amazing things – as he opened to them the Scriptures concerning Christ and what had been predicted of him. They said afterward, when they knew who he was,

“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” {Luke 24:32b RSV}

Why? Well, a burning heart is a heart that is caught up with the excitement and glory of a fulfilled humanity. That is where Luke ends his Gospel. The secret is revealed. The man is fully possessed. The Holy of Holies has been entered.

I do not think we could do better in closing our survey of this Gospel than to turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews and read these words:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, {Heb 10:19-20 RSV}

That is where we stand now. The secret of every human heart is open to anyone who opens his own heart to the Son of man, to the one who penetrates the depths of the human spirit, and from there reestablishes that relationship with God which makes a man what God intended man to be. The writer continues,

and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, {Heb 10:21-23a RSV}

After all, when Christ has entered your human spirit, something has happened to you that no one can gainsay, that no argument can have any force against. You have full assurance, from within; therefore, stand fast without wavering.

for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, {Heb 10:23b-24 RSV}

All the possibility of a fulfilled humanity is available to anyone now, in whom the spirit of Christ dwells. All that you want to be, you can be, in terms of love and good works. The writer goes on...

... not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. {Heb 10:25 RSV}

That gathers it up in one brief paragraph – the strange mystery of the ages – answering all the questions that have been raised by philosophers and thinkers about the mystery of our race:

- Why do we act the way we do?
- Where are we heading?
- What is the aim of it all?

Luke has unveiled it to us in the Gospel of the Son of man – the Man who unveiled man.

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WHO IS THIS MAN?
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The Gospel of John: WHO IS THIS MAN?

by Ray C. Stedman

The fourth Gospel holds peculiar significance to me for many reasons, but especially because it is written by the disciple closest to our Lord. When you read the Gospel of Matthew, you are reading the record of our Lord as seen through the eyes of a devoted disciple. Mark and Luke, of course, were dedicated Christians who knew and loved Jesus Christ, though they learned about him largely through the testimony of others, but John is one who leaned upon his breast. He was of that inner circle which included Peter and James, who went with our Lord through the most intimate circumstances of his ministry and heard more than any of the others. Therefore, we open this book with a sense of anticipation. Here is the testimony of our Lord's closest friend.

In light of this, it is very startling to see how John's Gospel begins (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

Sometimes I think it is difficult to believe that Jesus is God. I know there is not a Christian who has not at one time or another felt the full force of all the arguments that would make him out to be nothing more than a man. There are times when we find it difficult to lay hold of the full intent of those words and think of the man Jesus as God. But if we find it difficult, how much more did his own disciples find it so? They, of all men, would be least likely to believe that he was God, for they lived with him and saw his humanity as none of us ever has or ever will. They must have been confronted again and again with a question that puzzled and troubled them, "Who is this man?" As

they themselves said, "What manner of man is this who heals the sick, raises the dead, quiets the wind, and changes the water to wine?" {cf, Matt 8:27}.

I have often pictured them lying out under the stars with our Lord on a summer night by the Sea of Galilee. I can imagine Peter or John or one of the others waking in the night, rising up on an elbow, and as he looked at the Lord Jesus sleeping beside him, saying to himself, "Is it true? Can this man be the eternal God? What is the secret of his being, the mystery of his coming?" No wonder they puzzled about him and constantly conversed among themselves about the mystery of his being.

Yet, so overwhelming and convincing was the evidence they saw and heard that when they reached the end of the story, when John began to write down the recollections of those amazing days, he began with declaring the deity of Jesus, "This is the One who was in the beginning. He was the Word who was with God, who was in the beginning with God, and was God," {cf, John 1:1}.

That is the theme of this Gospel of John. In Matthew we see the Lord as the King. In Mark we see him as the servant, always busy in ceaseless activity, serving men. In Luke we see his perfection of humanity, man as God intended man to be. Now, in the Gospel of John, we see his entrance into the Holy of Holies. We learn the secret of his life.

The key to the Gospel of John is found in the next to the last chapter. There are two endings to this little Gospel. John adds a postscript, which we call Chapter 21, that has to do with certain things that occurred after the resurrection. But John had ended his Gospel with these words (Chapter 20, Verses 30, 31):

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [that is, these signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God] you might have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

That is the twofold purpose of this book:

- First, John is setting out to give evidence why any man in any age or in any place can fully and wholeheartedly believe that Jesus is the Christ – or to use the Hebrew form, Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised one.
- The second purpose is to show that he is the Son of God.

A great deal is made of this term, “Son of God” today, as though there were a distinction to be made between God and the Son of God, but no Hebrew would ever understand it that way. To the Hebrews, to call someone a “son” of something was to say he is identified with, identical with, that thing or person.

Barnabas was named the “Son of Consolation.” That is the meaning of the name *Barnabas*. Why? Because he was that kind of man – an encouraging, consoling kind of fellow. His nickname meant that he was the very epitome of consolation. He was the expression of it.

To the Hebrews, the use of this term *the Son of God* meant, “This one is God.” That is why, invariably, when our Lord used that term of himself, he was challenged by the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, saying, “Who are you? What do you make yourself out to be? Why, you make yourself to be equal with God.” Of course he did. That is what the title means.

In setting out to prove this, John employs the principle of selection. He lets his mind run back over those amazing three and a half years he was with the Lord. Already Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written their Gospels. But John did not write his until the close of the last decade of the first century. He wrote it as an old man looking back on these events.

This fact, of course, has been used by critics to say that we cannot depend upon the Gospel of

John, because it is the account of an old man who is trying to recall the events of his youth. Remember, however, that these events were on the lips, heart, tongue, and memory of the Apostle John every day after those events took place. He was always talking about them. He is writing now to tie together the record that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written.

Notice how he divides this. Jesus is the Christ – that is the first issue. It was the question on the lips of men in John’s day, the question that divided the Jews. Prominent figures were asking themselves, “Is this the One? Is this the Christ?” They knew there was a deepening sense of expectation running all through the Old Testament. It is forever saying in one way or another, “Someone is coming! Someone is coming!” At the close of the book of Malachi, you find that question hanging in the air, “Who is this One who is to come?”

In John’s day, people were stirred by the fact that John the Baptist had appeared. They asked him, “Are you the Christ?” He said, “No, but he is coming after me,” and when Jesus began to preach up and down the hills of Judea and Galilee, men were saying everywhere, “Is this the One? Is this the Messiah?”

The Lord Jesus declared again and again that he came with the authorized credentials of the Messiah. That is what he meant when he said,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.”

{John 10:1-2 RSV}

The sheepfold was the nation Israel. He says there is One who was to come by an authorized way, by the door. If anyone comes in any other way, he is a thief and a liar, but he who enters by the door, the authorized opening, will be recognized as the Great Shepherd. He goes on (Verse 3):

“To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, ...” {John 10:3a RSV}

He is referring there to the ministry of John the Baptist, who came as the opener of the door, the forerunner of the Messiah. Thus he came as the One who was authorized, with the proper credentials.

Now, what were those credentials? He gives them to us himself in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke tells us in Chapter 4 that he stood in the synagogue that day and read the book of the prophet Isaiah. He found the place and deliberately read to these people the words,

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me, ...”
{Luke 4:18a RSV}**

What is the meaning of Messiah? the Anointed One? “The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me,” he says,

**“because he has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor. {Luke 4:18b
RSV}
... to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord.” {Luke 4:18c-19 RSV}**

He stopped in the middle of a sentence, closed the book and sat down. Then he said to everyone there, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” {Luke 4:21b RSV}, that is, “I am this One.”

Take those marks of the Messiah and lay them beside the seven signs that John chooses from the ministry of our Lord and you will see that he selects those particular ones because they are the signs that prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Let me show them to you in the order in which they appear in John’s Gospel:

1. The first miracle of our Lord is the changing of water into wine, {John 2:1-11}. That miracle was a parable. Our Lord was performing a symbolic act at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. He took that which belonged to the realm of inanimate being, water, and changed it into a living substance, wine. He took that which belonged to the realm of death and changed it into that which is forever an expression of joy and life. By this he is declaring in symbol what he came to do: “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” {Luke 4:19}. He did not come to declare the day of vengeance; he stopped before that passage in Isaiah. But he came to declare the day of grace, when God’s purpose would

be to take man in his brokenness, his emptiness and his lifelessness, and give to him life – to proclaim the acceptable time of the Lord.

2. The next sign is the healing of the nobleman’s son {John 4:46-54}. The central figure in that story is not the son, who lies sick at the door of death, but the nobleman, who comes to the Lord with a heart crushed with grief. In the agony of his heart he cries out to Christ, and says, “Will you come down and heal my son?” The Lord not only heals the son at a distance, with a word, but he heals the broken heart of a father. As he said, he was anointed to heal the brokenhearted.
3. The third sign is the healing of the impotent man who lay at the pool of Bethesda {John 5:1-9}. Remember, that man had lain there for thirty-eight years. He had been a captive of this paralyzing disease, so that he was unable to get into the pool. He had been brought to that pool, hoping to be healed, hoping to be set free and our Lord singled him out of the great crowd of impotent folk and healed him, saying to him, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk,” {John 5:8b RSV}. Now, why? Here he was demonstrating his ability to set at liberty those who are oppressed. For thirty-eight years a man had been bound, and he set him free instantly.
4. The next miracle is the feeding of the five thousand {John 6:1-14}. This miracle appears in all four of the Gospels. Linked with it is the miracle of the walking on the water. What is the meaning of these signs? Well, you cannot read the story of the feeding of the five thousand without seeing that it is a marvelous demonstration of the desire of the Lord to meet the deepest need of the human heart, the hunger of man of God. He uses the symbol of bread. He himself had said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” (Matt 4:4). Then he demonstrated what kind of bread he meant. “I,” he said, “am the bread of life,” {John 6:35 RSV}. Taking the bread, he broke it, and with it fed the five thousand, symbolizing how fully he can meet the need of human life.

5. Then, sending his disciples out into the storm, he came walking across the waves to them in the midst of the tempest. The waves are high, and the ship is about to be overwhelmed, and their hearts are anguished with fear. He quiets them and says, "It is I; do not be afraid," {John 6:20 RSV}. In the double miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water, there is a symbolic representation of our Lord's ability to satisfy the need of human hearts and deliver them from their greatest enemy, fear. This is good news, is it not? This is one of the signs of the Messiah: he came to proclaim good news to the poor.

Can you think of any greater news to tell anyone than that there is a way in which he can find all the clamant cry of his soul satisfied and all the fear of his life removed? That is to proclaim good news to the poor.

6. The next miracle is the healing of the blind man, {John 9:1-12}. This hardly needs comment. Our Lord said he came "to give recovery of sight to the blind," {cf, Luke 4:19}. He chose a man who was blind from birth, just as man is spiritually blind from birth, and he healed him.

7. The last miracle is the raising of Lazarus from the dead {see John 11:1-44}, symbolizing the delivering of those who all their lives had been held under the bondage of Satan through fear of death. Thus these seven signs prove beyond question that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the expected One.

But John goes deeper than that. He says that he is not only the Christ, but he is the Son of God. When you see him in his delivering power, you are indeed seeing the promised Deliverer, the Messiah. Ah, yes, John says, but that is not the greatest secret about him. When you see that he is the one able to do all these mighty things, meeting the deepest need of men's lives, look further and you will see there is glory yet.

You discover that when you stand in the presence of his humanity, see his lovely eyes, feel the beating of his human heart, sense the compassion of his life poured out in service, you are also standing in the presence of God, you are seeing

what God is like. "This One," he says, "is the Son of God."

He declares that for us in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

No one has ever seen God [That is a statement of fact. Man hungers after God, and he is always searching for God; but John goes on]; **the only Son**, [the margin says that many manuscripts read "God" in this, "the only God"] **who is in the bosom of the Father, made him known.** {John 1:18 RSV}

Literally, he has exeged God. He has unfolded what God is like. Then, in his Gospel, John picks up seven great words of our Lord that prove that statement.

He bases it all on the great name of God which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses saw the bush burning and turned aside to learn its secret, God spoke to him from the bush and said, "I AM WHO I AM" {Exod 3:14 RSV}. That is God's nature. That is, "I am exactly what I am. I am nothing more. I am nothing less. I am the eternal I AM." Seven times in his Gospel John picks this word up and uses it about our Lord. In fact, seven times these words came from our Lord's own lips. These constitute the proof that he is Deity.

Does that amaze you? Have you thought that it was his miracles that proved he was God? No, no. They proved he was the Messiah, the Promised One. It is his words that prove he is God. Listen to them:

1. "I am the bread of life," {John 6:35b RSV}. That is, I am the sustainer of life, the One who satisfies life.

2. "I am the light of the world," {John 8:12b RSV}, the illuminator of life. I am one [to borrow a phrase from Paul] "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" {Col 2:3 RSV}, the explainer of things, the one who casts light upon all mysteries and enigmas and solves them.

3. "I am the door" {John 10:7b RSV}, Jesus said; that is, the opportunity into life, the open way. Whenever you are confronted with a sense of

lack, some hungering after something more, these are the words you need to hear.

4. "I am the good shepherd" {John 10:11a RSV}; that is, the guide of life, the only one properly equipped to take an individual and safely steer him through all the problems and chasms that yawn on every side, to lead him safely through life. ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}.)
5. Then, "I am the resurrection and the life," {John 11:25b RSV}; that is, the power of life. Do you realize that resurrection power is the only kind that works when nothing else will? It works in the midst of death. Resurrection power is the only kind that needs no outside props, no process of learning. It does not need anything to initiate it, shore it up, or bolster it in any way. When nothing else can be done, then it comes in and begins to act. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says.
6. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," {John 14:6 RSV}; that is, I am ultimate reality. I am the real substance behind all things.
7. "I am the vine" {John 15:5a RSV}, "apart from me, you can do nothing," {John 15:5c RSV}. I am the producer of fruitfulness, the source of fellowship and of identity and communion.

Thus our Lord takes the great, revealing name of God and, linking it with these simple symbols, enables us to understand God. "The Word," John says, "became flesh and dwelt among us," {John 1:14a RSV}. He pitched his tent among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of God become man. That is the tremendous theme of this book. There is not a greater theme in all the universe than the fact that when we stand in the presence of the humanity of Jesus we suddenly discover that, for the first time, we also stand in the presence of God. This is what God is like. This one who heals, loves, serves, waits, blesses, dies and rises again – this is God. That is what John reveals.

The one word that he leaves with us, then, is that believing that he is the Messiah and that he is God, we may have life in his name. He is the key to life. Who does not want to live? Isn't that what

we all want, young and old alike? What we are really seeking is the key to life. We want to be fulfilled. We want to see fulfilled all the possibilities and potential of our being which we sense lie deep inside. We want those deep yearnings satisfied. We want to be able to express ourselves. We want to be what we were designed and intended to be. Then listen! John says:

These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:31 RSV}

This brings us inevitably to two things:

1. First, to **worship**. How can you stand in the presence of this divine mystery and not feel your heart drawn out in worship of this one? As we often sing,

Can it be that I should gain
an interest in my Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love, how can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is worship.

Isaiah, who saw the Lord lifted up and the temple filled with the smoke of his glory, bowed down and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am ... a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips," {Isa 6:5 RSV}. Then an angel flew down from the altar, took a coal, and put it upon his lips, cleansing him.

2. That brought him to the next thing, to which we, too, must come, if we see what John is after here: Not only worship, but **service**:

Love, so amazing, so divine," [says Isaac Watts]
demands [what?] my soul, my life, my all.

How can we worship, unless as we hear the words of the Lord Jesus? – "As my Father has sent me, even so send I you," {cf, John 20:21}.

We say with Isaiah, "Lord, here am I, send me," {cf, Isa 6:8}.

What could be greater than to stand in union with this life? – around whom the whole universe gathers – the image of the invisible God!

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray as we bow before this blessed One of whom this book has been speaking, that the eyes of our understanding may be opened, that we may realize that here is One who stands supreme in the midst of those thousands and tens of thou-

sands in Revelation who cry, “Worthy is the Lamb to be praised, to receive honor and glory and blessing. Worthy is this One who is slain and is dead, and is alive, and lives forevermore.” We thank you for this revelation, and pray that our hearts may echo these words, “Lord, here am I; I am nothing but a human being, nothing but a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, but Lord, here I am. Take me. Send me. Use me.” In Christ’s name, Amen.

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The Acts Of The Apostles: AN UNFINISHED STORY

by Ray C. Stedman

Acts is the book that reveals the power of the church. Therefore, when a church begins to dwindle, lose its power, and turn dull and drab in its witness, it needs desperately to get back into the spirit, expectation, knowledge and teaching of the book of Acts. In this book, the principles of the exchanged life – “Not I, but Christ” – is dramatically unfolded.

If the book of Acts were taken out of our New Testament, we would never understand the rest of it. It would be like a child with his front tooth missing. When you close the record of the Gospels, you see nothing but a handful of Jews in the city of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, talking together about a kingdom for Israel.

When you open the book of Romans, on the other side of Acts, you discover that a man whose name is never mentioned in the Gospels is writing to a group of Christians in Rome – of all places, the center of Gentile culture – and he is talking about pushing out to the very ends of the earth. Obviously, something has happened in between. How did this tremendous change take place? What happened to make the gospel burst out of its confines in Judaism and the city of Jerusalem and reach out in one generation’s time to all the limits of the then-known world?

This book was written by Luke, Paul’s beloved companion, the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Unfortunately, it bears the wrong title. In almost all the editions of Scripture it is called “The Acts of the Apostles.” But as you read the book through, the only ones whose acts are referred to are Peter and Paul. All the others are left almost entirely unnoticed, so the title is hardly fitting. It really should be titled, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” or even, perhaps, “The Continuing Acts of the Lord Jesus Christ.” You find this suggestion in

the introduction of the book. As Luke is writing again to the friend to whom he addressed his first book, he says,

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, {Acts 1:1 RSV}

Obviously, then, Luke was VOLUME 1 and Acts is VOLUME 2. Acts is a continued story of what Jesus began both to do and to teach. Luke goes on to say,

until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” {Acts 1:2-5 RSV}

That is what the book of Acts is all about. It is the account of the way the Holy Spirit, coming into the church, continued what Jesus began to do – i.e., carried on the work which was initiated during the days of his incarnation.

Thus, the record of the Gospels is the story of only the beginning of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. When you come to the end of the Gospels, you have come not to the end, nor even to the beginning of the end, but to the end of the beginning. In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit now begins to fulfill the designed program of God. He begins to carry on his work through the reincarnated body of

Jesus Christ – the church – the body by which the Lord intends to reach out to the uttermost parts of the earth. That work began 1900 years ago, and, as you can see, he is still at it today. We are living now in the age of the Spirit which was inaugurated by the Day of Pentecost, the first major event of the book of Acts.

The church has suffered for many centuries from a very wrong idea. Much of the weakness of the church is due to the fact that somehow, over the years, through the traditions of men, a wrong concept has developed within the body of Christ. Christians have met together and have recited the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to take the gospel out to the farthest corners of the earth,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, {Matt 28:19a RSV}

... and that is unquestionably the will of God. It is one of the favorite tricks of the devil, however, to hold up before Christian people the end that God has in view, and then suggest to them that they go about doing it their own way – trying to fulfill God's will in man's way.

Now that is exactly what the church has been doing. It has gathered itself together, recited the Great Commission, and said, "Now we must mobilize all our human resources to plan the strategy to carry this out." Christ is often pictured as waiting up in heaven, earnestly watching to see what is taking place down here, hoping somebody will get with it and carry out his program. The idea is that the church must somehow plan all the strategy, and figure out how best to reach out to the far corners of the earth, so as to fulfill this expectation of God. But that is because we have listened to only one part of the Great Commission. We have heard the first word, "Go!" but our Lord spoke another little two-letter word that we have almost completely forgotten – "Lo."

Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. {Matt 28:20b RSV}

It was never the intention of the Lord that the whole job of planning the strategy of reaching out to the ends of the earth and of mobilizing the resources should fall upon the Christian. When the church attempts the work on this basis, the Lord simply folds his arms and lets us go about our busy ways. He watches us try to fulfill this Great

Commission in our own strength, while he stands by and quietly waits until we get over it.

When exhausted and utterly beaten and discouraged, as we inevitably will be in this process, we come back to him and cry out, "Oh, Lord, we can never get this job done. We can never accomplish this." Then he quietly reminds us that his program was for the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task through the church, that he is perfectly capable of doing it, and that the book of Acts is the complete testimony to his ability and adequacy to carry out the program he had in mind. "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" {1 Th 5:24 RSV}. It was always God's intention not only to lay the program before us, but to fulfill it in his own strength.

As you read through this book, you see various aspects of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. First of all, he is visible in directing the activities of the church. It is the Spirit of God who takes the initiative and launches new movements in carrying out the program of God. For example:

- When Philip was in Samaria preaching the gospel, a great city-wide revival was in progress as a result of his preaching. The whole city was stirred. But the spirit of God said to him, "Rise and go down to a man in the desert" {cf, Acts 8:36}. Now, what kind of strategy is that, to leave a city-wide campaign where the Spirit of God is moving in power, where multitudes are coming to Christ, to go down into the desert to talk to one man? But what one man was it? It was the Ethiopian eunuch, a man who was the treasurer of the Ethiopians {Acts 8:27}. Remember the story of how he was prepared by the Holy Spirit {Acts 8:38}. As Philip ran along beside the carriage, he heard him reading Isaiah and asked him if he understood it {Acts 8:39}. The eunuch answered,

How can I if someone doesn't explain it to me? {Acts 8:31b RSV}

When Philip came up to sit beside him, he found he was reading exactly the right place, Isaiah 53. Beginning at that spot, Philip began to preach to him about Jesus. And he was won to Christ.

That is always what Spirit-led witnessing is –

- the right man
- in the right place
- at the right time
- saying the right thing
- to the right person!

This is one of the first evidences in this book of the overall directing activity of the Holy Spirit.

- In Chapter 9, the Holy Spirit calls a man on the Damascus road and sends another man to pray with him – Ananias, who was absolutely astounded by this commission. “Lord,” he said, “you don’t know what you are asking.” God said, “I know whom I have called. He’s a chosen instrument of mine.”
- In Chapter 13 the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying to the church at Antioch,

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.
{Acts 13:2b RSV}

- Later on in the book, Paul says, “We tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit said ‘No.’ And we started to preach the gospel in Asia, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit.” {cf, Acts 16:6-7}. All through this book you find that the strategy has all been worked out in advance by the Holy Spirit. As Christians are available to him, he unfolds the strategy step by step. Nobody can plan this kind of a program. We can only be willing to follow the overall directive activity of the Spirit of God at work in his church. That is the divine strategy.
- Further on in Acts you find the Holy Spirit in another aspect of his ministry doing what no man can do – communicating life to those who believe. Wherever the gospel is preached, wherever the Word of God is upheld, wherever the good news of the work of the Lord Jesus is preached to men, the Holy Spirit is there to communicate life.
- Have you ever noticed who gives the altar call in the book of Acts? It is almost invariably the ones being preached to:

On the Day of Pentecost it was as the Spirit of God preached through Peter to those thousands who had been brought in by that tremendous miracle of the tongues after the Holy Spirit descended upon them. Peter got only halfway through his message. He had only reached his second point. What happened? They were convicted in their hearts. They broke in on him and said, “Preacher, what must we do to be saved?” {cf, Acts 2:37}. Now, who gave the altar call there? Well, they did.

When the Philippian jailer is impressed by the singing of Paul and Silas at midnight, and the earthquake comes and shakes down the prison walls, who gives the altar call? Why he does. He comes running and says to them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” {cf, Acts 16:25-27}.

It is the Holy Spirit communicating to them, imparting life to them when they believe. A most helpful verse in this regard is in the Gospel of John. I have read this many, many times to remind myself that it is not the invitation that makes people come to Christ; it is the truth as it is being proclaimed by the Holy Spirit. In Chapter 8 of John, Christ is explaining his message to his followers. He is the light of the world. He reveals himself to men. Verse 30 says, “As he spoke thus, many believed in him” {John 8:30 RSV}. While the word was going out.

Not only does the Holy Spirit communicate life, as he did in the home of Cornelius (while the message was going on the Holy Spirit fell upon the people gathered there), but he is also at work preserving the purity of the church. Today there are groups of people whose sole occupation seems to be to defend the faith; to preserve, if they can, the purity of the church. Many of these people go so far as to corner unsuspecting pastors, nail them to the wall over this whole matter of defending the faith, and try to convince them to drive out those who disagree, or who have heretical ideas, within the church. Their perfectly proper intention is to try to preserve the purity of the church. But throughout the book of Acts you will discover that the Holy Spirit himself is in charge of this task. As the church fulfills its commission to be available, to be willing instruments of the activity and life of the

Holy Spirit, he is at work to preserve the purity of the church.

For example, there is an amazing incident that occurs early in the book. Ananias and Sapphira's hypocrisy was revealed when they tried to attach to themselves a holiness which they did not actually possess (Acts 5:1-11). They tried to appear more committed or dedicated than they really were. They tried to gain a reputation for sanctity among the Christians by appearance only. The judgment of the Holy Spirit came immediately in the form of their physical death. Now, he does not judge that way today (at least not to that extent). This is a pattern to indicate what the Spirit of God does on the spiritual level. But at the beginning, he judges on the physical level, in order that we might see this principle at work. But whether spiritual or physical, the result is exactly the same. Let somebody begin to use his religious standing, his Christian opportunities in order to advance his own sanctity in the eyes of people – to pretend to a holiness he does not possess – and what happens? The Spirit of God cuts him off from the manifestation of the life of Christ. Instantly that life is as powerless, as weak and fruitless, as dead as far as its effect upon those around, as Ananias and Sapphira were as they lay dead on the floor at Peter's feet.

Finally, the major emphasis of this book and the amazing thing about these Christians – the quality that made them a constant wonder to those who heard them preach – is that the Spirit of God is always at work imparting boldness to Christians. Did you notice how bold these Christians were? At one moment you see Peter and John hiding behind locked doors, afraid to go out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the enmity of the Jews against the Lord Jesus. Now, after the Spirit of God comes upon them, they are out in the streets and temple courts boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ. When they are locked up in prison, the angel releases them and they go right back into the temple courts to pray and preach again. Once again they are arrested, and the church makes prayer for them, asking God that they might go out again and preach the gospel in the very same place. In other words, they are saying, "Lord, do it again. We got into trouble the last time, but Lord, do it again!" Their boldness was simply irresistible. Even those who were bitter enemies of the gospel could not resist the boldness with which they proclaimed the truth.

That is God's program – the Holy Spirit doing the whole thing – energizing, guiding, directing, programming, empowering, and communicating life. He does it all. It is not up to us to do anything except be available, to be his instruments, to go where he wills, to open our mouths, to be ready to take advantage of whatever situation he places us in. It is the job of the Spirit, which he never fails to fulfill, to carry out that ministry. That is what the church has lacked, is it not? That is what you see so much here in the book of Acts.

The extent of this program is revealed to us both geographically and chronologically in this book. In Chapter 1 you have the geographic dimension (Verse 8):

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."
{Acts 1:8 RSV}

You can divide the book on that basis; this is a divinely given table of contents.

1. The first seven chapters gather around being a witness to Christ in Jerusalem.
2. In Chapter 8 you find a break, and the disciples are driven out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria.
3. Beginning with Chapter 13 you have the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out to the Gentile world. That begins the story of the outreach to the uttermost parts of the earth.

That is God's program for the geographical carrying out of the gospel, and it is only in our own generation that we begin to see this completely fulfilled.

In Chapter 2 you see the same program fulfilled chronologically (in point of time). Here, as the people are stunned by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and are asking what they must do to be saved, Peter says (Verses 38, 39): "Repent [that is, change your mind] and identify yourselves in baptism with the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive Christ. Believe in him, for this promise is to you," {cf, Acts 2:38-39}. It was to the very generation to which he was

preaching, “to you and to your children [the next generation] and to all those that are far off” {Acts 2:39b RSV} – down the corridors of time. No matter how many generations may come in this far-reaching age of grace, the promise is to you as it was to them, that to everyone who receives the Lord Jesus Christ, the promise of the Holy Spirit will be given, “to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him,” {Acts 2:39c RSV}. That is the program of God in the dimension of time.

It began, in the first act after the ascension of Christ, with the completion of the twelve apostles once again. Here, I must take issue with those of my colleagues who suggest that Matthias was chosen as one of the disciples in the energy of the flesh, and that it was a mistake on the part of men; that God chose Paul rather than Matthias. I believe that this account makes very clear that Matthias was chosen under the superintendency of the Holy Spirit and that he was put in the right place at the right time. In this account, Peter stood up and quoted the Scriptures, saying that it had been predicted that one should be chosen to take Judas’ place. “His office,” he quoted, “let another take” {Acts 1:20b RSV}. His conclusion is,

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” {Acts 1:21-22 RSV}

Then, as you know, they put forward two men, Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Matthias. Then through the exercise of a perfectly appropriate method, one which was used in Old Testament time again and again to determine the mind of God (the casting of lots) Matthias is chosen.

Further indication that this choice is indeed under the leadership and superintendency of the Holy Spirit is found in Chapter 2, where it says that on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, Peter stood up with the eleven. Peter (one) with the eleven (twelve altogether) goes on, lifts up his voice, and addresses the assembled multitude (Acts 2:14).

Then in Chapter 6, long before Paul is called as the apostle to the Gentiles, we read (Verses 1, 2):

In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Helenists [that is, the Grecian Jews] murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples... {Acts 6:1-2a RSV}

What twelve? Why, the eleven with Matthias, who was chosen to take Judas’ place, completing the number of witnesses. It is upon this twelve, the complete number of the apostles, that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost.

You remember in the book of Revelation that the names of the twelve apostles formed the foundations of the city that John saw coming down from heaven – the twelve, with Matthias {Rev 21:12-14). There were twelve apostles to Israel. There had to be twelve. Judas fell, but God chose Matthias to take his place as a witness to Israel, but it is Paul, who is the special apostle, called to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Now, this does not mean that the other apostles do not have a ministry to us; they do. But it was agreed among them that God had chosen that Peter should go to Israel, while Paul went to the Gentiles. The same message was given to each, but the twelve were especially designed to be a complete, divinely chosen witness to Israel, and they fulfilled that ministry completely.

After the full number of the apostles was restored, the great mark of the book of Acts, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, took place. Everything else flows from this event. The interesting thing is to see how Christians, reading about this amazing occurrence, have focused their attention on the incidentals and neglected the essentials:

- What are the incidentals here? The rushing wind, the fire that danced on the heads of the disciples, and the many tongues or languages by which they spoke. These are the incidentals of the story. These are simply the peripheral events that took place, the signs that showed that something important was happening.
- What was the essential, then, the important thing? It was the forming of a new people – the church. One hundred and twenty individuals met in the temple courts. They were as unrelated to each other as any people born in

widely scattered parts of the earth might be to each other today. They were individually related to the Lord, but they had no blood ties. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, he baptized them into one body. They became a living unit; they were no longer related only to the Lord; they were related also to each other. They became a living organism, which was from then on, and still is, to be the body of Christ, the means by which he speaks to the world, by which he is given a flesh and blood existence in our day. They were made a new people, by means of a new power – the Holy Spirit, indwelling them and tying them to one another – and given a new program. As we have already seen, this was to reach out to Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, through time, from one generation to the next, until the coming of Jesus Christ. Those are the essentials.

Isn't it strange how we focus on these tiny little incidentals, neglecting the tremendous matters that the Holy Spirit would impart to us?

The rest of the book deals with the calling of Paul, the wise master builder, the one whom the Holy Spirit selected to be the pattern for Gentile Christians. This is why Paul was put through a very intensive training period by the Holy Spirit, during which he was subjected to one of the most rigorous trials that any human being could undergo. He was sent home to his own home town to live in obscurity for seven years, until he learned the great lesson that the Holy Spirit seeks to teach every Christian, and without which no one of us can ever be effective for him. In the words of our Lord, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone" {John 12:24b RSV}.

As you trace the career of the Apostle Paul, you discover that, like every one of us, when he first came to Christ he did not understand this. As we would have reasoned in his place, he thought that he had all it took; he was especially prepared to be the kind of instrument that could be mightily used of God to win Israel to Christ. Undoubtedly he said to himself (as he reveals in the letter to the Philippians): He had the background, he had the training, he was by birth a Hebrew, he was educated in all the Law and the understanding of the Hebrews, he had the position, he was the favorite pupil of the greatest teacher of Israel, Gamaliel, he

was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He understood everything of the Hebrew background. Out of this consciousness of his own background and training arose in his heart that pulse beat that you find constantly breaking through from time to time in the writings of this mighty man – this hungering to be an instrument to reach Israel for Christ:

- In the ninth chapter of Romans he said, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race" {Rom 9:3 RSV}. But God had said to this man, "I don't want you to reach Israel. I'm calling you to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to bear my name before kings, and to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ," {cf, Acts 9:15}.
- Do you remember how he went out into the desert, and there God taught him? Then he sent him back home to Tarsus. After he tried in Damascus to preach Christ out of the energy of his own flesh and found it failing, he was driven out of the city and let down like a criminal over the wall in a basket. Broken-hearted and defeated, he found his way to Jerusalem and thought the apostles at least would take him in, but they turned him aside. It was only as Barnabas finally interceded for him that he was given any acceptance in the eyes of the apostles at all.
- Then, going into the temple, he met the Lord, who said to him, "Go back home. Get out of the city. They won't receive your testimony here. You don't belong here. This isn't the place I've called you to," {cf, Acts 22:17-21}. In Tarsus he faced up at last to what God was saying to him all the time, that unless he was willing to die to his own ambition to be the apostle to Israel, he could never be the servant of Christ. And when at last he received that commission and took it to heart, and said, "Lord, anywhere you want. Anything you want. Anywhere you want to send me. I'm ready to go." God sent Barnabas to him, and he took him by the hand and led him down to Antioch, a Gentile church, and there the Apostle Paul began his ministry.

The book ends with Paul in Rome, preaching in his own hired house, chained day and night to a Roman guard, unable to get out, unable to pursue the evangelizing of the ends of the earth as his heart longed to do – limited, fettered, bound – and yet, as he writes to the Philippians, his heart overflowing with the consciousness that though he was bound, the word of God was not. One of the most amazing words in all of Scripture is given there, as he writes to his friends in Philippi and says, “All these things which have happened to me, have happened to advance the gospel,” {cf, Phil 1:12b RSV}. They have not limited anything. They have not held anything back. These obstacles, and these apparent disappointments have not stopped a thing; they have only advanced the gospel. And then he gives two specific ways in which this was happening:

- One was that the cream of the crop in the Roman army who formed the special palace guard of the emperor were being brought to Christ one by one. The praetorium guard was being reached, and, of course, you know how it was happening. They were being brought in by the emperor’s command and chained to the Apostle Paul for six hours. Talk about a captive audience! God was using the emperor to bring his best boys in and chain them to the apostle for six hours of instruction in the Christian gospel. No wonder Paul writes at the end of the letter, “All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household” {Phil 4:22 RSV}.
- The second thing is that because Paul had been arrested, all the other brethren in the city were busy preaching the gospel, so there was more of the gospel going out in Rome because he was in prison than there would have been if he were loose. He said, “I rejoice in that.” That always suggests to me that one of the finest ways to evangelize a community might be to lock all the preachers up in jail!

- But there is a third advantage the apostle could not see, a thing he never dreamed was taking place. We can see now, looking back, that the greatest thing that Paul ever did in his lifetime was not to go about preaching the gospel and planting churches, as he would have thought. But the greatest accomplishment was the letters which he never would have written if he had not been in prison. Because of those letters, the church has been ministered to and fed and strengthened through 20 centuries of Christian life.

Now, as you know, the book of Acts is an unfinished book. It has never been completed – it suddenly ends. Luke does not even write *finis* at the end, he leaves it there. He never gets back to it, because, of course, the Holy Spirit intended it to be unfinished – it is still being written. The book of Acts is the book of the record of the things which Jesus began both to do and to teach. Is he through yet? No. He is still working, isn’t he?

VOLUME 20 is now being written. When this great book is fully completed and, in glory, you get to read it – what will be your part in it?

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this wonderful book that challenges us, blesses us, encourages and delights us, and makes us want to cast ourselves anew upon your grace, forgetting all the traditions of men, and to turn once again to the program and the strategy of God. How we thank you, Lord, that every bit of it is still as vibrantly true as it ever was, and that in this 20th century day, we can discover again for ourselves all that this book contains. Thank you, in Christ’s name, Amen.

The Message of Romans

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans is undoubtedly the most powerful human document that has ever been written. It is pure gold from beginning to end.

- This is the book that lit the fire in Martin Luther's heart and brought about the Protestant Reformation, changing the history of Europe, as well as the world.
- This is the book that struck home as John Wesley sat in a little chapel in London listening to Luther's Prelude to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed as he heard the truths of Romans set forth. There followed, through him, the great evangelical awakening that saved England from the fate of France and arrested the decay of English life, completely altering the history of the world again.
- This is the epistle that burned in the heart of Karl Barth, who in our day set forth some of the mighty truths of this letter and thus captured the theological world, calling it back from the crass, empty liberalism of the nineteenth century, restoring much truth to the churches of Europe. The lives of millions of people who have read the letter to the Romans have been drastically altered.
- A church I know of in Montana was once regarded as the most liberal church in the city of Great Falls. The pastor was in Chicago on one occasion, and he went into the Moody Church to see what fundamentalists were saying. He wanted to find something to criticize. He listened to Dr. Ironside teaching the book of Romans, and his heart was captured by that message. Afterward he talked with Dr. Ironside, who gave him a copy of his lectures on Romans. This man read the book on the train back to Montana, and by the time he reached Great Falls, he was a transformed man. He went into his pulpit and began to proclaim the truths of the book of Romans and the church was transformed.
I have, therefore, had the experience of seeing a completely liberal church transformed to an evangelical testimony in the space of a few years by the power of the book of Romans.

Perhaps that will whet our appetites as we come to this great epistle.

It was written to the Christians in Rome by the Apostle Paul. He was spending a few months in Corinth before going up to Jerusalem to carry that famous collection of money which had been gathered together by the churches of Asia for the needy saints in Jerusalem.

We do not know how the church in Rome was started – perhaps by Christians who had been converted at Pentecost and returned to the capital city.

Paul was writing to them because he had heard of their faith, and he wanted to fulfill it to the utmost; he wanted them to be soundly based in the truth. Thus this letter constitutes a magnificent explanation of the total message of Christianity. It contains almost every Christian doctrine in some form, and is a panorama of the marvelous plan of God for the redemption of man.

If you had no other book of the Bible than this, you would find every Christian teaching at least mentioned here. This, then, is what we might call *the master key to all of the Scriptures*. If you really grasp the book of Romans in its total argument you will find yourself at home in any other part of the Scriptures.

In the introduction, found in the first seventeen verses, Paul writes to us about Christ, about the Roman Christians and about himself. As in every good introduction, he declares here the major themes of the letter. The letter itself is divided into three major divisions: Chapters 1 through 8, 9 through 11, and 12 through 16. These divisions grow naturally out of one another. As we shall see,

- The first eight chapters are doctrinal explanations of what God is doing with man; how he redeems the total man – body, soul and spirit.
- Chapters 9-11 illustrate this for us in the nation Israel.
- And 12-16 is the practical section in which all these mighty truths are applied to human situations.

Thus, the book covers all of life. If you will remember that simple outline you will have a key to the book of Romans.

The first major theme is about Christ, because there is no Christianity without him. Christianity is not a creed; it is a life – a life to be lived again in you. Therefore, you must learn about Christ. That is the theme of the letter and it is the note with which it begins.

Next, Paul writes about the Roman Christians because they are just like us. In fact, this is the central problem with which Christianity grapples – human beings like you and me. That is what these Roman Christians were. They are the basic material in which God begins this work. All that is de-

scribed about them in this letter is true of us, as everything that is true of us was true of them.

Third, Paul writes about himself because he is the pattern of what Christ will do; he is Exhibit A, a living example of God's grace. All this is simply to make visible and clear to us what God intends to do in Christ.

This letter requires a summary treatment. In studying certain books of the Bible I have tried to gather up the main themes, the principle thoughts of the book, in order to get the full force of the message. But this letter moves in such a logical development that the best way to handle it is to trace through the argument, without getting bogged down in details, so that we might see the devastating logic by which the apostle develops his theme. When we are through, we will see how magnificently he has captured all the mighty truths of the gospel for us.

To begin with, in Chapter 1, we have the central affirmation of the letter – **the gospel**:

I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God ... {Rom 1:16a RSV}

Who would be ashamed of the power of God, the greatest force possible in the universe, at work in the gospel? It can change lives; it can lay hold of a drifting, purposeless, lost young man who does not care where he is going and does not know what he is living for and suddenly change his life and give him purpose, drive, and meaning. That is the power of God at work. That is the gospel.

it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. {Rom 1:16b RSV}

Paul will show us why as we go along, for in the gospel,

the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. {Rom 1:17b RSV}

This quote is from Habakkuk and is the verse that burned itself into Martin Luther's heart. That is Paul's theme – the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel.

To establish **the need** for this, Paul looks at the world around him. In the subsequent verses, through Chapter 2 and most of Chapter 3, he is simply analyzing what mankind is like, taking the two apparent divisions of mankind.

Someone has well said, "There are only two classes of people, the righteous and the unrighteous, and the classifying is always done by the righteous." I remember years ago, when my children were very small, stepping out into the backyard one day and finding that someone had drawn a line down the center of a panel of the fence with chalk. One side was headed "Good People" and the other side, "Bad People." Under the heading, "Bad People," were listed the names of my children. On the other side were the neighbor's children. It was quite obvious that the classifying had indeed been done by "the righteous."

The apostle starts with the unrighteous, those whom we would call "The Bad People," and outcasts of society. But first he summarizes both classes in one verse. This is such an important verse that I call your special attention to it (Verse 18):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. {Rom 1:18 RSV}

That says a great deal. It says, for instance, that the problem with men is that they have the truth, but they will not look at it; instead, they suppress it.

If you want proof of that, I suggest you look at your own life for a while, and also at the lives of those around you. Is it not true that we push the things we do not like down into our subconscious mind? We do not like to think about them. This is why men keep so busy in the rat-race of life, never wanting to be alone, never wanting to stop and think, or really look at things, but always attempting to keep busy in a constant whirl of life. Suppression of the truth – that is the central problem.

Because of this suppression, the wrath of God is continuously pouring itself out upon mankind. That wrath is described for us as this chapter develops. It turns out not to be lightning bolts from heaven, flung at wicked people who step over the traces, but rather God saying to mankind, "Look, I don't want you to do a certain thing because it will

destroy you, but if you insist upon doing it, you may, but you will have to accept the consequences. You can't make a choice to live wrongly and still avoid the consequences that come from that choice."

Three times in this chapter the wrath of God is indicated in the repeated phrase. "God gave them up." It results in this condition (Verses 29-31):

They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. {Rom 1:29-31 RSV}

That is the condition of the rebellious people who display their enmity towards God and their suppression of the truth of God by flagrantly disobeying him, observing no standard, living as they please, and doing what they like. The result is a moral decay, and a perversion of the natural drives of life. Even the sexual drives become perverted, so that men give themselves to men, and women to women, as this chapter describes. This is exactly what is taking place in society today, wherever man lives in open rebelliousness.

But that is not all of society. In Chapter 2, the apostle turns to the other side, the "good" side, the "Good People" – the so called "moral" and "religious" people who are by this time very delightedly pointing the finger at the crowd which is living in open and vile wickedness. Paul says to them, "Wait a minute!" Verse 1:

You have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. {Rom 2:1 RSV}

Then in a most remarkable way, he shows how this is true. He reveals that these people who are saying, "Why, we don't do these things. We don't live like this. We don't smoke. We don't carouse. We don't go in for sexual licentiousness. We observe the laws. We try to behave ourselves," are, nevertheless, equally as guilty as the others.

They, too, are fulfilling certain of the things on the list above, as fully as those who do the more open things. They indulge in such things as malice,

strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, and so forth. They, too, are “inventors of evil;” they, too, are “foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.” They cover it by an external appearance of being good, but inside, their hearts are as filled with malignity, envy, jealousy, strife and evil against one another as the others.

So there you have the picture of humanity. “Do-your-own-thing” people are on one side, looking at these moral, respectable people, reading their hearts aright and saying, “Look at the hypocrites. I wouldn’t touch them with a ten-foot pole.” And all the “moral and respectable” people are looking at these others and saying, “Look at that licentious, lascivious crowd. We don’t want anything to do with them.” But God, turning the spotlight of his omniscient eye on humanity, says, “You are all equally guilty.” There is no difference.

Then the Jew comes in and says, “What about me? After all, I am a Jew and have certain advantages before God.” Paul examines this claim and shows that the Jew is in exactly the same boat as the others. Despite his advantages; he is filled with the same kind of heart-enmity as the others. So Paul’s conclusion is that mankind stands, without exception, in need of a Redeemer.

Now, that prepares the way for the gospel. When man sees this, the conclusion is found in this well-known passage (Chapter 3, Verses 19-20):

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. {Rom 3:19-20 RSV}

And then, in Verse 23:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. {Rom 3:23 RSV}

As Phillips so beautifully renders that last clause, “everyone falls short of the beauty of God’s plan” {Rom 3:23b J.B.Phillips}. That lays the basis for redemption.

There are **three phases of redemption**, as Paul outlines them for us. These are familiar to you: justification, sanctification, and glorification:

Chapter 4 illustrates the meaning of *justification*. Paul begins this theme in the closing part of Chapter 3, where he shows us that justification means that God gives us a righteous standing before him on the basis of the work of Christ. Another has died in our place. Another has met our need. We could never do it ourselves, for we are totally incapable of pleasing God apart from this change that occurs in the heart. It makes no difference whether we build a moral, respectable life outwardly or kick over the traces and live like a bohemian or a hippie. Both are guilty; neither is accepted; neither is any better than the other. Therefore, the only way righteousness can come to us is by accepting the gift of God in Jesus Christ. That is justification. It has to do with the spirit of man. Each of us is a three-fold being; we have spirit, soul, and body. It is God’s program to save the whole man, and in the next series of chapters Paul tells us how God does it.

He begins with the spirit, the deepest part of man. What God does in the spirit is to implant his Holy Spirit there. That gives us righteousness, a righteous standing before God. Justification is therefore a permanent, unchangeable thing. It is far more than forgiveness of sin, although it includes that; it is a position before God as though we never had sinned at all. It is Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, reckoned to our account. When this takes place we are delivered from the penalty for sin.

- Paul illustrates this in Chapter 4 with Abraham and David, who were both justified on this basis, and not by circumcision or by obeying the Law or by any of the things that men do to please God. No religious hocus-pocus, no attempt to obey an unreachable standard, would be adequate in God’s sight. It was to be simply by faith; these men believed God about his Son.
- Abraham looked forward and saw the coming of Christ and believed God and he was justified by faith. David, although he was guilty of the twin sins of adultery and murder, believed God and was justified, so that he could sing about the man “to whom God would not impute iniquity.” Thus, these men are examples from the Old Testament of how God justifies.

Unfortunately, many Christians stop right there. They think that all salvation is about – a way to escape hell and get to heaven. But there is more to the human life than the spirit; there is also the soul and the body.

Beginning in Chapter 5, Paul sets forth for us *the way God works to deliver the soul*. That consists of our mind, our emotions, and our will. The soul of man, as he is born of Adam, is under the reign of sin. The flesh (if you want to use the Biblical term for it) rules us. The life of Adam possesses us, with all its self-centered characteristics. Even though our spirit has been justified it is quite possible to go on with the soul still under the bondage and reign of sin. So, though our destiny is settled in Christ, our experience is still as much under the control of evil as before we were Christians. That is the cause of the miserable experience of being up-and-down, sometimes reckoning on the promises of God for justification, then experiencing again the implacable bondage of sin ruling in the life, causing selfishness and self centeredness. Well, what is God's program for this? To sum it up in one word: *sanctification*.

God intends us to see that in Jesus Christ this whole thing has been taken care of, even as our destiny was, so that we can be as free from the reign of sin as we are from the penalty of sin:

- In Chapter 5, Paul outlines the whole program for us. He takes these two really basic divisions of mankind, man in Adam and man in Christ, puts them side-by-side and says, "Look, when you were a man in Adam (that is, before you became a Christian) you acted on the basis of the life that you had inherited from Adam. You did things naturally, and what you did naturally was wrong, it was self-centered. You didn't have to plan it, or to program it. "You didn't have to get up in the morning and think about how to be bad, did you? You didn't catch yourself making resolutions never to be good again, and then suddenly find yourself breaking your word, and being good again when you really didn't intend to. No. You simply expressed the life that was in you, the life of Adam. You learned how from babyhood and it was so widespread around you that it seemed perfectly natural."

But now, Paul says, when you become a Christian, God does something to that old life. He cuts you off from this life in Adam. You are no longer joined to fallen Adam, but you are joined to a risen Christ, and your life is now linked with him. He plans now to express his life through you in the same natural way as Adam once expressed his life through you. What you experienced of defeat, misery, heart-ache, bondage and blindness in Adam will be exceeded much more by what you will experience of victory, glory, blessing, peace and joy in Christ.

When you learn the process, it is as easy to be good in Christ as it was to be bad in Adam. It is just as natural, and done without struggle. But it will take a while for you to learn to put it into practice. You will do feebly at first and you will struggle with it. Perhaps it will take you quite a while to really see what Paul is talking about, but when you do, you will discover that where once sin reigned over you unto death, Christ is now reigning over you unto life. Right now, in this life, you can experience victory in Christ where once you experienced only defeat in Adam.

- Chapter 6 begins to show us how. Here Paul declares that God, through the death of Jesus, not only died for us, but we also died with him. That is a great truth. When God says he set us free from the life of Adam and linked us to the life of Christ, he really did. Through for quite a long time our feelings will tell us differently, God wants us to understand this. We are to believe it regardless of how we feel, because what he says is true. If we will believe it, despite our feelings, we will soon discover that it is true. More and more we shall enter into the realization of this tremendous thing – that we can be good in Christ as easily as we were bad in Adam.

He begins, then, by announcing the fact, and then says that we must learn to reckon on this. Day by day, as you come into situations of pressure and temptation, you must remind yourself that what God says is true and act on it, even though you do not feel like it. You will not feel dead with Christ; you will feel as if this evil within is very much alive, and that it has control over you, that you must do wrong

things. You will feel unsatisfied if you do not, afraid that you will not find what you are looking for in life, or that you will miss out on what the world around you is experiencing.

These are the pressures that will come upon you, but whom are you going to believe? The One who loves you? Will you reckon that what he says is true and act on that basis? If you do, you will soon discover that it is true, and you will be brought right out into liberty.

- Chapter 7 faces the fact that there are two levels of understanding and experiences in this matter. We know already, even before we become Christians, that certain aspects of our natural life – the Adamic life, the flesh – are bad because they get us into trouble. We know that selfishness is bad. We know that sexual misadventure is bad. We know that stealing and lying are bad. We think that we understand what the flesh is, and what God means when he talks to us about these bad things in our lives. At first, this is the level on which we respond. We stop lying and stealing and doing other outward things. Then we discover that something strange is happening; despite the fact that we have learned how to walk in victory over the things we have labeled bad, we are still in bondage. We still do not have the power we are looking for in our Christian experience. Thus we enter into the experience that Paul describes in Chapter 7. There he speaks of an inner conflict in which he wrestles with himself. What is wrong? What we have not learned yet is that there is what we might call a “good” side of flesh which is really as bad as the “bad” side. Self effort – the effort we make to try to do something for God, or to gain some kind of flavor or pleasure or advancement for ourselves by the things we do for God – these are just as bad as the “bad” things.

When we finally learn that there is nothing we can do for God, but that he intends to do everything through us, then we come into deliverance. That is when we begin fully to realize the experience of mind, emotion, and will brought under the control of Jesus Christ and the fulfilling in glorious, triumphant power all that he has in mind for us. That is the sanctifying of the soul.

But now what about **the body**? Chapter 8 deals with that. Here Paul shows us that while we are still in this life the body remains unredeemed, but the fact that

- the spirit has been justified, and
- the soul is being sanctified
- is a guarantee that God will one day redeem (glorify) the body as well.

When we enter at last into the presence of Christ, we shall stand – body, soul, and spirit – perfect before him.

That line of thought erupts into a great, tremendous paean of praise at the close of this chapter.

In Chapters 9 through 11 some of **the questions** that have inevitably been raised by any thinking mind which has followed through this great plan of redemption are answered:

- First, there is the question of *the sovereignty of God* which is magnificently treated in Chapter 9. God is a sovereign being, and his sovereignty answers the question of why I am part of Christ’s body and not someone else. The whole matter of election and the predestinating choice of God helps us to see this whole problem as it really is. We tend to think of ourselves as in a neutral condition before God, and depending upon how we live or act, or what choices we make, we will either fall off on the side of being lost or go on to be saved. But this is not the case. This chapter shows us that the whole race is already lost, lost in Adam; we were born into a lost race. We lost our right to be saved in Adam, when he sinned, and we have no rights before God at all. Therefore, it is only God’s grace that saves any of us. No one has any right to complain to God if some are saved, when none have any right to be saved. Thus, he sets before us in a most powerful way the sovereign power and choice of God.

- In Chapter 10 he links the sovereignty of God with *the moral responsibility and freedom of man*. He shows us that salvation is a choice of faith. You need not climb up into heaven to bring Christ down, or go down into the grave to bring him up from the dead. In other words, if you were planning to work your way into heaven, this is what you would have to do. You would have to climb into heaven and bring Christ down to earth, and then after he had been here a while and died, you would have to go down into the grave, make him alive and bring him up – all by your works. How are you going to do that? Well, you cannot, and furthermore, you do not have to. The word is already in your mouth that Jesus is Lord; only believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, and you will be saved.
- In Chapter 11 he shows us that even as God set aside Israel for a time, in order that grace might do its work among the Gentiles, so God has completely set aside the flesh, the fallen nature, what we are by human nature, so that we might learn what God will do for and through us. When we freely admit, in practice, that without Christ we can do nothing, then we shall learn that we can do all things through him who strengthens us. Faith is the process of this, and it will never be any different. No matter how long we live as Christians, we will ourselves never become any better or any more able to serve Christ, apart from simple dependence upon him. It is always and only Christ working in us which accomplishes the Father's will.

Pride, therefore, is our greatest temptation and our cruelest enemy. Some day even our flesh will serve God by his grace. In the day when creation is freed from its bondage to sin and the sons of God stand forth in resurrection bodies, then even that which was once rejected and cursed shall be made to fulfill the promises and demonstrate the power of God. This is all illustrated by God's treatment of Israel. And that leads us to the doxology at the close of Chapter 11, Verse 33:

O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! {Rom 11:33 RSV}

The final section, Chapters 12 through 16, covers **the practical application** of these truths in life. I will call attention to only one or two things.

First, in Chapter 12, Verse 1, he begins,

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, [justification, sanctification, glorification] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [or reasonable service]. {Rom 12:1 RSV}

In other words, the most reasonable, intelligent, thoughtful, purposeful thing you can do with your life, in view of all these great facts that Paul has declared to you, is to give yourself to God and to live for him. Nothing else can fulfill you to any degree. Therefore, give yourself to him. It is the reasonable thing to do.

When you do, you will find your life being changed in all your relationships:

- First, it is changed with regard to your brethren, as the latter part of Chapter 12 shows. Presenting your body will affect your life in the church.
- Then, in the latter part of Chapter 12 and in Chapter 13, he says it will affect your relationship to the governing powers, to mankind in general, and to all society.
- Even your inner attitudes will be different, as discussed in Chapter 14. Your attitudes toward the weak will be entirely opposite to what it was before you were a Christian.
- And your attitude toward the lost (Chapter 15) will be entirely different. There will be a burning passion to reach them, for a quite different reason than you ever could have had before.

Paul's closing words are wonderful (Chapter 16, Verses 25-27):

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory evermore through Jesus Christ. {Rom 16:25-27}

Prayer:

Our Father, teach us these mighty truths. Teach us to give ourselves to them that we might learn them understand them and put them into practice in our own lives might fulfill the wonderful potential that is possible in the inheritance you have for the saints. And that you, Lord Jesus, might discover and fulfill in us all that is involved in your inheritance in us. For we pray Christ's name. Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman
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The Message Of First Corinthians

by Ray C. Stedman

The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians is a very, very important letter for us because it so thoroughly captures the problems that we face as moderns living in this modern age. The reason is, of course, that Corinth was the most American city in the New Testament – it was a resort city, the capital of pleasure in the Roman Empire.

If you remember your geography you know it was located on the Peloponnesian peninsula, and the conditions under which the Corinthians lived were very much like the conditions under which we live, or to put that the other way, the conditions under which we live today are Corinthian conditions. Corinth was a beautiful city, a lovely city of palms and beautiful buildings, the center of pleasure for the whole empire, and it was devoted to two things – the pursuit of pleasure (largely passion), and of wisdom. It was a Greek city, and its inhabitants loved to philosophize, and they were given to what Paul calls, “the wisdom of words.”

So the two major forces that were active in this city, creating the atmosphere in which the Corinthian church had to live, were these: intellectualism and sensualism. This was a city devoted to the worship of the goddess sex. That is why I speak of it as so like modern conditions today. In the city of Corinth there was a temple that was dedicated to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, and part of the worship of the Greek goddess was the performance of certain religious ceremonies that involved sexual relationships; therefore, the priestesses of this temple were really prostitutes, and there were some 10,000 of them attached to the temple. The city was openly given over to the practices of li-

centiousness; it was regarded as a normal, proper part of life and no one ever thought twice about it. If we think we are living under conditions where sensualism is rampant and worship of sex is widespread, these conditions do not yet approach those of the Christians who had to live in Corinth.

Furthermore, they were continually assaulted by the doctrines, dogmas, and ideas of men following the great philosophers. This city was the heir of the great thinkers of the Golden Age of Greece – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all had their followers within the city of Corinth. And, as in every Greek city, they loved to gather in the public plazas and debate these issues endlessly. They were people given over to the love of wisdom.

Now into this city comes the Apostle Paul. You remember the story from the book of Acts; he had come down through Thessalonica and had been driven out of that city by an uprising of the Jews against him, had gone for a brief time to the little city of Berea and then had come down into Athens. There in Athens, as he walked about the city alone, he noted the many temples and was finally taken up to preach to the Athenians on Mars Hill. When he left Athens at last, he came down across the little isthmus into Corinth. There he stayed for a period of about a year and a half to two years, preaching the gospel and making tents for a living.

He had found a couple who had come from Rome, named Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tent makers, and he stayed with them and led them to Christ. He formed a church in their home and gradually the gospel spread throughout the city and many of the Corinthians on hearing it, we are told,

believed, and were baptized, and became members of this church.

That was the church to which Paul wrote this letter, and as you read it, you see that it was a church in trouble; it was the biggest problem church in the New Testament. But, although there were a great many things wrong about it, there were some things that were right, too. As Paul began his letter to them, he recognizes some of these things that are right. First, he calls them saints, he says,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, {1 Cor 1:2a RSV}

then his eyes lift to the horizon of both geography and time, and he sees even us and he says,

**together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:
{1 Cor 1:2b RSV}**

and then his usual greeting,

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
{1 Cor 1:3 RSV}**

Then the apostle begins to talk about some of the things that made these people Christians – the great themes of our Christian faith. He mentions the fact that they had received Christ by faith, and, by grace, had entered into a new life, and had been enriched by him. And there was also much for which he could commend this church in the opening verses of this letter; but he soon comes to what is the key to the entire letter. If you never remember anything else of First Corinthians, at least remember this verse, because everything in this letter is built around it:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1: 9 RSV}

There is the central thing in the Christian life – we are called to share the life of the Son of God. That is what fellowship is – it is sharing. Fellowship with anyone is sharing time, and this is what God has called us to. Paul puts that first in this letter to call the attention of these Christians to

what was lacking in their experience, and everything in the letter gathers about this verse.

The letter falls into two major divisions – there is, first of all, a great section dealing with what we might call *the carnalities*; that takes you from Chapter 1 through Chapter 11. Then there is a closing section, from Chapter 12 through Chapter 16, that deals with what Paul himself calls *the spiritualities* – the carnalities versus the spiritualities. The carnalities included everything that was wrong with this church; the spiritualities were what they needed to correct it.

As you read this letter through, you will see that we suffer today from all the carnalities, in principle at least, and that what we desperately need to set our lives right are the spiritualities. Therefore, this letter is especially written to those who live in a sex-saturated, wisdom-loving atmosphere and are trying to live as Christians in the midst of all the pressures that constantly come from these two areas.

In the first section, speaking to the church in trouble, there are three major areas that Paul deals with:

- There is, first of all, the problem of divisions,
- Then there was the problem of scandals in the church, and,
- Finally, he took up certain matters they had written to him about – questions that were troubling them.

And all these are brought together under the major heading, **the carnalities**, the things that were troubling the church.

The first problem, this matter of *divisions*, was caused by the fact that the spirit of the city had come into the church.

There are those who are telling us that the need in the church today is to capture again the spirit of the age in which we live. There could be absolutely nothing further from the truth than that! The one thing the church must never do is to capture the spirit of the age. The job of the church is to correct the spirit of the age. When a church begins to reflect the spirit of the age in which it lives, it imme-

diately loses its power, and that is what had happened to the church at Corinth.

They were allowing all these divisions over the philosophies of men to come into the church, and they had chosen certain religious leaders around whom they were gathering in little factions, saying that so-and-so was better than so-and-so, and the insights of this man were better than that man. They were forming little sects and cliques and schisms within the church. These divisions were largely built around certain insights they felt each man contributed, and Paul mentions certain names here to indicate what he means; some were following Peter, some Apollos, some were gathering about his name, Paul. And then there was an exclusive little group who said they were the purest of all; they said they were following Christ, and Christ only – and they were the worst troublemakers of all. But the problem was, that they were each thinking that their leader's special bit of insight represented a superior view. And they were doing exactly what the people out in the city were doing, dividing up over the views of men.

Now Paul answers this with a tremendous word in which he shows that the wisdom of men is of no avail. He sets it aside completely, and he says that in the church these insights of men are always partial and untrustworthy to a great degree, and that the Corinthians will never learn anything until they give themselves to the wisdom of God. "The world," Paul says, "By wisdom does not know God" {cf, 1 Cor 1:21 RSV}, and they will never get to the heart of their problems by trying to pursue the insights of current popularity or secular philosophers.

Now that is still true today. The church will never solve its problems as long as it constantly pursues this writer and that writer, this man and that speaker, thinking that it will gather from the efforts and knowledge of men the insights it needs to understand its problems. The apostle says it is impossible that we can ever arrive at a solution to our needs on this level, because there is something vitally missing. That missing element is the life of the Spirit in man, and without this, he can never solve all the riddles of life. So the apostle answers these schisms and factions and divisions by confronting them with the word of the cross – the word that presents the cross of Christ as that instrument by which God cuts off all human wisdom, not as

being worthless in its own narrow realm, but as being useless in solving the major problems of man.

When we understand this, we realize that we will never begin to learn until we first learn that we do not know anything. When we come to appreciate the word of the cross, we understand that in the cross of Jesus Christ, God took his own Son, now become man like us, identified with us in every way, and nailed him up to die as being useless as far as solving any of the problems of mankind is concerned. That is the word of the cross; that is why it looks so foolish to the natural man; that is why it proceeds on a totally different principle than the wisdom of the world. And when we accept that, the apostle says, we begin to discover that true, secret, hidden wisdom that unfolds little by little the answers to the problems of life. We begin to understand ourselves and to see why this world is what it is, and where it is heading, and why all the confusion and the difficulties and the problems exist, as the deep things of God, the wisdom which God has hidden in Christ, is unfolded to us through the teaching of the Spirit by the Word of God. It is a wonderful section.

And Paul says, "I'm not going to waste any time at all arguing with you about Socrates or Plato or Aristotle, or any other wisdom of men: They have their place, but when it comes to solving the deep-seated problems of human nature, there is only one wisdom that can touch it, and that is the word of the cross." This becomes, then, one of the mightiest answers of all time to the intellectualism that constantly hounds the Christian church and attempts to undermine it – a false intellectualism.

I mean by that, that the Word of God never attempts to set aside or call worthless the pursuit of knowledge. God intends men to learn things, he designed us that way; but it must be knowledge based upon a right beginning and we are called back to the principle set forth in the Old Testament,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, {Prov 9:10a RSV}

That is where we begin.

Now, Paul goes on here to show that the true reason for their division was not what they thought it to be – differences of human points of view – but rather, it was carnality, the love of the flesh for being puffed up, and for finding itself idolized and followed. This was their problem. Paul says that

while that principle is at work, they would remain babes, they would never grow. The word of the cross must come in and cut off the flesh before you will ever begin to grow. As long as this keeps on, you will find yourselves constantly involved in little squabbles and bickerings and divisions, and you can live your whole Christian life on that basis, Paul says.

But one of these days you are going to come to the end, and the testing, the analysis of what your life has been worth, and in that day you will see that if you have been living in the flesh, it is all wood, hay, and stubble. It is burned up, completely worthless, and your life – except for the fact that you have received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – is a wasted enterprise. It is possible, even in the religious realm,

- to gain the approval of men, and
- to be accepted as quite a figure in the church, and
- to enjoy the favor of others, and
- the prestige that comes from position,

and to come to the end, only to discover that the absolutely relentless judgment of God has not been impressed in the least degree by that which originates from anything else but the work of the Spirit of God in you – it has to be the Spirit and not the flesh.

Now Paul turns to the matter of the *scandals* that were occurring in this church. These were, of course, the effects of the divisions.

There was first of all an intolerable case of sexual immorality in the church that was being openly regarded with a considerable degree of acceptance and toleration, and he says, “this is absolutely wrong; you must deal with this.” Whenever sin breaks out openly like this, and it is not repented of, then the church must act in discipline, and he scolds these leaders for not moving to bring this before the judging of the church and to set aside this iniquity that was eating away at their ranks.

Here is another similarity to the church today. It is almost frightening to see how certain leaders of the church are now openly advocating sexual immoralities, and certain of the pastors and leaders of youth groups in the church are openly encouraging young people to sleep together, and to live together.

Now, at the time this letter was written, the atmosphere was such that sexual immorality was widely accepted within the city as the normal way of life. Within the church, however, it is absolutely set aside as being totally incongruous with the Christian profession, because it was a violation of the humanity of the individuals involved. The love of God burned in zealous judgment against this because it was destroying and would destroy those involved in it. That is why the apostle speaks in such scathing words concerning this matter. Chapters 5 and 6 both deal with this matter of immorality, and the apostle points out that the defense of the Christian must not be derived from any moral standards outside himself – it is not “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” that keeps young people, or older people, free from sexual problems and pressures, but rather it is the recognition that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God himself dwells in us, and we are never out of his presence. Everywhere we go, he goes with us, and is in us, and, in that sense, everything we are doing is done in the presence of the Son of God himself. That is what keeps the young person free from the pressures that come.

Then, beginning with Chapter 7, Paul turns to the questions they had written to him,

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. {1 Cor 7:1a RSV}

And they wrote about four major problems:

1. First, there was a question about marriage; they asked Paul if it was right to be married, in view of the pressures that were around them, if perhaps they should give themselves to the service of God in an ascetic life. Although Paul himself was not married, nevertheless he told them in this section that it is best, it is good for men and women to be married, that marriage is a perfectly proper way of life, and because of the temptation to immorality, he says, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband; that was in view of the Corinthian conditions.

Then he shows them that it is also right to have a single life, if God grants this as a special calling to any individual – this is a perfectly honorable way of life. Marriage is not a necessity, though it often is an advantage, and

yet it can be a problem. Paul deals very thoughtfully, helpfully, and carefully with this whole question of marriage.

Then they wrote to him about three things that were troubling them; largely in the church at Corinth:

2. First, they were worried about offending God, and about offending the conscience of the weaker brother, in the matter of eating meat that was offered to idols.

Although we are no longer troubled by the problem of whether we ought to eat meat offered to idols or not, nevertheless in this section, we are confronting in principle this whole thorny issue of Christian taboos – smoking, drinking, dancing, everything that has ever been brought up as a problem within the church that is not specifically identified as an evil in the Scriptures. What do you do about it?

It is most interesting that Paul was an apostle, with all the authority of an apostle, but he absolutely refused to make up any rules along this line. This is because the weak, immature Christian always wants somebody to put him under law, but if you put a Christian under law, then he is no longer under grace! And Paul knows that Christians must learn to deal with what he calls “the law of liberty.” The fact is that all things are right; nothing is wrong in itself: the devil never made any of the capabilities and capacities that are in the human being – God made them all. And no urge or desire, or tendency is wrong in itself – we are at liberty in these things.

But with this law, he links two other laws. One he calls the “law of love.” That is the law that says, “I may be free to do it, but if I am really putting a stumbling block in somebody else’s path, I won’t do it” – that is the law of love. The limitation is imposed not by my conscience, but by another’s conscience. The other is the “law of expediency,” i.e., everything is legal, is lawful, but not everything is helpful. There are a lot of things I could do, and many directions I could go, as a Christian, but if I spend all my time doing all the things I am free to do, I no longer have any time to do the things which I am called to do, and therefore, it is not always helpful. These things can

be a waste of time and drag us back, even though they are not wrong in themselves. That is what Hebrews calls the “weights.” As the writer says, “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,” {Heb 12:1b RSV}.

3. Then, they wrote also about women – women were a problem in the church at Corinth too. (I did not mean anything bad by that!) But they were, because they were involved with a very difficult problem about hats.

Now this had peculiar local overtones about it – if a woman was seen bare-headed in Corinth, she was immediately identified as a prostitute, one of the temple priestess, and that is why Paul writes to these people in Corinth and says, “You ladies, when you come to church, put a hat on; it is a sign that you are a Christian woman subject to your husband.”

Now in practice that applied to Corinth; in principle (the principle applies all the time) Christian women are to be in subjection to their husbands – as you see all through the Scriptures – in every way, as an indication and a sign that the church is in subjection to its Lord. The Christian woman fulfills her ministry to her Lord in being subject to her husband, and all this is involved in this problem of headship which the apostle defines as equality, cooperation, and yet submission.

4. Then the third problem concerned the Lord’s table; there were certain ones who were eating this in a mechanical, perfunctory way, not seeing any meaning of having any insight into what they were doing, and so the apostle had to show them that everything the Christian does must be done realistically and with a recognition that it is done as unto the Lord.

Now in Chapter 12 through the rest of the book, he is dealing with **the great spiritualities**, the correction to these carnalities. You do not correct these things by just trying to straighten yourself out. How do you correct them?

- Well first, by a recognition of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life. That is why Chapter 12 begins with that very word.

Now concerning spiritualities [it is translated “spiritual gifts” here, but it is actually one word], **brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.**

{1 Cor 12:1 RSV}

Why not? Well, because this is what makes life work, and he goes on to explain that it is the presence of the Spirit that makes Christ real to us, and the gifts of the Spirit that are designed to make the body function and reach out and perform its work of touching society on every side.

Here again, we have missed so much of the great richness of the provision of Christ for his church. We know so little about the gifts of the Spirit. What is your gift – do you know? And are you using it? Are you putting it to work? Or do you need Paul’s admonition to Timothy, “rekindle the gift of God that is within you” {2 Tim 1:6b RSV}. The body functions by the exercise of its gift, and every Christian has a gift – at least one – and there are different gifts; we do not all have the same.

God has sent different gifts within the body, and we all function as these gifts are put to work; therefore, this is a beautiful chapter – showing us that we must not despise another because of a different gift. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” {1 Cor 12:21a RSV}, nor must we neglect the gift that has been given to us; it is all necessary – even the head cannot properly operate without the foot. Think of that – the head is Christ himself, and yet we are all members one of another, and so, as the body of Christ, we fulfill our functions – both in the church to the body itself and to the world – through the exercise of spiritual gifts in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- And the proof that we have learned the secret will be as set forth in Chapter 13. You know what that is – love – the manifestation of love. This is a wonderful chapter, because it sets forth for us the value of love, the portrait of love, and the power of love.
- Then in Chapter 14, Paul takes up another problem that was causing confusion in the church – the misuse of one of the gifts, the gift

of tongues, and the presence of the false gift of tongues that was at work in that church as it is in our society today. In the correction for these abuses, he tries to focus the whole weight of this section on the importance of the gift of prophecy.

It is always amazing to me how many read this chapter and entirely miss the apostle’s point. The whole purpose of the chapter is that we start talking about the gift of prophecy and emphasizing it, and urging it upon others, and encouraging those who have it to exercise it. But you hardly ever hear anything about that: it is all tongues, is it not? Yet Paul was trying to play down the gift of tongues, and play up the gift of prophecy.

Now, the gift of prophecy is simply the ability to explain and expound the Scriptures, to speak comfort and edification, and encouragement from the Scriptures.

- That brings us to Chapter 15 with its great emphasis on the resurrection. What would any of these things be worth if we did not have a living Christ to make them real? The resurrection is the great pivot for the whole of the Christian faith – everything comes back to that. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then, as the apostle says in this chapter, we are hopeless, and not only that, we are the most to be pitied of all people – we are nuts, we are fools, we ought to be locked up somewhere, if Christ be not raised from the dead.

But what a triumphant paean of proof and praise is in this chapter concerning the resurrection. Paul closes it with what is his whole point. Everything in this whole letter comes right down to this one verse (Verse 58):

Therefore, [because of all he has said up to this point] my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

- Chapter 16 is just a postscript in which he catches up certain little things that the church needed to know, very important to us, but then he comes back to this theme again:

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong, Let all that you do be done in love.
{1 Cor 16:13-14 RSV}

And you have got the equipment to do it with.
Now do it!

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that we who live also in a sex-saturated society, given over

to the love of wisdom and intellectualism, have in Jesus Christ, in the word of the cross, everything that it takes to meet the pressures that come upon us in this day; there is no reason for failure. And so, Lord, we pray that we may learn more about these great themes, and discover the exciting fascination of everyday living on this level and in these terms, thus discovering the adventure that you intended life to be. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

The Message of Second Corinthians

by Ray C. Stedman

Reading through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth makes you aware that this is the most personal and emotional of all his letters. It throbs with a sense of the glories of God's grace.

Visiting Corinth on my recent trip was a moving experience for me. There is very little left standing of the original city – it was destroyed by the Romans shortly after Paul's visit there and has been lying in ruins ever since. Certain temple columns remain, though, as well as the market place and other public areas of the city. They can be clearly discerned, and the actual pavement of the judgment hall of the Roman proconsul is well preserved.

It wasn't hard for me to imagine the Apostle Paul as he came down from Athens into this city which was at the time a center of pleasure, a great commercial city and a city of great beauty, with many, many temples. It had gained a reputation as the center of lascivious worship – the worship of the Goddess of Love. There were some 10,000 prostitutes attached to the temple of Aphrodite and the city lived up, or perhaps I should say, down, to its reputation as a place of sensual pleasure. It represented a sex-saturated society. You can see indications of this in Paul's letters to the church there. It was easy to imagine the apostle arriving in the dust of the road, unknown and unheralded, a simple tentmaker by all appearance. Finding two people of the same trade, Aquila and Priscilla, he lived and worked with them, and preached up and down the city streets and in the market places and synagogues. Thus God used him to lay the foundations of the church at Corinth.

As I stood there I couldn't help thinking of certain phrases that come right out of this letter of Paul's. In the sixth chapter he speaks of himself,

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. {2 Cor 6:3-10 RSV}

Standing in the midst of the ruins of the city, it was easy to understand those words. The apostle was regarded as the scum of the earth by the intelligentsia of Corinth, with its love of philosophy and the wisdom of men's words. They looked down upon this traveler, this peasant from Judea who was passing through. He had neither reputation nor evidences of wealth or power, aggrandizement or influence. Yet before he left he shook the city and established a church that survived the life of that city. The gospel that Paul preached is today a living power on earth although the city has long since crumbled into ruin.

You cannot understand this second letter of Paul to the church at Corinth without some grasp of its background. After Paul had established the church there, and had labored in the city for almost two years, he left and went to the city of Ephesus on the Asian mainland. From there he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Its purpose was to

correct some of the divisions that had arisen in the church at Corinth as well as some of the irregularities, scandals, and immoralities that were creeping into the church from the life of the city outside. We have that letter preserved for us and perhaps you are familiar with its great themes – calling Christians back to an understanding of what fellowship with Jesus Christ can mean, declaring again the great spiritual values which make Christian faith a living vital thing.

That is what the church at Corinth needed, but after Paul had written that first letter, the Jewish party – which had caused him so much trouble in the city – evidently continued to gain strength. They were headed by an anti-Pauline teacher who possibly had come down from Jerusalem and had organized opposition to the apostle's teachings. Paul was plagued with a group of Judaizers who hounded him and followed him around wherever he established churches, teaching the people that they had to observe the Law of Moses. They said that the great themes of the grace of God were not the accurate and authentic Christian gospel, and that people had to be circumcised and meet other particulars of the Law. They represented themselves as being the true followers of the Law. They called themselves the "Christ party." Paul makes reference to this in his first letter.

After Paul had written the first letter, this party apparently took over the church in Corinth, and so Paul revisited Corinth for a very short time and apparently was rebuffed by the church leaders. The very church that he had planted himself now had become so permeated with false Christianity that, when the apostle himself came to them, they rebuffed him and refused to allow him to teach within the church. You can see that as you read between the lines in the second letter. So Paul returned to Ephesus. From there he wrote a very short, sharp, caustic letter, rebuking and reproofing them for their attitudes. But that letter has been lost to us. It is clear that Paul wrote one, and yet it has not been preserved, perhaps because Paul, writing in the peak of passion may have said things that went beyond what the Holy Spirit intended so that the letter, not being fully and wholly inspired as were the others of Paul's writings, has been lost. Or it may have dealt so wholly with local issues that it lacked the universal application which inspired Scripture requires.

That letter was sent by the hand of Titus. While Titus took the letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle remained in Ephesus earnestly, anxiously, waiting to hear what the results would be. This is the note upon which the second letter opens. Paul tells them that he has been troubled about them. He also had undergone intense suffering while he was waiting in Ephesus for word from them.

In Chapter 1, Verse 8, he says,

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly crushed that we despaired of life itself. {2 Cor 1:8 RSV}

Then he tells them how anxious and concerned he was about them in Chapter 2, Verse 4,

For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. {2 Cor 2:4 RSV}

So he was waiting in Asia for word to come as to what had happened, but while he was waiting, the trouble arose in Ephesus which is recorded for us in Chapter 19 of the book of Acts. Perhaps you remember that the silversmiths caused a great commotion in the city, and Paul was threatened with being dragged before the Roman judges there. He escaped this and decided to go on to Macedonia to meet Titus, who would be coming up through Macedonia on his return from Corinth. Paul could wait no longer for news, his anxiety over the Corinthians was so great. He also intended to raise some money there for the relief of the Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing great difficulty because of a famine there. With these two concerns at heart, he went to Philippi in Macedonia.

There he met Titus and received word that the sharp, caustic letter he had written had accomplished its work, and that the majority of the Corinthian Christians had repented of their rejection of his ministry and had begun to live again the life of Jesus Christ. A minority was still unyielding, however, and still rebelling against the authority of the apostle. So, from the city of Philippi. Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians which expresses so much of the anxiety and agitation of the heart that he experienced.

With that background you can understand something of the passion of the apostle as he writes. From the trouble, tears, and heartache that are reflected in this letter come the three great themes which it embodies:

- the ministry within the church;
- giving and service, or ministration by the church; and
- the subject of authority, i.e., where spiritual power and authority actually reside.

When you read them through you will find that the first five chapters, particularly, are a wonderful explanation of what **the ministry within the church** ought to be. The apostle knew that the church at Corinth was failing to understand the true functions of ministers of Jesus Christ. As a result, they were waiting to obey the teaching of the true ministers of Christ – Paul himself, Silas, Timothy, Titus and others who had come to them. Because they were failing to obey the teaching of the Word of God, they were thus failing to fulfill the ministry in Corinth. That is why this church, which seemingly had everything, could do nothing in the city of Corinth. It is to correct this difficulty that these two letters were written. With that key, we can understand the reason for Paul's trouble, tears and his anxiety.

In these opening chapters we get a great declaration of what the ministry ought to be. As Paul states in Chapter 3, for instance, it is not the ministry of the old covenant, but of the new. In other words, the message is not the demand of the Law upon people to compel them to follow certain rules and regulations. When Christianity becomes that it always becomes a deadly, stultifying, dangerous thing. Unfortunately, it has become just that among many, many people. Then it is no longer a matter of following an indwelling Lord, but simply a grim determination to try to follow certain rules and regulations – demands that are made upon the flesh. As Paul says that – that old covenant, exemplified by the Ten Commandments – makes its appeal to us, and its demand upon us, but without an accompanying dynamic to fulfill it. It is always a ministry of death. "The letter kills," he says, "but the Spirit gives life" {cf, 2 Cor 3:6b}.

He goes on, then, to set forth the wonderful ministry of the new covenant. This is the new arrangement for living, not the old grim determination to clench your fists and set your teeth and try to do what God wants you to do – that is never Christianity – but the realization that he has provided in you the Holy Spirit to minister to you the life of a risen Lord in whose strength and grace you can do all that life asks of you. That is the new arrangement for living. In this section, therefore, he sets forth the resources of a Christian:

- First, there is the Word of God. The business of a minister of Jesus Christ (that is, every Christian) is to declare the Word of God. Notice how he puts it in Chapter 4:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, {2 Cor 4:1-2a RSV}

There is where the failure of the church lies in so many areas today – clever, subtle tampering with the Word of God, undermining its authority, changing its message, ignoring its declarations, refusing to act upon the facts that are declared. Paul says we have renounced all this.

but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. {2 Cor 4:2b RSV}

That is the first resource of the ministry – the truth and light of God's word.

- Second, as I have already suggested, there is the indwelling treasure, the mysterious indwelling Spirit of God. You see this in Chapter 4, Verse 7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. {2 Cor 4:7 RSV}

It is not because of our personalities, nor that we are such clever, smart, educated people

that we can live victoriously. It is obvious that what is happening is something far beyond what we can naturally do. We have this treasure in an earthen vessel in order to show that the power is not ours, but that it belongs to God.

- With this, Paul links the principles of the Cross. This is the secret by which the power is released:

Is your life this way? Are you showing the kind of life that can only be explained in terms of God at work in you? That is what Christianity really is. As people observe you, they should see the earthen vessel and say, "Well, I don't understand. The kind of life this person is exemplifying can never be explained by the sort of stodgy, dull person he naturally is. Something else must be at work." The secret of the release of that kind of radiant power is the principle of the Cross.

You find it set forth in Chapter 4, Verse 10,

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. {2 Cor 4:10 RSV}

That means always to accept God's judgment upon the flesh – upon the natural life. He has judged it in the Cross and declared it to be worthless. Paul says, "I am always carrying about with me that sentence of judgment upon the natural life, in order that the life of Jesus, with all its glorious possibilities, might be manifest in me." Furthermore, "while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake," i.e., we are always being put into places of difficulty, pressure, hardship and trouble. Why? In order that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

That is why you have difficulties. That is why tomorrow morning you may have a hard time at the office. Your boss may call you in and rip you up one side and down the other quite unjustifiably. If you whine to yourself, "Why does this kind of thing happen to me? Why does it always have to be me? What have I done to deserve this?" – it will reveal how totally ignorant you are of the basis of Chris-

tian living. You are put into these situations in order that you may react, not like the men and women of the world with resentment, bitterness, railing, and fighting back, but, rather, in such a way that the life of Jesus might be manifest in your mortal flesh.

That is the secret of the new arrangement for living, and that is what Paul says is the glory of the Christian ministry and the Christian life.

- He goes on to declare the great hope of the believer, that "we look not at the things which are seen, but the things which are unseen" {2 Cor 4:18 RSV}. We know that we have a body which cannot be destroyed "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" {2 Cor 5:1 RSV}. God has a great future ahead for us. The life we now live is the preparation for that life which is to come. Therefore, as he says,

this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}

The present is but prologue to the future.

- Then he declares his motives in Chapter 5, Verse 11,

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; {2 Cor 5:11 RSV}

And in Verse 14:

For the love of Christ controls us [constrains us, drives us to move out] {2 Cor 5:14 RSV}

- This brings us into a face to face confrontation with a great scriptural declaration of the transforming character of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This good news does what nothing else can do. That is why Paul was never ashamed of it, in Corinth, Rome, or anywhere else, because it can do what nothing else in the world – no philosophy, no line of argument, no education process, no reformation of any type – can ever accomplish. It is a transformation by the implantation of a new life.

And he [Christ] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. {2 Cor 5:16-21 RSV}

Paul says that God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation and “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” and declaring that he has already reconciled the world unto himself and that his message then to all men is “be ye reconciled unto God.” “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is the gospel.

In Chapters 8 and 9 we have Paul’s declaration of **the ministrations of the church**. The great discourse on giving was occasioned by the collection Paul was taking for the relief of the famine-stricken saints at Jerusalem. Giving, he says, is to be the proof of love. In this section we find that great verse (9 of Chapter 8):

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

That is the reverse process by which Christianity operates – as poor, and yet making many rich. Even out of their poverty Paul says, the Macedo-

nian Christians gave liberally, beyond themselves, and thus God poured spiritual enrichment back into their lives. This is the essence of Christian living, and it is the basis for the great principles of Christian giving which are declared in Chapter 9, primarily in Verses 7 and 8:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}

There is no warrant here for financial campaigns or pressure programs to try to extort money from Christian people. Nobody is to be put under any pressure. Nobody is to be put under any compulsion. We are to give as each one has made up his own mind, “not reluctantly, nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” With that goes this great promise,

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 RSV}

Have you dared to try that? That word is as true in this 20th century as it was in the 1st century when Paul wrote it. “He that scatters abroad,” Paul says, “shall receive much; he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully,” {cf, 2 Cor 9:6-7 RSV}.

Now in Chapters 10, 11 and 12 we have a change of tone entirely. Here Paul begins to speak to that rebellious minority of Christians in Corinth who were still refusing the authority of his ministry among them. It wasn’t, Paul says, that they were refusing the word which he brought; they were disobedient to the truth of God. From this situation comes a great dissertation on **the basis or ground of authority in the Christian life**. These false teachers were claiming the following of the people on the basis of certain things about which they were boasting before them – how faithful they were, how abundant they were in serving them, how they endured much hardship and such difficulties for the cause of Christ. They were exalting themselves before these people and boasting about their lineage, their background, and their education.

The apostle cuts right across all this, saying, in effect, “You have been deceived. This isn’t where authority is based; this isn’t where mastery comes from.” Then in an ironic almost sarcastic fashion he shows them the true basis of authority. He says, “If you insist upon being impressed by these kinds of things, well, I could boast before you too. If I did, I would be a fool. I would only act like these foolish men whom you follow so easily, but since you are so impressed by this kind of thing, all right, I will boast a little. I will tell you what God has done through me.”

And then there comes this great passage in Chapter 11:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – [“Anybody who talks like this is foolish, but that is what you like; that is what impresses you. All right”] with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. {2 Cor 11:22-23 RSV}

Then he gives this tremendously impressive list of ordeals that he underwent:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [Thirty-nine stripes five different times in his ministry.] Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. [We have the record of it in the book of Acts.] Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city; danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. {2 Cor 11:24-27 RSV}

Then, he says, this is all idle boasting. “This is not where my authority lies. If you really want to know,” he says, “where my authority lies and where true spiritual power comes from, let me tell you how I began to learn the lesson. This is not going to sound very impressive, but I want you to know that I am telling you the truth. This is the

event I boast about more than anything else in my life – the moment when I began to learn the secret of genuine power.” Then he says this amazing thing, starting with Chapter 11, Verse 31:

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not lie. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands. {2 Cor 11:31-33 RSV}

What a thing to boast about! But Paul says, “As I look back upon that night, when I was so discouraged, so defeated, I can see that then I started to learn the secret of effective, victorious living, I had thought my learning and my intelligent understanding of the Scriptures, my Hebrew background and all my qualifications would be the keys that would open the hearts of these Jews in Damascus to me, but I found that they weren’t. I had to flee like a common criminal. There and then the Lord Jesus began to teach me the wonderful lesson that out of weakness I am made strong; that when I am weakest, he is the strongest. Out of that,” he says, “I have learned the great lesson of rejoicing and glorying in my weakness.”

For when I am weak, then I am strong. {2 Cor 12:10b RSV}

In this connection he recites his experience with a “thorn in the flesh,” this ugly thing that kept pestering him, prodding him, aggravating him and hurting him. He begged to have it taken away, but the word of the Lord came,

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.” {2 Cor 12:9b RSV}

That is the secret of strength: not outward impressiveness; not great prestige, pomp and favor; not great ornate buildings decorated to the highest degree, enclosing impressive statuary and wonderful paintings. Oh, no. Spiritual power never lies there. Neither does it lie in a brilliant, impressive personality, nor in ability to speak with eloquent oratory, with command and mastery of language. No, it never lies there. It lies in a heart that realizes that it can do nothing apart from a dependence on a

living Lord within. The weaker you are, the stronger Christ can be.

Isn't that encouraging?

Doesn't that strengthen you?

Are you saying, "Well, I can't do anything"?

Of course you can't. If you could, it wouldn't amount to anything. But he can do all things through you. That is the great secret of this letter. That is what the apostle longed to impart to these people. This is what Corinth so desperately needed, just as Palo Alto so desperately needs it today – men and women who will quietly believe this great, commanding, and compelling principle by which God's power is manifested in human life: Out of weakness comes strength.

So Paul closes the epistle by addressing these people at Corinth as he addresses us today,

Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith. {2 Cor 13:5a RSV}

Are you believing God? Are you counting on him to do what he says he will do through you? Are you walking into situations and crawling out on limbs where, if God does not come through, you will be made a fool of? "Examine yourselves, whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves."

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? {2 Cor 13:5b RSV}

That is the secret of Christian living.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that the passion of this apostle may not be lost upon us today, that we may realize afresh that the world is as sick and as troubled and as anxious, as problem-ridden and as despairing in this 20th century as it was in Paul's day. It needs, above everything else, the declaration of the mighty gospel of God, the new arrangement for living, the new covenant by which the Holy Spirit takes the image of Christ within us and makes it fresh and new to us, thus empowering us to live in the strength and glory of his life in us. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." May these truths grip our hearts in reality, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

GALATIANS: Don't Submit Again to the Slave's Yoke

by Ray C .Stedman

In many ways Galatians is the most colorful epistle in the New Testament. It is filled with vivid and vigorous language. If you have read it, I am sure that you were struck by its forcefulness.

In looking at any individual book of the Bible, it is worthwhile to consider where and how it fits into the whole. Let's review the overall structure, then, before beginning this study of the message in Galatians:

We can first divide the Bible according to its natural divisions of Old and New Testament to find out what each testament contributes to the supreme message of the Scripture. That central message, essentially, is that the whole revelation of God – the entire Bible in other words – is given so that we might be complete human beings in Christ. That is its aim. The Bible was given so we might experience all God intended for man in the beginning, wholly filled and flooded with God himself. To this end the Old Testament contributes the theme of **preparation**, the groundwork. The New Testament contributes the note of **realization**. It actually confronts us with the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself God's program and plan for making life complete for us.

As you may recall, there are several divisions within the New Testament:

- The Gospels and the Book of Acts present Jesus Christ to us.
 - Each Gospel gives a **different aspect of his life**.

- Acts ties these gospel presentations of Christ to his present **manifestation** in the world today, in his body, the Church. This is Christ at work: Christ in human life.
- Next, the Epistles give us the **explanation** of Jesus Christ – his person, his work and their significance – all spelled out for us so that we might understand and grasp them.

The Epistles are further divided into three major groups:

1. The first four – Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians – express the truth **Christ in us** – what it means to have Jesus Christ living in us.
2. The second division, encompassing the rest of the Epistles through Philemon, gathers around the theme, **you in Christ** – the significance of the fact that we are made part of his body. These Epistles explain the work of the Church and the proper life of the Church.
3. The third group, beginning with the letter to the Hebrews and including those to James, Peter, John and Jude, are the letters which describe the operative word **faith** – what faith is, how it works, why it suffers, and what it faces in life. Faith is the means by which all that Christ is in us and all that we have in him are made manifest in our experience.

- The last division of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, standing by itself as the great **consummation** of what Christ has come into the world to do. It describes for us the great scene when all will be ended and the work of redemption is accomplished.

This, in brief, relates the study of Galatians we are now beginning to the Bible as a whole.

You who have read this little letter carefully will have noticed that it is very closely related to the epistles to the Romans and to the Hebrews. These three letters of the New Testament form what might be regarded as an inspired commentary on a single verse from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. It was to that Old Testament prophet that God gave the great truth,

the righteous shall live by his faith. {Hab 2:4 RSV}

All three of these letters quote this verse, "The just [or the righteous] shall live by faith." It is interesting that each of them shows a different aspect or gives a different emphasis to the verse:

- In Romans the emphasis is put on the words, *the righteous*. Paul details what it means to be righteous, how a man becomes justified before God and declared righteous in Christ. It was this epistle that finally delivered Martin Luther from a terrible legalism.
- Then, in Galatians, the emphasis is upon the words *shall live* – what it means to live as a righteous person, justified in Christ. This is the letter about liberty which is the fullest expression of life.
- Finally, in Hebrews, you find the last two words, *by faith*, emphasized. This is the great letter on faith, culminating in that memorable section in Chapter 11, called "the heroes of faith."

Galatians comes to grips with the question of what real Christian life is like. The answer can be characterized by one word, *liberty*. The Christian is called to liberty in Jesus Christ. The cry of this epistle is that Christians might discover the liberty

of the sons of God in accordance with all that God has planned for man in the way of freedom and enjoyment. Its aim is freedom of our human spirits to the utmost extent, restrained only as necessary for us to exist in harmony with the design of God. Therefore, this letter has been called the "Bill of Rights of the Christian Life," or the "Magna Carta of Christian Liberty," the "Emancipation Proclamation" from all forms of legalism and bondage in the Christian experience.

In the introduction of the letter we read:

Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: {Gal 1:1-2 RSV}

This is not a letter written to a single church as in the cases of those to Corinth and Ephesus. This is a letter addressed to a number of churches. Who were these Galatians? If you read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the book of Acts you will discover the background of these churches. They were churches begun by Paul when he was on his very first missionary journey, traveling with Barnabas into the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. In Lystra, on one occasion, he was stoned and dragged outside the city and left for dead after having first been welcomed and treated as a god. In all these cities he experienced persecution. These were the cities of Galatia.

The name of the province comes from the same root as the word *Gaul*. Any of you who took Latin in school remember that you began your reading of Julius Caesar with the words, *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*: "Gaul as a whole is divided into three parts." Gaul is the ancient name for France. About 300 years before Christ some Gauls from what is now France had invaded the Roman Empire and sacked the city of Rome. Then they crossed into northern Greece and continued across the Dardanelles straits into Asia Minor. At the invitation of one of the kings of the area, these Gauls settled there.

So they were not Arabs or Orientals but a Celtic race, of ancestry similar to that of the Scots, the Irish, the Britons, and the French. Since many Americans are also of that ancestry, this letter is particularly pertinent to us, as you will recognize when you read Julius Caesar's description of the

Gauls: "The infirmity of the Gauls is that they are fickle in their resolves, fond of change, and not to be trusted." Or, as another ancient writer put it, "They are frank, impetuous, impressionable, eminently intelligent, fond of show but extremely inconstant, the fruit of excessive vanity." Doesn't that sound like Americans? Most of the world would agree to that.

On his second journey, this time with Silas instead of Barnabas, Paul set out to go back through these Galatian cities and visit the churches that had been established, and on this occasion he stayed a considerable time in various cities because he became sick. He refers to this illness in a rather oblique manner in this letter. Evidently it was some kind of serious eye trouble, for he says to these Galatians,

For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. {Gal 4:15 RSV}

Some Biblical scholars feel that he had inflamed, pus-filled eyes that made him almost repulsive at times. But these Galatians, as Paul admits in this letter, received him with great joy, treating him as though he were an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus himself. They reveled in the gospel of grace that he brought because he had set forth for them, with amazing vividness, the glory and the work of the crucified Lord. They had entered thereby into the fullness of life in the Spirit and had received the love, joy, and peace that Jesus Christ, entering the heart, gives.

But when he wrote this letter, probably from the city of Corinth, something had happened. Certain people, whom Paul labels in another place "wolves in sheep's clothing," had come among them; certain Judaizers had come down from Jerusalem with what Paul calls an alien gospel – not a totally different gospel, but a perversion of the true gospel. To these Gentile believers in Jesus Christ in the freshness of their new-found faith, the Judaizers were declaring that, in order to grow and really become genuine Christians, the Gentiles would have to become circumcised, keep the Law of Moses, and obey all the Old Testament ritual. These legalists were trying to impose all the restrictions and the ceremonial obligations of the Law of Moses.

Now, they hadn't set Jesus Christ aside – very few gospels that have any chance of spreading ever do that. But the Lord was given second place and keeping the Law was made paramount. Furthermore, the Judaizers challenged the apostolic authority of the Apostle Paul. They pointed out that he was independent, very undependable, overly enthusiastic, and he had graduated from the wrong seminary. So they were trying to get the Galatians to reject his authority as an apostle.

Paul was greatly disturbed by this news. As you read this letter you can see that he is moved and agitated to the utmost. Listen to some of the expressions he uses. In verse eight of the first chapter we read,

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. {Gal 1:8 RSV}

Or, to put it bluntly, as Paul actually said, "let him be damned." And he repeats it again: "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be damned," {cf, Gal 1:9b RSV}. He was not merely hurling acrimonious challenges or insults here. He was simply facing the fact that anybody who comes with a different gospel has already damned himself. He hasn't found the truth. Those apart from Christ are accursed, as the apostle makes clear not only in this letter, but in many others.

At the close of the letter his emotions are stirred again and he is greatly concerned about these people who are preaching circumcision and the bearing in the flesh of the marks of the Law. He says,

I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! {Gal 5:12 RSV}

Literally, he says, "let them emasculate themselves!" Since they are so zealous in trying to get some mark in the flesh on you," he says, "I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves!"

You can see now some of the fire that flashes throughout this letter. The apostle is deeply disturbed. He is wearing his war paint and wastes no time with pleasantries or personal greetings. He moves right to the matter at hand with vigor and vehemence. He can't even wait for his secretary.

As he tells us in the later part of the letter, he painfully scratches it all out in large letters, in his own handwriting, despite his poor eyesight.

What is the theme of the letter? What has him so upset? This is the theme of Galatians:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. {Gal 1:3-4 RSV}

What has disturbed him is that this perverted gospel, this legalistic approach to Christianity is concealing the two great truths that are inherent in the gospel – the true gospel:

- First, Christ gave himself for our sins: that is justification.
- Second, he gave himself to deliver us from this present evil age: that is sanctification.

All of it is by grace and not by works. It is the assault upon these truths that has so deeply disturbed the apostle. He knows that anything that challenges them is a false gospel that will lead its victim into heartache, bondage, desolation of spirit and ultimately to spiritual death. So he is disturbed.

Let's take a more detailed look at these two great truths which provide the basic outline of the letter. In the first four chapters he handles the great matter of **justification by faith**. Christ died for our sins. He gave himself for our sins. That is, of course, the basic declaration of the gospel, the good news that Christ has borne our sins. That is always good news. Therefore Paul spends the first chapter defending this good news.

1. First he shows that it was revealed by Jesus Christ directly to him. He didn't get it from any man, not even from the apostles. Christ himself appeared to him and told him this good news.
2. Second, it was acknowledged by the other apostles as being the same that they had received.

This, by the way, is one of the answers to what is called *hyper-dispensationalism* in our day. There are certain persons who claim that Paul had a different gospel than Peter, James, and John and the others – that his gospel is superior to theirs. But Paul himself in this letter says that when at last, fourteen years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem and had an opportunity to compare notes with the other apostles, they were amazed to discover that this man, who had never been a part of the original twelve, knew as much about the truth of the gospel as they did. In fact, he knew what went on in the secret, intimate gatherings that they had with the Lord Jesus Christ. You can see an example of this in First Corinthians, where the apostle is speaking of the Lord's Supper. He says,

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, ... {1 Cor 11:23-24a RSV}

How did Paul know that? Well, he said, "I received it from the Lord Jesus." When Peter, James and John heard that this man knew as much about what went on in that upper room as they did, they recognized that here indeed was a man called of God. His apostleship rested upon that fact.

3. Third, it was not only revealed to him by Christ and acknowledged by the other apostles, but it had been vindicated when Peter came to Antioch. Peter, the one who was supposedly the head of the apostles, was in error in Antioch. You can read the story in Chapter 2. The difficulty was over the matter of eating kosher versus Gentile foods. Peter had been a Jew, raised to eat nothing but kosher foods, but when he became a Christian he ate with the Gentiles and thus indicated the liberty that he had in Christ. But then, when certain men came down from Jerusalem, he began to compromise and went back to eating only with Jews, thus denying the very liberty that he had formerly proclaimed. This is what stirred Paul up and he withstood Peter to his face. Think of that! This maverick

apostle challenged Peter to his face. He vindicated the gospel as he did so.

Then he goes on to show us:

- First, that the gospel is salvation by faith and not by works. The gospel is of salvation by faith in the work of one who has already done it all, not by the works that we ourselves employ.
- Second, it was by promise and not by Law. Abraham was given the promise four hundred years before the Law was given. The Law, therefore, cannot change the promise. The promise of God stands true whether the Law comes in or not.
- Further, he shows that those who are in Christ are sons, not slaves. They are no longer servants but they are part of the family of God. In this connection he deals with the great allegorical passages concerning Hagar and Sarah, the Law and the mount of grace (Jerusalem above). From these passages he declares the great fact of justification by faith.

Now all that is wrapped up in that little phrase, “who gave himself for our sins.” Jesus Christ has paid the price himself. He didn't send an angel...

No angel could our place have taken,
highest of the high tho' he.
The one who on the cross was forsaken,
was one of the Godhead three.

It was this truth that delivered the soul of Martin Luther. More than 450 years ago the monk of Wittenberg strode up and nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the castle church and thereby began what we call the Protestant Reformation. Here was a man who had tried his very level best to find his way to heaven according to the pathway of works. He had done everything the church of his day suggested. He had tried fasting, indulgences, the sacraments, the intercession of the saints, penances, and confessions. He had endured long night vigils and heavy days of labor. He had done everything he could, but the harder he worked, the more his inner distress increased.

Then, absolutely desperate, he went to the head of the Augustinian Order, of which he was a monk,

and asked for some kind of release. The dear old man, not knowing very much, told him all that he could. He said, “Put your faith not upon yourself but in the wounds of Christ.” Then a dim ray of light began to break through into Martin Luther's soul. But it wasn't until he was in his little room in the tower preparing lectures on the Psalms for his students that the full light began to break. He was struck by a verse in the Psalms that said,

in thy righteousness, deliver me! {Psa 31:1 RSV}

This gripped Martin Luther's heart because the righteousness of God was to him a terrible thing – that unbendable righteous judgment by which God would destroy everyone who failed in the least degree to measure up to the full expectation of the holiness of God. Luther said that he even hated the word “righteousness.”

But then, as he began to investigate the word, it led him to the Epistle to the Romans where he read the words, “the righteous shall live by faith,” {Rom 1:17b}. That struck fire in his heart and he saw for the first time that another had paid the penalty. Christ himself had entered the human race and borne the guilt of our sins so that God might, in justice, accept us – not on our merits, but on his. When that truth broke upon Martin Luther's heart, he was never the same man again. It led him to challenge the system of indulgences and all the other legalistic bondage of the Roman Church and caused him at last to nail the Theses to the door.

It is interesting, as someone has pointed out, that every single religion known to man is a religion of works – except the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

- Hinduism tells us that if we renounce the world and relate ourselves to the “spirit of the universe,” we will at last find our way to peace.
- Buddhism sets before us eight principles by which man is to walk and thus find himself on the way to salvation.
- Judaism says we must keep the Law absolutely and inflexibly and then we will be saved.

- Islam says that a man must pray five times a day and give alms and fast on the month of Ramadan and obey the commands of Allah. All are ways of works.
- Unitarianism says that man is saved by having good character.
- Modern humanism says salvation is by service to mankind.

In every case salvation is said to be achieved by something *we have to do*. But the good news of the gospel is that ***Christ has done it!*** He alone has done what no man can do for himself and thus has set us free.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the apostle turns to the second and equally important aspect of this great truth, summarized in these words in Chapter 1, Verse 4:

to deliver us from the present evil age, {Gal 1:4b RSV}

Christianity is not merely going to heaven when you die. It is also living now, in this present life. It is being set free from the controlling bondage to the world and its ways, its evil and wickedness, in our life now. It is to be delivered from this present evil age right now. This too is by the gift of Jesus Christ. Here again the apostle waxes hot upon these Galatians. He said earlier, "Oh, you foolish Galatians" {Gal 3:1a RSV}. "You simple minded people. Do you really think that you can begin in the Spirit and then proceed by means of the flesh and in that way accomplish your profession? Why, it is all of faith, all by the power of God that the Christian life is led."

He goes on to develop this theme, showing that the gospel of liberty in Jesus Christ, the life of freedom, must neither be lost through legalism nor abused through license. It certainly doesn't give us the right to do anything we like, any way we like. That is bondage just as much, but merely of another sort. True freedom is to be expressed in loving service for one another. This is truly life.

All legalists sum up their faiths essentially in the following way: They say that:

SINCERITY + ACTIVITY = LIFE

You can test any religious experience in the world by that measure and, unless it is the gospel of the grace of God, you will find that what it says, in one way or another, boils down to that. "Sincerity (that is 'faith') plus activity equals life as God intended it to be lived – salvation or whatever you want to call it." But the truth is quite the opposite. It is that

LIFE + FAITH = ACTIVITY

That is an entirely different thing. We work, not in order to be saved, nor to be blessed by God, but we work because we share the life of Jesus Christ in us.

Galatianism is still found today even though we are not likely to be asked to be circumcised or to observe the Sabbath. (There are groups who do this, but, essentially, this is not a common danger to us.) Legalistic ideas about keeping Lent, holy days, and rituals are better known modern forms of Galatianism, although they aren't serious threats to us either. But what we are in grave danger of forgetting is that Christ himself came to deliver us from this present evil age and that he does it by living his life in us. That is the key. We know that this age is evil. We feel its pressures to conform, to lower our standards, to believe all the lies shouted at us by TV, radio, billboards, magazines and in conversations – everywhere. The danger is that we think we can deliver ourselves from the grip of these pressures by setting up Christian programs, by filling our time with activity –

- teaching in the Sunday School,
- playing the organ,
- leading young people's groups,
- joining Christian clubs, and
- taking part in meetings.

We think that this is what keeps us free, but that is Galatianism. It is the same kind of bondage that the apostle wrote about and it will deaden and dampen the spirit of an individual and bring him into bondage just as it did in Paul's day.

Compare it with the truth that Paul declares in the last two chapters of Galatians – that Christ lives in us by the Spirit and reproduces his life in us. Therefore, the whole Christian walk is to re-

puciate the life of the flesh with its self-centeredness and to rely upon the work of the Spirit of God to reproduce in us the life of Jesus Christ. How beautifully all this is gathered up in the verse (Chapter 2, Verse 20) that is perhaps the best known of this whole letter:

I have been crucified with Christ; It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. {Gal 2:20 RSV}

The old self-centered “I”

- has been crucified with Christ so that it no longer has any right to live, and
- your task and my task is to see that it doesn't live,
 - that it is repudiated,
 - that it is put aside,

along with its determination to express what Paul calls “the works of the flesh.” See what they are (Chapter 5, Verses 19-21):

immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery [by the way, sorcery is a word linked to pharmaceutical matters, including drugs like LSD and other psychedelic substances], **enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. {Gal 5:19b-21a RSV}**

All of these ugly characteristics are the works of the flesh – the old self-centered life which, Paul declares, was judged and cut off in the cross and was replaced by the life of Jesus Christ made available to us. Therefore, dependence upon him to live in us and a willingness to let it be done, and to let him move us in the direction he desires, results in “the fruit of the Spirit” which is (Verses 22-23):

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. {Gal 5:22b-23 RSV}

Now this is where Christian liberty enters in. You haven't begun to live as God intended you to live until the fruit of the Spirit is a consistent manifestation in your life. Anything less is the bondage of legalism, with its dullness, apathy, indifference – and its death.

Then Paul concludes with his wonderful sixth chapter in which he describes how being filled with the Spirit will result in our bearing one another's burdens, restoring one another in meekness, in gentleness of spirit, not in judgment nor in harshness, in giving liberally and freely to one another's needs, and in patient continuing in well-doing – sowing to the Spirit instead of to the flesh.

Finally, the Apostle closes on one of the most personal notes in the whole New Testament. He says (Verse 11):

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. {Gal 6:11 RSV}

Painfully scratching it, hampered by poor eyesight, he says, “I don't want to glory in your flesh like these Judaizers do. They love to compel people to be circumcised because they think each person circumcised is another scalp they can hang on their belts as a sign that they have done something tremendous for God. That is not my glory.” He says, “I glory in the cross of Christ which cuts off that kind of living, cuts it right off at the roots, cuts off the ‘old man’ with all his self-seeking, ambition, and self glory. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ which crucifies me unto the world and the world unto me – that is my glory.”

Now he says, “Don't any of you write to me and tell me that what I have written you is all wrong, because I want you to know that living this kind of life has been costly. I have earned the persecution of many. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

If you challenge the world and its ways, you will find those who are resentful of the way you live and the way you think and some will be actively antagonistic. Some will be ready to burn you at the stake if they get a chance because you are defying the accepted standards of life. You are setting aside the principle upon which the world seeks to accomplish its ends. Your life is judging theirs and they resent it. But the apostle says, “It doesn't make any difference to me. I glory in the

GALATIANS: Don't Submit Again to the Slave's Yoke

Lord Jesus Christ who has taught me what true liberty is, what it means to be a son of the living God and to live my life in the freedom and the joyfulness of personally knowing Jesus himself.”

Prayer:

Our Father, how this letter challenges us in these lukewarm days in which we live, in which men and women talk much about commitment but very seldom evidence it. We pray that we may be captured by these words and see once again that life is not

worth living if it be not lived for Christ, that the deceitfulness of our hearts must be judged in the light of your word, that we not be content with mere expression but only with that which comes from the reality of your Spirit at work in us. Produce in our lives, O great Spirit of God, that blessed fruit that glorifies the Father, and deny within us and help us to repudiate that which has been crucified and set aside in Jesus Christ, that we may receive from him all that he has provided. We ask in his name. Amen.

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EPHESIANS: The Calling Of The Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle to the Ephesians is, in many ways, the crowning glory of the New Testament. But perhaps this letter ought not to be called “Ephesians” for we do not really know to whom it was written. The Christians at Ephesus were certainly among the recipients of this letter, but undoubtedly there were others. In many of the original Greek manuscripts there is a blank where the King James translation has the words *at Ephesus*; just a line where the names of other recipients were apparently to be filled in. That is why the Revised Standard Version does not say, “To the saints at Ephesus,” but simply “To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus...”

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians there is a reference to a letter he wrote to the Laodiceans. Our Bible does not include an epistle called “A Letter to the Laodiceans,” but many have felt that it is the same one we call “The Letter to the Ephesians.” The reason is that the Revelation of John (the last book in the Bible) begins with letters to the seven churches of Asia, the first being to Ephesus and the last to Laodicea.

These cities were grouped in a rather rough circle in Asia Minor, and it evidently was customary for anyone who wrote to one of the churches to have the letter sent along to each of the others in turn, continuing around the circle until it came at last to the church at Laodicea. This may account for what would otherwise seem to be a lost letter from the Apostle Paul to the Laodiceans. At any rate, this letter sets forth, in a marvelous way, what no other book of the New Testament describes so

completely – the nature of the body of Christ, the true Church.

The first four letters of the New Testament – Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians – are the development of the phrase, “Christ in you,” teaching us what the indwelling life of Christ is intended to do. But beginning with the letter to the church at Ephesus, we are to learn and understand what it means for us to be “in Christ” and to share the body life of the Lord Jesus Christ – “you in Christ.” Here is the great theme of this letter – the believer in Christ, or the nature of the Church.

Verse 3 of the first chapter is in many ways the theme of the letter – in Christ – is the key:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, {Eph 1:3 RSV}

There are many who take the phrase, “the heavenly places,” which appears several times in this letter, as a reference to heaven after we die, but if you do this, you will miss the whole import of Paul’s letter. While it does talk about going to heaven some day, it is talking primarily about the life you live right now. The heavenly places are not off in some distant reach of space or on some planet or star; they are simply the realm of invisible reality in which the Christian lives now, in contact with God, and in the conflict with the devil in which we are all daily engaged.

The heavenly places are the seat of Christ's power and glory. In Chapter 2, Verse 6 we are told,

[God] raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {Eph 2:6 RSV}

But in Chapter 3 we learn that here also are the headquarters of the principalities and powers of evil:

... that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:10 RSV}

The conflict that occurs is set forth in Chapter 6:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. {Eph 6:10-12 RSV}

So you can see that this is not a reference to heaven at all, but to earth. It is to the invisible realm of earth – not to that which you can see, hear, taste, or feel – but to that spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on all sides and which constantly influences and affects us, whether for good or evil, depending upon our willful choice and our relationship to these invisible powers. Those are the heavenly places. In this realm, in which everyone of us lives, the apostle declares that God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing; i.e., he has given us all that it takes to live in our present circumstances and relationships. Peter says the same thing in his second letter: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,” {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}.

That means that when you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord, you have already received all that God ever intends to give you. Is that not remarkable? The weakest believer holds in his hands all that is ever possessed by the mightiest saint of God. We already have everything, because we have Christ, and in him is every spiritual blessing and all that pertains to life and godliness. Thus we have what it takes to live life as God intended. Any failure, therefore, is not because we are lacking any-

thing, but because we have not appropriated what is already ours.

This, of course, eliminates any foundation for the notion of a “second blessing,” or a third, or a fourth. It is all here, now! There will be blessing after blessing as you take them, one by one, moment by moment. That is the import of the hymn, “Jesus, I am resting, resting” – every moment receiving from him all that he is – resting in his power, resting in his life.

The apostle develops the theme of this epistle for us with six wonderful figures of speech, by which we learn that the Church is the whole body of Christ. But I find that when you approach the subject from that angle, it is difficult for people to grasp the significance of the truth in this letter. We all have the tendency to think of ourselves as somewhat remote from the Church. Every now and then someone comes to me and says, “The Church ought to do so-and-so.” I reply, “Well, you are the Church; go to it.” The fact that they are the Church seems to strike them with a degree of amazement. Someone said to me not long ago, “The Church ought to be more friendly.” I said, “All right, you and I are the Church, let's be more friendly.”

The Church is people. Every believer is a member of the body of Christ – the Church – so I would prefer to go through this letter using not the word “church,” but “Christian,” because every believer is a small replica of the whole Church. If we understand that God lives within the Church we see that he also lives within each believer. Each one of us, as a believer in Jesus Christ, is a microcosm of the whole body. We can, therefore, go through this whole epistle relating what Paul says not to the Church, but to each one of us, as individual believers.

In the first figure, the apostle refers to the Church as **a body**:

... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The first chapter is entirely devoted to the wonder and amazement that we normal, ordinary, sin-possessed human beings should be called by

God in a most amazing way – reaching back even to before the foundation of the earth – to become members of that body. It is a tremendous declaration. The Apostle Paul never got over his amazement that he – bowlegged, baldheaded, despised by many, regarded with contempt in many circles – was nevertheless a member of the body of Jesus Christ, and was called of God before the foundation of the earth and given such tremendous blessings that he was equipped for everything that life could demand of him. That is what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

Now what is the purpose of the body? It is to be “the fulness of him who fills all in all” {Eph 1:23b RSV}. In other words, it is the expression of the head. That is what your body is for. It is intended to express and perform the desires of the head. The only time that a healthy human body does not do that is when some secondary nervous center is artificially stimulated.

You know, for instance, that if you hit your knee in the right place with a hammer, your leg will kick up in the air without your even willing it. Even if you choose not to kick, it will still react. I sometimes wonder if some of the activity of the Church can be ascribed to a sort of reflex movement – the body acting on its own without direction from the head.

At any rate, the function of the body is to express “the fulness of him who fills all in all.” What a mighty phrase that is! Do you ever think of yourself that way? Do you ever dare think of yourself the way God thinks of you – as a body to be wholly filled and flooded with God himself?

Next, Paul refers to the Church as **a temple**:

... in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:21-22 RSV}

Here is a holy temple. One of the greatest things taking place in the world today is the growth of this building that God has been erecting through the ages. When all the worthless products of human endeavor have crumbled into dust; when all the institutions and organizations that we have built have long been forgotten, the temple which God is erecting will be the central focus of attention

through all eternity. That is what the passage implies. Furthermore, he is building it now, using human building-blocks; shaping them, edging them, sandpapering them, preparing them just as he desires, putting human beings into this temple where he wants them. Why? What is his purpose for you, and his purpose for the whole temple? It is as Paul says – to be the home of God, the dwelling place of God. That envisions and includes everything which we understand by the word home.

When my family and I come back from a long trip, as soon as we get home, we take off our coats, stretch out, and make ourselves at home. We all say how great it is to be home. But what is it about our home that makes us feel that way? Isn't it that at home we can relax and be ourselves? That does not mean that when we are away from home we are something other than ourselves, but we are always somewhat restrained. While at home, we can be all that we want to be – just relaxed and ourselves. That is what God is building the Church for – to be the place where he can be what he wants to be in you, fully relaxed and all that he is, in you. That is why he is calling you and building you.

The third chapter introduces the third figure. Here we learn that the Church is **a mystery**, a sacred secret:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; [Here is the mystery:] that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:8-10 RSV}

There are wonderful intimations here – that God has had some secret plans at work through the centuries which he has never unfolded to anybody. But he has had a goal and a purpose in mind that he intends to fulfill, and the instrument by which he is doing it is the Church. This is something we can never fully grasp, but it involves the education of the whole universe. Paul is saying that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God – the multitudinous aspects and facets of God's wisdom – will now be made known to all the principalities and powers that inhabit the heavenly places, the invi-

ble realm of reality anywhere and everywhere, in all ages. The education of the universe is the purpose of the mystery.

In Chapter 4, now, the apostle uses still another figure:

... and put on the new nature [the King James Version says, “the new man”] **created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.** {Eph 4:24 RSV}

The Church is a **new man** because every Christian in it is a new man. This is linked with Paul’s word in Second Corinthians:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old had passed away, behold, the new has come. {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}

The present creation, which began at the beginning of the heavens and the earth, has long since grown old and is passing away. The world with all its wealth and its wisdom belongs to that which is passing. But gradually through the centuries God has been building up a new generation, a new race of beings, a new kind of man which the world has never seen before – better even than Adam. In Romans we learn that all we lost in Adam we have gained back in Christ and more, much more! {See Rom 5:15-17 RSV}. Here is revealed a race of beings of which the world has never before dreamed.

Also in Romans the Apostle Paul says that the whole creation is standing on tiptoe (that is the literal meaning), craning its neck to see the manifestation of the sons of God, the day of the unveiling of this new creation (Rom 8:19). But remember, this new creation is being made right now, and you are invited to put on this new man, moment by moment, day by day, in order that you might meet the pressures and problems of life in the world today.

That is why the Church is here. The Church is a new man, and the purpose of the new man is to exercise a new ministry. In this same chapter of Ephesians, we read,

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. {Eph 4:7 RSV}

This new man in each of us has been given a gift that we never had before we became a Christian. Our job, our reason for existence – the reason Jesus Christ put us here on earth and leaves us here – is that we might discover and exercise that gift. I do not know of anything more important than this. The reason why the Church has flagged and faltered, failed and lost, is that Christians have lost this great truth which each one receives directly from the Lord. That includes us all, from the youngest to oldest, who know Jesus Christ. The risen Lord has given a gift to you, just as the man in the parable gave the talents to each of his servants, entrusting them with his property until his return. And when he comes back, his judgment will be based on what you did with the gift he gave to you. That is the exercise of the new man.

Chapter 5 introduces still a different figure for the Church; we learn here that the Church is a **bride**:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25-27 RSV}

And then quotes the words of God in Genesis:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.” This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church. {Eph 5:31-32 RSV}

The Church is a bride. And it is to be a bride for the enjoyment of the bridegroom. Paul says Christ’s intention in preparing the Church as a bride is that he might present it to himself. Isn’t that what every bridegroom desires – that his bride shall be his? During their early days of courtship she may go out with some other fellows, but when they are engaged she is promised to be his and they are both waiting for the day when that can be realized. Then at last the day comes when they stand before the marriage altar and promise to love and honor and cherish one another until death shall part them. They then become each other’s – she his and

he hers – for the enjoyment of each other throughout their lifetime together. Now that is a picture both of the Church and the Christian.

The Christian is to be the bride of Christ, for the Lord's enjoyment. Do you ever think of yourself that way? That concept helped revolutionize my own devotional life when it dawned upon me that the Lord Jesus was looking forward to our time together, and that if I missed it, he was disappointed. I realized that not only was I receiving from him, but that he was receiving from me, and that he longed and yearned for me. When I met with the Lord after that it was with a new sense that he loved me and delighted in our time of fellowship.

The last picture of the Church in this epistle is as **a soldier**:

Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:13 RSV}

What is the purpose of a soldier? It is to fight battles, and that is what God is doing in us now. He has given us the great privilege of being the battlefield upon which his great victories are won.

That is the essence of the story of Job. This dear man was struck without warning by a series of tragedies. All in one day he lost his possessions one by one. Finally he lost his entire family, except his wife. He didn't understand what was happening, but God had chosen Job to be the battlefield of a conflict with Satan. God allowed Satan to go to the utmost limit in afflicting Job's physical body. In addition, his mind was troubled; he could not understand what was happening. But when the battle was over God greatly blessed Job, and has used him mightily to teach the people of God in all ages that trials and difficulties are not always for the sufferer alone, but are a means by which God wins mighty victories against the unseen powers. We are called to be soldiers who have learned how to fight.

In his first letter John writes to his young Christian friends,

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:14 RSV}

That is, you have learned how to fight – how to move out, how to throw off the confusing restraints of the world, how not to be conformed to the age in which you live – and to move against the tide, against the current, thus greatly glorifying God.

I love the story of Daniel who, as a teenager, was a prisoner in a foreign land. He was exposed to a pagan environment and had to fight the battle day by day, counting time after time upon God's faithfulness to keep him when everything was against him. The pressures brought to bear upon him were almost incredible. But again and again Daniel and his friends met the tests and won the battles and carried on. Toward the close of the book Daniel was sent a visitor, the angel Michael, who told him some tremendous things. Daniel was allowed to see down the stream of time well beyond our own day. Yet when the angel first appeared to him, Daniel was greatly troubled. He fell upon his face, his knees shook, and he was fearful and afraid of his holy visitor. But the angel said to him, "O Daniel, man greatly beloved ..." {Dan 10:11b RSV}, "Fear not," {Dan 10:12b RSV}. Why was he beloved? Because he was a faithful soldier.

This is the privilege to which God is calling us in this day of world unrest and distress. God is calling us to be soldiers, to walk in the steps of those who have won the battle before us, having been faithful unto death if necessary.

This is the privilege of those who are called and equipped with every spiritual blessing, so that there might be

- a body,
- a temple,
- a mystery,
- a new man,
- a bride, and
- a soldier

for Jesus Christ. That is quite a calling!

The exhortation, then, of this letter is contained in just one verse, in which Paul says,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, [writing this letter from prison] beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ... {Eph 4:1 RSV}

EPHESIANS: The Calling of the Saints

Do not lose sight of what God is doing. The world cannot see it. It has no idea what is taking place. But you know, and you can see it, so do not lose heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this reminder, from the pen of your faithful apostle, of the character of the world in which we live,

and the nature of the battle which we fight, and the glory of the calling which we have. We ask that you will make us faithful – faithful to the end, faithful unto death if need be. And may all the pressures be met by the answering power of the Lord Jesus himself, the Son of God, who dwells within us and makes his home in our hearts. What a precious fellowship this is. In Christ's name, Amen.

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The Message of Philippians

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter to the Philippians has been called not only the tenderest letter that Paul ever wrote, but also the most delightful. It brims over with expressions of praise, confidence, and rejoicing despite the fact that this is one of Paul's prison epistles, written in Rome during his first imprisonment.

You can find the background for this letter in the closing section of the book of Acts, and also in Chapter 16, which tells of Paul's visit to Philippi and the founding of the church to which he later wrote this letter. You may remember reading of those exciting and danger-filled days when Paul and Silas were in Philippi together. They first met a group of women who were having a prayer meeting by the riverside, and to these women they spoke the gospel. One of them, Lydia, a seller of purple goods (one who dyed garments for royalty and the wealthy), invited them into her home, and her name has been known throughout the centuries because of her kindness and hospitality to the apostle. In Lydia's home the church of Philippi began. Paul's preaching throughout the city stirred up a great deal of interest and reaction. Finally it aroused the resentment of the rulers and he was thrown into jail. It was on that occasion, when he and Silas were locked in stocks down in the inner prison with their arms and heads held immobile, that an earthquake shook the prison, toppled the walls, and released the prisoners, setting them free. Then the Philippian jailer came running in and fell down before the apostle. Thinking his life was forfeit because the prisoners had escaped, he cried out in those words that have been the subject of so many gospel sermons,

“Men, what must I do to be saved?” {Acts 16:30b RSV}

The apostle's answer was brief and to the point,

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” {Acts 16:31b RSV}

Paul later went on to the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and other places in Greece. But now as he writes to the Philippians, he is in Rome, a prisoner of Nero. Although he is allowed to stay in his own rented house, awaiting trial before the Emperor Nero, he is chained day and night to a Roman soldier. Paul knew his life could easily be forfeit when he appeared before Nero. And yet this epistle glows with radiance and joy, confidence and strength. It is a great encouragement to any downcast or discouraged heart to read this letter to the Philippians. If you are going through times of pressure and trial, I urge you to read this little letter. It will encourage you greatly, especially if you remember the circumstances out of which it comes.

The letter is divided into four chapters which represent, for once, natural divisions within the text. The subject or theme of this letter is Jesus Christ and his availability for coping with the problems of life. The church at Philippi to which Paul wrote was not beset with serious doctrinal problems but only the normal, usual problems of everyday, commonplace existence – Christians who did not get along with one another, and incipient divisions within the church created by certain persons who were trying to mislead others with ideas not quite in accord with the Christian faith. To

deal with these problems, Paul designed this epistle as a guide for ordinary living. It faces the normal problems a Christian has, and proclaims the victory which a Christian can appropriate in overcoming these problems. The recurring theme, running throughout the letter, is that of joy and rejoicing. Repeatedly the apostle uses phrases like, "Rejoice, and again I say rejoice, rejoice in your sufferings, rejoice in your difficulties." This becomes, then, a letter in which we are instructed how to live victoriously and joyously in the midst of the normal difficulties of life.

The four chapters present Christ in four different aspects. The themes are caught up for us in four key verses that appear in these chapters.

He is presented in Chapter 1 as our life – **Christ our life**. I think you will immediately recognize the key verse of Chapter 1. It sets forth this idea that Christ is our life. In Verse 21 the apostle says,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. {Phil 1:21 RSV}

I think often times we read that verse as though it were the cry of a man fed up with life, who could hardly wait to get to heaven, who had 'had it.' He was in difficulty with pressures and problems and he just longed to go to heaven and get away from it all – sort of a Christian escapism. We usually put the emphasis at the end of the sentence, "to die is gain." I think this reflects a very common attitude that we Christians sometimes have – that we would like to get away from it all. We do not like living life the way we have to live it, and we look longingly to heaven and sing songs like *Sometimes I Grow Homesick for Heaven*. But that is not what Paul is saying at all. If you look closely you will see that he is really saying, "I don't know which to choose. To me to live is to have Christ and to die is to gain heaven, but if I had to choose, I don't know which I'd choose. To live is to experience Christ who is my life. Thus life is continual adventure and excitement and I can hardly wait to live it." This certainly indicates that he was not fed up with life at all, nor was he discouraged because of his circumstances. The entire context of the passage confirms this. Writing to these Philippians he says, "Don't be disturbed about me, brethren. You hear that I'm in prison, but let me tell you some-

thing. My circumstances have served to advance the gospel, and my imprisonment has made it possible for the gospel to be spread in Rome as it never has before. And I'm not discouraged; I'm rejoicing. Furthermore, the other Christians in Rome are stirred up and are preaching around the city," {cf, Phil 1:12}.

An unique evangelistic enterprise was occurring, the like of which has perhaps never been seen before or since, and he tells them what it is. God had designed a plan for reaching the Roman Empire that Paul never dreamed of. And do you know whom he made head of the arrangements committee? Nero, the Emperor! Paul tells us in Verse 13,

... it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; {Phil 1:13 RSV}

If you read between the lines, you can see what was happening. Nero, the Emperor, had commanded that every six hours one of the finest young men in the whole Roman Empire, from the elite who constituted his personal bodyguard, would be brought in and chained to the Apostle Paul in order that Paul might instruct him in the things of Christ. Isn't that amazing? One by one they were coming to Christ, and there was being formed a picked band of young men, the very keenest, most intelligent, finest and strongest young men of the empire. If you do not believe that, look at the last chapter of the letter, where in the next to last verse he says,

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. {Phil 4:22 RSV}

Now isn't that a unique plan for evangelizing the Roman Empire? But that is the kind of God Paul had, and that is why he could say, "To me, to live is Christ. I don't know what he is going to do next but this is exciting, this is adventurous, and to step out into the daily adventure of a new experience with Jesus Christ captivates me. I don't know which to choose, whether to live this exciting life or to die and be with him." Now that is what life in Christ means.

We know that Christ died for us, but it was in order that he might live in us. The experience of the outworking of Christ's life in us is what turns life on, and makes it a vital, glorious experience. You cannot read the first chapter of this letter

without seeing how thoroughly the Apostle Paul had discovered this. Even as he contemplates appearing before Nero he says,

For I know through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. {Phil 1:19-20}

What had made the difference? This man had found the secret that God intended for humanity – God indwelling man. It takes God to be a man. And no life is complete that does not have God in it. Paul had found this out, to the glory of his day-by-day existence, and he never forgot it. He lived life to the fullest in the knowledge that Christ is our life.

In Chapter 2 he applies this secret in a different way. Here he deals with the problem of the disunity which was threatening some of the saints at Philippi. The fact was that certain ones among them were quarreling, and there were divisions within the body of the church. This is constantly happening in almost any church. People get irritated with each other; they get upset by the way other people do things; they do not like the attitude that someone displays, or his tone of voice. Then cliques and divisions, which are always destructive to the life and vitality of a church, tend to develop. So Paul points out to these people that **Christ is our example** in settling difficulties and problems. The key passage that sets this forth begins in Chapter 2, Verse 5,

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus. {Phil 2:5 RSV}

That sounds strange, doesn't it, "Have this mind which you have?" What he means, of course, is that you have the mind of Christ, since you have Christ. All right, let it be expressed. Allow it to come forth. Let it show itself. And what is the characteristic of this mind? Paul goes on to tell us,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, {Phil 2:6 RSV}

The phrase *to be grasped* means "to be held onto at all costs." He did not count the fact that he was equal with the Father – one with God the Father and God the Spirit, one of the three persons of the triune God – a thing to be held onto at all costs. Think of that! The greatest relationship that could possibly be true of any being or person was his. But rather than clutching it to himself,

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. {Phil 2:7-8 RSV}

That was the self-condescension of Jesus Christ. It was the emptying out of all that he held of value in his life. And this, says Paul, is the mind of Jesus Christ. In your quarrels, one with another, have this attitude toward each other. Do not hang onto your rights at all costs. How apropos this is in these days, when we hear so often about clinging to "my rights" and that we should insist upon "our rights." How different is Christ's example!

In this connection I can never forget the incident that Dr. H. A. Ironside used to relate. When he was a boy of only eight or ten years of age his mother took him to a business meeting of Christians. Two men were having a quarrel – he didn't remember what it was about – but one of them stood up and pounded on the desk, and said, "I don't care what the rest of you do, all I want is my rights." Sitting in the front row was a dear old Scottish man, somewhat hard of hearing, who cupped his hand behind his ear, leaned forward, and said, "Aye, brother, what's that you say? What do you want?" The fellow said, "Well, I just said that all I want is my rights, that's all." And the old Scot replied, "Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? If you had your rights, you'd be in hell. The Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights, he came to get his wrongs. And he got them." The fellow who had been bickering stood transfixed for a moment. Then he sat down and said, "You're right. Settle it any way you like." And in a few moments the argument was settled. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who gave up his rights, and humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. But don't stop there. What was the result?

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:9-11 RSV}

When he gave up his rights, God gave him every right in the universe. He put his problem in God's hands, and God the Father vindicated him. This is what Paul is saying to quarreling Christians – give up your rights. Don't insist on them. He says, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves," {Phil 2:3 RSV}.

The opening words of Chapter 2 are his practical application of this truth:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. {Phil 2:1-2 RSV}

Paul goes on in the rest of the chapter to show that when anyone decides to do this, God will be at work. It is God who works in you, he says, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" {Phil 2:13b RSV}. Paul closes the chapter by mentioning two of his co-workers who exemplified these very attributes, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy was faithful, and Paul says of him,

I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, ... {Phil 2:20-22a RSV}

Epaphroditus had come from these saints at Philippi and had brought a gift from them to Paul, and then had fallen desperately ill. They had heard about his sickness and were troubled. Paul says that they were right to be concerned, as he was very ill, but that God had had mercy on him and now he was sending him back to them. He says,

So receive him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such men, for he nearly died for the

work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me. {Phil 2:29-30 RSV}

He gave up his rights. Have this mind which is in you – Christ's mind, Christ's example.

I think that if we would put that admonition into practice we would be different people. There would be no quarreling within churches and no divisions among Christians.

Chapter 3 sets forth Christ again, this time as our confidence – **Christ our confidence**, our motivating power. He is the One who moves us to want earnestly what we ought to want and who makes us confident that it can be achieved. I do not think there is any quality in life in more desperate demand than confidence. Who is not looking for motivation? All the courses on personality buildup are designed to try to give us the spark that energizes, that motivates us, that makes us want to do what we ought to do and would like to do. All this, the apostle says, we find in Jesus Christ. He is the motivator. Paul puts it strongly in the well known Verse 10 of Chapter 3,

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, ... {Phil 3:10a RSV}

For contrast he outlines the things that motivated him and gave him confidence, or rather, a false sense of confidence before he became a Christian. In Verse 3 he describes Christians as those who should worship God in spirit, glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. But that is the problem with us. We are constantly trying to build up confidence in the flesh – in the principle of self-effort. That is the philosophy underlying all the personality buildup courses – Dale Carnegie, the Powers Girls, and all the others – an attempt to teach us confidence in the flesh. Paul lists the training that he had had in that. He tells those who think they have reason for confidence in the flesh to look over his qualifications. "These," he says {cf, Phil 3:4-5 RSV}, "are the things in which I had pride and confidence: first, in my ancestry – I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" – an absolute Boston blueblood. You can't beat that for ancestry. Furthermore, he says, "I was proud of my orthodoxy – as to the Law, a Pharisee, the strictest sect of my religion. I

was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. And then I was proud of my activity – as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church. And then of my morality – as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. But now,” he says, “whatever these things were to me, I count everything as loss because I have found that Christ could be my confidence. All the confidence I once got from these secondary sources I found to be of absolutely no value compared to that which Jesus Christ gives. And in resting upon his life in me, I have found so much more, that now all these other things are but dross, but dung, but refuse compared to what Christ gives” {cf, Phil 3:6-8 RSV} – Christ our confidence.

In the latter part of Chapter 3 he sets in contrast those who seek secondary values in the guise of religion. He says,

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. {Phil 3:19 RSV}

But on the contrary, those whose confidence is in Christ do not end with this life, but we look for a city, a commonwealth which is in heaven and from it we await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, to change our lowly bodies to be like his, by the resurrection power which enables him to subject all things to himself.

Then in Chapter 4 you see Christ not only as our motivator, but **Christ our strength**, our energizer. Not only does he move us to want the right things, but he makes it possible for us to do them. He provides the dynamic that fulfills the desire. It is mental torture to give a person great desire but then not to give him the ability to fulfill it. That is a certain recipe for frustration. So the apostle closes with the declaration that Christ gives complete fulfillment. He supplies our strength as well as our desire. In Verse 13 he declares:

I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:13 RSV}

How practical some of these things can be is demonstrated in the context.

First there is the problem of getting along with others. There were two ladies in the church at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche. We know they were ladies because in the Greek the form of their

names is feminine. (Of course, you all remember the story of the man who couldn't quite pronounce these names but read them this way, “I entreat Odious and I entreat Soontouchy to agree in the Lord.”) Unfortunately we still have in our churches odious people and soon-touchy people – those whose feelings get hurt very easily and those who delight in hurting others' feelings. But the apostle says, “I beseech you, be of the same mind in the Lord,” {cf, Phil 4:2 KJV}. How? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” {Phil 4:13 KJV}. That is the secret.

And then there is the matter of worry.

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. {Phil 4:6 RSV}

What a recipe for peace in the midst of anxiety!

How many have tried it and found that it works? Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything – there is a counteraction proposed. Do not just sit there and fret or turn your mind off. Do not suppress your anxieties. Pray to the Lord about them, with thanksgiving, and leave them with him. And the peace of God, which you will never be able to understand – where it comes from or how it gets there – will possess your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, {cf, Phil 4:7}. Christ is our strength.

Finally there is the matter of poverty. Paul says,

Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. {Phil 4:11-12 RSV}

And he passes it on to the Philippians.

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. {Phil 4:19 RSV}

Christ our strength.

This letter embodies the secret of a man who ran the full course, who fought the good fight, who kept the faith. This is his explanation of how he did it. We who live in this 20th century – with its

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perils and problems, its frustrations, its anxieties, its pressures – need to discover and understand this because we have the same One indwelling us who indwelt the Apostle Paul:

- Christ is our life;
- Christ is our example;
- Christ is our confidence; and
- Christ is our strength.

Prayer:

And now, our Father, we ask you to grant that these words will take root in our hearts and lives. May we be not merely hearers

of the word but doers also. Keep us from deceiving ourselves and going away from here having heard these great truths but unwilling to do them. Grant to us that we may begin at whatever level we find ourselves, whether we be young or old, in school, at home, at work, or wherever we are. Make us ready to test these promises, to step out on these mighty truths, and discover with the Apostle Paul the joy that floods the heart of someone who experiences Christ as a living Lord, and the one who can help us to live a daily adventure of new discovery with him. For we ask it in his name, Amen.

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COLOSSIANS: Power to Endure with Joy

by Ray C. Stedman

Most of the letters that Paul wrote to the churches were written to those that he had started himself. But he did not begin the church at Rome, nor did he begin the church at Colossae. It is not certain who started the church at Colossae, but it is very likely a man mentioned in certain of Paul's other letters -- Epaphroditus, or, since that was too long a name for even the Greeks to say, Epaphras. He is mentioned in this letter as being from Colossae, and is very likely the one who founded the church. Where he had heard the Gospel we do not know, but he had evidently taken it to his own home town and had begun to proclaim Christ. Out of that proclamation had come the church at Colossae.

Epaphroditus had gone to Rome to see the Apostle Paul, who was then a prisoner, carrying with him reports of the church at Colossae. Another man had also gone to Rome to see Paul during his first imprisonment, and he too brought reports of the church at Colossae. So it was to these new Christians who had never met the apostle face to face that Paul wrote the letter from Rome.

It was written at about the same time as the letter to the Philippians, and you will notice that it is very similar in its structure and content to the letter to the Ephesians. They were probably written at about the same time, during Paul's first imprisonment, and are therefore called the Prison Epistles of the Apostle Paul. The primary difference between the Ephesians and Colossians is that the Colossians had a problem, and it is on

this problem that the apostle is primarily focusing. They were on the verge of losing their understanding of the power by which Christian life is lived. Therefore, this letter is the great proclamation and explanation of the power of the Christian's life through Christ as the resource of the individual.

The theme of this letter can be expressed by these words which are part of the apostle's introductory prayer for the Colossian Christians:

May you be strengthened with all power [that is why he wrote the letter], **according to his glorious might** [that is the subject of the letter to the Colossians]. {Col 1:11a RSV}

Since Paul had never been to Colossae, he begins the letter with certain references to himself as an apostle and with greetings to these people, with thanksgiving for the faith that he has heard is prevalent among them, and for their love and joy and for other evidence that these people have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and have been radically transformed.

That is always the mark that the apostles looked for. Whenever they heard of other Christians they expected to hear that something had happened to them, that they had become a different kind of people, that they weren't going on, as many Christians attempt to do today, utterly unchanged in their attitudes or their outlooks. But to the first-century Christians, becoming a Christian meant a radical transformation, resulting from a revolutionary

change of government. This was evident in these Colossian Christians. Now the apostle writes to them and thanks God for what he has heard about them. He comments upon their faith and then prays for them. This prayer is one of the most refreshing and delightful prayers in the New Testament (1:9-12):

From the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the lord, fully pleasing to him, hearing fruit In every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share In the inheritance of the saints in light. {Col 1:9-12 RSV}

Beginning on that note then, he sets forth for them the source of all power in the Christian life -- Jesus Christ himself.

One of the strongest and most glorious proclamations concerning his essential deity is found in this passage (1:15):

He is the image of the invisible God, {Col 1:15a RSV}

An image is an exact expression. He is declaring here that in the man Jesus we have the exact expression of all that God is. And furthermore, he is,

the first-born of all creation; (Col 1:15b RSV)

Perhaps you have had the experience of finding a couple on your doorstep with little green books under their arms, announcing themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses and asking if they may come in and tell you the truth about life and the Bible. If you let them in, sooner or later they turn to this passage to show you that Jesus Christ was not God, but he was essentially a creature -- the highest of the creatures of creation -- and they use this term the first-born of all creation to bolster their argument. They say that this means that Jesus was the first one ever created. (There is, of course, a sense in which this word first-born does have that meaning. In referring to our children, we say that the oldest one is the first-born because he or she appeared

first on the scene.) That is one of the slick devices by which the cults propagate their errors. It is very subtle because it seems to be logical and scriptural.

But what they are doing is giving the term a modern meaning, which is quite different from the usage in the New Testament. Here, the word "first-born" means the heir, or the chief -- the principal one, the owner. This phrase, "the first-born of all creation," means that the Lord Jesus stands in relationship to creation just as an heir stands in relationship to his father's property. He is not part of it, but rather, he is the owner of it, the heir.

This term is used in various ways in the Old Testament. There are two specific instances where the one who is born second is the first-born of the family. In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, Ishmael was born first, but Jacob was the first-born. So you see, Jesus was not the first one of a line of creation, but the heir of all creation -- the owner of it. And this fits with what the apostle goes on to say (1:16):

In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. {Col 1:16 RSV}

If you look carefully at the Jehovah's Witnesses' little green translation of the Scriptures, you will notice that in order to substantiate their lie about Jesus Christ, they've inserted the word "other" in these phrases. "All other things were created by him. In him all other things were created." But there is absolutely no warrant whatsoever in the Greek text for the insertion of the word "other." This is a clear instance of the kind of deceitfulness to which these people will stoop in order to propagate their lies.

Now here is Paul's great declaration. Here is the Lord Jesus. He is declaring him to be the creator. The One who flung all the worlds into being, who was present with God (and who was God) when the great words went out, "Let there be light; let the earth bring forth," and all the other great declarations of creation that are recorded in Genesis. It was the Lord who did this, and, furthermore, as Paul goes on to say (1:17):

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. {Col 1:17}

Now it is one of the puzzles of science why things hold together. We know that everything we can touch is made up of tiny atoms that consist of electrons buzzing around a nucleus. And anything that rotates or revolves has a force that projects outward -- centrifugal force. Therefore, things ought to be blowing up. Because of this centrifugal force, every atom ought to be flying apart. Well, what holds it together? Science cannot answer. Scientists say it is an unnamed force. That always interests me, because it reminds me of Paul's experience in Athens when he found the people worshipping an unknown god. It is the unknown God that science is struggling with today: his name is Jesus of Nazareth. By him are all things held together, and all power in the natural world comes from him.

But further, the apostle says (1:18):

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead. {Col 1:18 RSV}

Twice he uses this term, the first-born. He is the first-born of the old creation; he is the first-born of the new creation -- the resurrection -- the first-born from the dead. Now that does not mean that he was the first one ever to be raised from the dead, because scripture records others who preceded him. But he is the One who is the heir, the Lord of all the new creation. He is the head of the new creation, as the apostle tells us, and we are part of a new body, the new race of men that God is forming through the centuries, and of that body, Jesus Christ is the head. From him, then, flows all power -- resurrection power.

It is my increasing conviction that the problem with most Christians is that they do not understand what the Bible teaches about resurrection power. If they had any idea what this power is like and how it operates, and the areas and situations in which it is intended to operate, they would never again live as they live now. They would be entirely different. I do not mean that they would be dazzling people, making great displays of power and moving mountains. It does not take resurrection power to do that.

Resurrection power is quiet. It is the kind of power that was evident in the Lord Jesus. It was

not the fact that he came from the tomb that dazzled the eyes of the soldiers there, nor that produced the earthquake. He came from the tomb absolutely without a sound. The stone was rolled away, not to let him out, but to let people in, so they could see that the tomb was empty. There was no sound, no demonstration. There was the quiet, inexorable power of a risen life which no mechanical or natural power can possibly resist. This is what God has released to us. A (quiet power that changes hearts and lives and attitudes, making everything over from within. That is resurrection power. It flows to us from the head of the new creation, the risen Christ, the source of all power.

Now Paul goes on to show who are the intended recipients of this power (1:21-22):

You -- who were estranged and hostile in minds, doing evil deeds... {Col 1:21 RSV}

That includes us all, doesn't it? We all belong in this category. And we are the ones through whom this power is now to operate.

... he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, {Col 1:22 RSV}

Then Paul gives us the demonstration in his own life of this power. He says that God called him and set him up in the ministry to proclaim a mystery, and he tells us again what it is (1:25-27);

... to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations ... {Col 1:25b-26a RSV}

You will not find it explained in the Old Testament. It was experienced there, but it was never explained.

... but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, {Col 1:26b-27a}

What is it?

Christ in you, the hope of glory. {Col 1:27b RSV}

Christ living in you. This is the supreme declaration of the Christian church. You have

never preached the Gospel until you have told men that not only will their sins be forgiven when they come to Christ, but that he, himself, will live within them -- to do through them everything they are expected to do. He died for us, so that he might live in us. This is the full glory of the Christian Gospel.

Now notice how Paul experienced this. He says (1:28-29):

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy... {Col 1:28-29a RSV}

Where does the energy come from? This amazing apostle, with his indefatigable journeying night and day, through shipwreck and hardship of every kind, working with his hands, laboring, traveling up and down the length and breadth of the entire Roman empire, is ceaseless in his endeavors. Where does he get the energy? Would you like to know? He says (1:28-29):

... striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires with me. {Col 1:29b RSV}

Christ in you! The hope of glory. Now that is why I say if Christians would begin to understand what it is that God has made available to them, they would never be the same again. We would never have to plead with people in the church to take on needed enterprises, ministries, or teaching Sunday School. We would not be met with the excuse, "Oh, I just don't have the strength to do it. I don't have the energy." You see, here is a source of energy, Paul says, that is constant and consistent and which flows through him, created by the Spirit of God indwelling him. As he saw the task, he moved to meet it with energy which God gave. That is resurrection power.

Now, in chapter two, we have the warning against certain false powers which would woo us away from the true power Christ has given us. These warnings are as valid and relevant today as they were when Paul wrote them. Certain things among men are always regarded as sources of power. If you can obtain these, you can be a powerful individual; your personality will be strong and radiant. You will be a dynamic leader of men. You have seen

advertisements in which this kind of language appears; "For just ten dollars you'll get a course that will transform you within fifteen days into a dynamic leader. You'll never be the same again."

There are many more subtle approaches offering us power, but they all come largely through the three avenues outlined here by Paul. First of all, though, he reminds us of the glory of Jesus Christ (2:3):

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. {Col 2:3 RSV}

We have all that it takes to live life in him, and in verse six he says,

As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, {Col 2:6 RSV}

You have got what it takes, now live it out, let it show.

... rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. {Col 2:6b RSV}

Have you ever read that verse before? Abounding in grumbling is the way it sounds to us, sometimes, doesn't it? But Paul says, abounding in thanksgiving. Now what robs us of that? Well first, the idea that power comes from human knowledge. Verse 8:

See to it [says the apostle] that no one makes a prey of you [literally, kidnaps you] by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. {Col 2:8 RSV}

I do not know how many instances of this kind of kidnapping I have seen, or how many failures of faith on the part of young people going to college to study. Young people who have been raised in Christian homes, but who have been exposed to the wily, subtle teachings of human wisdom, have lost their faith and turned away from the things of Christ, often going off into wild and riotous living. Why? Because no one warned them, or else they did not heed the warning to avoid being made a prey of human knowledge. Now this sounds, at first, as though the Gospel is anti-intellectual. But the Bible is not against knowledge. It is against

knowledge that does not come under the judgment of the Word of God.

The apostle analyzes what is wrong with human knowledge. There are many things that are right. There is much truth in what man has discovered through the centuries. This we must readily admit. But Paul points out first that the source is suspect, because it comes from tradition. Tradition is the gradually accumulated body of knowledge built up bit by bit through the centuries and passed along from one generation to another. Consequently, human knowledge is made up of great quantities of truth mingled with error, with no way of distinguishing between the two. Those who accept it uncritically are bound to accept as much error as they do truth. It will lead them, therefore, into mistaken concepts and erroneous and injurious ideas.

In the second place, he says, human knowledge is according to the elemental spirits of the universe. What does that mean? Paul is referring here to the dark powers that, as he brings out in other letters, govern the minds of men, darken their intellects and limit their understanding. Human knowledge, then, is essentially rudimentary. That is, it is elementary. It stays on the periphery of truth, never getting to the real heart of things. That is why you can have a university community, saturated with the highest exponents of human knowledge, and yet filled with vileness, corruption, unrest, distress, with a high suicide rate and evidences of decay and deterioration on every side. Human knowledge does not go to the heart of things as the Word of God does. The two compliment each other, but there must be a critical evaluation of the words, as they are subjected to the wisdom of God.

The final objection Paul makes is that it is not according to Christ. Therefore, human wisdom lacks the ability to insert the great positives into life. It is essentially negative. It does not produce the qualities of love, truth, joy, peace and power that come only from Jesus Christ.

He shows us, then, that the answer to the lure of human wisdom is the judgment of the cross. The cross has delivered us and cuts us off from trust and admiration for human wisdom as such. We are brought to the place where we can judge these things and see their moral values properly in the light of the Word of God.

Paul goes on to indicate another false source of power, which also leads many people astray (verses 16-17):

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. {Col 2:16-17 RSV}

In that same vein he continues in verse 20:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch [referring to things which all perish as they are used], according to human precepts and doctrines? {Col 2:20-22 RSV}

What false source is this? It is the power that supposedly comes from a dedicated zeal for God. It manifests itself in the keeping of days and special feasts and regulations and ascetical practices -- flogging the body, wearing a hair shirt, laboring long hours out of zeal for the cause. All these things look like sources of power. Sometimes we cannot help but admire the zealotry of individuals who get themselves all wrapped up in a cause. But, says the apostle, they are tricking themselves. They do not discover real power (verse 23):

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, {Col 2:23a RSV}

There is a kind of false humility that is produced by this kind of behavior. It extracts a grudging admiration from us, but look what the apostle says:

... they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. {Col 2:23b RSV}

You see, you can wear a hair shirt and be filled with lust. You can beat your body black and blue and still be guilty all the time of thinking lascivious thoughts. These things provide no check to the indulgence of the flesh. Therefore, there is no power here to lead the kind of life that we must live.

Now he mentions a third source of false power (verse 18):

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind. {Col 2:18 RSV}

What does he mean here? We are hearing a lot about this these days. If you get in touch with the invisible spirits, you will have power. If you contact the dead, and get messages from them, you will have an unseen source of power which will enable you to live as other people cannot live. These Colossians were troubled with these influences as we are troubled with them today. We are seeing a great increase on every hand of this turning to the occult -- to astrology, to the black and devious arts, to magic, to seances. All of this is a satanic substitute for the power of Jesus Christ -- the indwelling power of Christ.

Now, in chapter three, the apostle turns to the true manifestation of power and how to lay hold of the power of Christ (verses 1-2):

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth. {Col 2:1-2 RSV}

That does not mean that we should go around constantly thinking about heaven. There is nothing super-pious about this. He is simply saying, "Don't let your desires and your attitudes be governed or directed by desires for earthly fame or power. Instead, let your desires be shaped by the word of God." We are to have a desire to exhibit love, truth, faith, and patience -- the qualities that mark the life of the risen Lord. That is what he's talking about. We are not to go around thinking about heaven all the time. We are to go around manifesting heaven in the situations in which we find ourselves.

Paul gives us the recipe for doing this:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; {Col 3:5a RSV}

God has already sentenced it to death on the cross. When it manifests itself in you, treat it like that -- as under the sentence of death from God. He goes on to list these earthly things:

... immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, {Col 3:5b RSV}

And then he moves over into our area:

... now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foolish talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, (3:8-9a RSV)

Put these away. That is step number one. Step two is in verse 12:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together. {Col 3:12-14a RSV}

What does he mean by this? That we try to imitate Christ in this respect? Oh no. You see, he has already told us that Christ dwells in us. Having him there, he says, now deliberately let these things be manifest in you. Deliberately set yourself to manifest these characteristics of his life. Count on his life in you to make them real and not phoney -- genuine, authentic manifestations of his life. The apostle lists certain areas in which these are to be made manifest:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, ... {Col 3:18a RSV}

Husbands, love your wives, ... {Col 3:19a RSV}

Children, obey your parents ... {Col 3:20 a RSV}

Fathers, do not provoke your children... {Col 3:21a RSV}

Slaves, obey ... your earthly masters, ... {Col 3:22a RSV}

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, ... {Col 4:1a RSV}

And he concludes with these practical admonitions:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also, ... {Col 4:2-3a RSV}

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, ... {Col 4:5a RSV}

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, ... {Col 4:6a RSV}

In the last section of the letter there are simply some personal greetings from men who are with Paul. These men, too, are demonstrations of the power of an indwelling Christ at work. He concludes the letter, as was his custom, by taking the pen in his own hand and writing:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you. {Col 4:18 RSV}

Now I want to return once more to that verse in the first chapter which is the key to this letter:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, ... {Col 1:11a RSV}

That is tremendous, isn't it? You want that, don't you? Christ's power, Christ's life, manifested in you. What do you want it for? So you can dazzle everybody? So you can go around performing miracles, doing startling things that will get your name in the paper? Is that why? Read what Paul wants you to have it for:

... for all endurance and patience with joy, {Col 1:11b RSV}

Underline those words. That is where resurrection power is made manifest. The world cannot produce that kind of living. It does not know how to take trials with a smile, to endure hardships with faith and patience and joy. As far as the world is concerned, this takes an unknown kind of power the power that is resident only in Jesus Christ. This power will transform our hardships and our difficulties into joyful experiences, not just phony manifestations of joy. They are genuine. We learn things from these trials. If our heart is right with Christ, if we are putting off the old and putting on the new we discover that these experiences, instead of producing grumbling, griping, and complaining provide a basis for joy, as we are "strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might."

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this first-century book that speaks to our twentieth century lives, and shows us that not one thing has changed. Not one thing in our world is different from the world these early Christians faced. Not one thing is different about our relationship to Jesus Christ. We, too, can live as they lived, in joy, gladness and thanksgiving in the midst of this life. We pray that we may discover this truth by acting upon these admonitions which Paul has given us. We pray in Jesus' name Amen.

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THE MESSAGE OF FIRST THESSALONIANS

by Ray C. Stedman

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is also the first letter the apostle wrote. It was written to a struggling, yet vigorous church that was only a few months old, made up of Christians who had just come to Christ under Paul's ministry. This is a delightfully revealing letter, showing the heart of the apostle toward these new Christians, and also showing the struggles that were present in the early church.

We sometimes get very distorted conceptions of these early Christians; there's a tendency to regard them as always triumphant, always waging the battle with vigor, and always winning great victories in Christ's name. But they also had very severe problems, some of which are reflected in this letter. It was written about 50 A.D., and may well be the first part of our New Testament to be written. Most scholars feel that the gospels were written about this same time or shortly afterward, though some hold that the gospel of Matthew, and perhaps of Mark, appeared about 43 or 45 A.D. At any rate, this letter is at least one of the earliest Christian writings.

The account of Paul's founding of this church is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. After he and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi because of their preaching of the Gospel, an earthquake shook down the prison doors and freed the prisoners. Paul was then freed by the Roman magistrates, and he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica. Many of the places where Paul preached have crumbled into ruin, but Thessalonica is still a thriving, bustling

metropolis. It was then the capital of Macedonia, but it is now in Greece proper, and is called Thessalonike.

From the account in Acts, we learn that Paul had only been there about three weeks when persecution began and he had to leave the city for his own safety. He went down to Athens and from there he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how these Christians were doing. He was very disturbed about them; he felt that perhaps the persecution they were undergoing would drive them from their faith.

He went on to Corinth where he founded a church after several months of difficult labor. After some time, Timothy returned to him at Corinth, bringing word of how the Thessalonians were doing, and of some of the problems they were facing. As we read this little letter through, we can recognize them as the kind of problems that we also face.

For one thing, wherever the Apostle Paul went, he was hounded by a group of Jews who spread the rumor that because he was not one of the original twelve, he was not a genuine apostle. This was not only a problem for Paul, but also for the Thessalonians. Furthermore, the pagans of Thessalonica were severely persecuting the Christians -- threatening them, and taking away their property -- so these early Christians, perhaps only three or four weeks old in the Lord, were called upon to endure hard things for the cause of Christ.

In that city, as in all the Greek cities, sexual promiscuity was common -- was even regarded

as a religious right -- and to live a life of chastity was to be regarded as a freak. Therefore, as is the case today, there was great pressure upon these new Christians to fall into line with the common sex practices of their day.

Then the major problem of this church was that the second coming of Jesus Christ was greatly misunderstood. The apostle had evidently told them something, but they were confused about this, which produced another grave problem. Some of them were expecting Christ to come back so imminently that they had actually stopped working and were waiting for him to come. Since they weren't earning a living, somebody had to take care of them, and they were leeches on the rest of the congregation. Also, there were tensions developing between the congregation and the church leaders which needed some admonition to settle, and finally, there were those who were somewhat indifferent to the Holy Spirit's work among them, and to the truth of God as it was being proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Do those problems sound familiar? We can consider ourselves in very similar circumstances as this church at Thessalonica. The letter itself divides simply into two major divisions. In the first three chapters the apostle is just unloading his heart to them concerning his relationship to them, and this is followed by a very practical section with advice on how to behave in the midst of the pressures in which we live.

In this first section Paul pours his heart out for these early Christians. He is afraid they might have misunderstood his leaving Thessalonica, as though he had abandoned them to persecution, so he reminds them that he had just come through a terrible time of persecution himself in Philippi, and that his own heart was deeply concerned for them. The key to this is in the very beginning:

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope ... {1 Th 2-3a RSV}

Those three things marked these Thessalonian believers -- their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance in hope. These are detailed more clearly farther down, in the latter part of verse nine, where we read, "how you

turned to God from idols" {1 Th 1:9b RSV}-- that was the work of faith; they turned to God from these pagan idols they were worshipping, and "to serve a living and true God" {1 Th 1:9c RSV} -- that was their labor of love; they became an available instrument for the love of God, and third, "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." {1 Th 1:10 RSV}. And there is the expression of the patience, waiting in hope for his Son from heaven.

Now interestingly enough, those three things also form a little outline, built right into the text, to guide you in understanding the first three chapters. The work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope -- chapter one, chapter two, chapter three.

We might say of these early Christians, "they dropped out, tuned in, and turned on." They dropped out of the stream of society, the world in which they lived, (not out of contact with it: in fact, they spread the Gospel through the whole area); they dropped out of the attitudes, the power structures, and the values of the world in which they lived. And they tuned in to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and received the word.

Here the apostle is reminding us that the word he spoke was not the word of men: it came "not only in word," he said, "but also in power and in the Holy Spirit." {1 Th 1:5b RSV}. And they turned on, as they waited with expectation for the coming of the Son of God. They had a reason for living, they had a purpose, and they had a hope in the midst of the hopelessness around them.

An archaeological excavation team, working in this very city of Thessalonica, has turned up an ancient, first-century graveyard. And there among the pagan tombstones they found one which was inscribed in Greek with these words: "No Hope." But here, in a church in the midst of that city, there were those who had found the endurance based on hope; they were looking for the coming of the Son of God. That is what keeps the heart calm in the midst of perils and persecutions. That is what makes it possible to watch the world apparently coming apart at the seams and maintain quietness; God is in control, and he knows what he's doing. And thus Paul

encourages these Thessalonians with these words.

Chapter two is a wonderful description of the labor of love -- not their labor, this time -- but Paul's, and here you have a marvelous description of his ministry (Chapter 2:9-12):

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. {1 Th 2:9 RSV}

... for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. {1 Th 2:11-12 RSV}

And they did that, for he says (verse 14):

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; {1 Th 2:14a RSV}

This is the service, the labor of love.

Chapter three is an account of how Paul sent Timothy to them, and Timothy brought back word of the persecution they were undergoing, and yet of their steadfastness in the midst of it. And there is a wonderful description of the patience of hope, permitting them to endure difficulties with joy.

Chapters four and five, the practical section of this letter, are divided into four brief sections which take up the problems that were confronting this church. The first exhortation the apostle gives is to live cleanly in the midst of a sex-saturated society. These words have great importance to us who have to live in the same kind of society today, and he begins by reminding them that he had taught them how to live (verse 1):

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. {1 Th 4:1 RSV}

He had not taught them, as many people think Christianity teaches, that they ought to live a good, clean life. Buddhism teaches that. And most other faiths teach that you ought to live a moral life. But that alone is not what Christianity says; it teaches you how to live a good, clean life! And Paul reminds them that he had taught them "how to please God."

Now, what is it that pleases God? What one quality of life is essential to please God? Faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. A life of expectation that the God who lives in you will manifest his life through you is the kind of life that pleases God. It isn't a life of your efforts, struggling to live up to a standard that you've imposed upon yourself, or someone else has imposed upon you. It is a life in which you are constantly dependent upon the one who indwells you, to keep you able to do and to be what you ought to be.

This kind of life results, then, in a purity that is practiced. If Christians are practicing impurity, that is a clear revelation that they are not practicing a life of faith. But purity practiced is the sign of the principle perceived. Paul says,

For this is the will of God, [even] your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; [that is the will of God]that each of you know how to take a wife for himself [possess his vessel, literally, or possess his body] in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. {1 Th 4:3-8 RSV}

It is very clear, isn't it? We are told how to live cleanly.

The second problem he takes up is the matter of living honestly, in verses 9 through 12 of chapter four. They are to show love toward one another, and the practical manifestation of that is for every man to get busy and work with

his hands and not have to depend upon somebody else for support; rather,

... to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands...so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody. {1 Th 4:11-12 RSV}

That's practical, isn't it?

Now in verse 13, we come to the major problem this book addresses -- the misunderstanding about the coming of the Lord. These Thessalonian Christians had gotten the idea that when Jesus Christ returned to earth the second time to begin his millennial kingdom, those who were alive when he came back (and they were expecting him within their lifetime) would enter with him into this kingdom. But they were deeply troubled that those who had died in the meantime would somehow miss the benefits and the blessings of the millennium.

Now this probably arose because of a misunderstanding of the doctrine of resurrection. They were thinking in terms of one resurrection, a single event which would come at the end of the millennium, when the dead would be raised -- the good and the bad alike -- to stand before the judgment seat of God. And there are passages, of course, that do speak of a resurrection to come at the end of the millennium. But Paul points out that the resurrection does not proceed as a single event, but that groups of believers are resurrected at various times. Notice his argument:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, [that is, who have died] that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. {1 Th 4:13-14 RSV}

In other words, these who have died are going to be raised again; and they'll come back with Jesus when he comes to establish his millennial reign.

Well, this presents another problem. How is it that they are going to come back with him bodily when their bodies have been placed in the grave? What reassurance can they have on this?

"Ah," says the apostle, "let me give you a revelation from the Lord":

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord [this is an authoritative revelation] that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, [the presence of the Lord] shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. {1 Th 4:13-18 RSV}

In other words, there is an aspect of the Lord's coming, before his coming to establish the millennium reign. He is coming for his people, he is coming to gather those who are his to be with him, in his presence (parousia in Greek), before his return to establish the kingdom. The 'coming of the Lord' here does not refer to the 'second coming' of Christ. And at the time of this parousia the dead in Christ will be raised, so that we all will be with him when he's ready to establish his kingdom. So you see how this answered their problem? They need not grieve over those who have died; they'll actually precede those who are alive when the Lord comes for his own.

Now between that parousia the Lord's coming to establish the kingdom, we learn from other passages of Scripture that there will probably be about a seven year period. In the meantime the great tribulation occurs, and Paul now goes on to speak of this as he continues in the next chapter. He says to them,

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. {1 Th 5:1-2 RSV}

Nobody can set a date for this event. It's going to come suddenly, quickly, and when the Lord comes in the parousia two great chains of events will be initiated. The Lord will begin one series of events in which all believers will be

caught up to be with him, and at the same time, he will begin another series of events on earth known as the great tribulation, or in the Old Testament, "the day of the Lord."

Now there are two "days" we need to distinguish in Scripture: the day of the Lord, and the day of Christ. They both begin at exactly the same time, but they concern two distinct bodies of people. The day of Christ concerns believers, while the day of the Lord refers to what is happening to unbelievers during this time. And it is my personal conviction that when the Lord comes for his own, and the dead in Christ rise -- when we who are alive are caught up with them to be with the Lord -- that we don't leave this planet at all. We stay here with the Lord, visibly directing the events of the tribulation period as they break out in great judgmental sequences upon the ones who are living as mortals upon the earth -- the scenes that are vividly portrayed in the book of Revelation.

Now the apostle says to them that no one knows when this is going to happen:

When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. {1 Th 5:3-4 RSV}

It will surprise the people of the world like a thief, but it needn't surprise you like a thief, because you are looking forward to it -- you ought to be expecting it.

For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. {1 Th 5:5 RSV}

Therefore, what should be the practical result? Well, don't go to sleep as others do, but keep awake and be sober. Don't act as though everything is going to go on as usual, but be aware of what God is doing and act accordingly. Remember these signs that Jesus gave that indicate the close approach of these events; these ought to make us aware that it is time to give ourselves more than we ever have before to the work of God. Paul says,

... keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day,

let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. {1 Th 5:6b-8 RSV}

Now he's not talking about salvation from hell: he's speaking here of the salvation which is to come; that is, salvation from the wrath of God during the time of the judgment. He goes right on to say,

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep [whether we live until the coming of the Lord, or die beforehand] we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. {1 Th 5:9-11 RSV}

How completely he answered their problem! They did not need to be discouraged, or frightened, or distressed, but they could go on about their business, confident that God was in charge of affairs. And although times were difficult, they could busy themselves about the work of the Lord, knowing that they were only investing themselves in a certain future.

The last section speaks not only of living confidently, but of living peacefully in the midst of these conditions:

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. {1 Th 5:12-13a RSV}

There was some friction that was developing towards some of the church leaders, and Paul says, remember that these men are concerned about your soul's welfare, and although they may have to speak rather sharply at times, it's not because they want to hurt you, but to help you. Therefore, remember that and live at peace with them, and esteem them, and love them because they are concerned about you.

And furthermore,

Be at peace among yourselves, {1 Th 5:13b RSV}

and he gives some practical exhortations as to how to do that:

... admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. {1 Th 5:14b RSV}

And most important,

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. {1 Th 5:15 RSV}

That is probably one of the most frequently broken commands in Scripture. When somebody does something to us, what do we say? "Wait 'til I get even with you!" "I'm going to pay back if it's the last thing I do!" And yet, this is the very attitude which the Scriptures denounce as worldly thinking, outside of the grace and truth and love of Jesus Christ.

Then there are these beautiful verses,

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. {1 Th 5:16-18 RSV}

And after various other admonitions, his final prayer for them is beautiful:

May the God of peace himself [dwelling in you] sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23 RSV}

What a wonderful letter this is! And all of this was addressed to new Christians, yet the apostle expected them to lay hold of these truths. In order to grow, there must be, as Jesus said, a constant hungering and thirsting after more; "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied," {Matt 5:6 RSV}. And it is this that the world is waiting to see, especially in these last days.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, in many ways we recognize the days in which we live as very similar to the days in which this letter was written; yet from our vantage point of twenty centuries away, we can see that although their hopes burned brightly for the coming of the Lord, then, they were a long way from the goal. But how much more surely are these promises true for us; how much more certain can we be that we are in the days in which our Lord is moving world events to presage his coming! Lord, help us to walk in the light of this, as we've been exhorted and admonished by the Apostle Paul, earnestly and soberly, intelligently giving ourselves to first things first. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

2 THESSALONIANS: Restrainers of Lawlessness

by Ray C. Stedman

Before Jesus Christ left this earth he said that he would return, but that before his return there would be a time of difficulty and widespread lawlessness. The seams of society would come apart, and disorders, violence, and riot would be so widespread that men's hearts would literally fail them for fear of the things that were coming on the face of the earth. And Jesus predicted the character of the age that would follow his ascension into heaven, and said that it would culminate in a time of great tribulation "such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be," {Matt 24:21b RSV}.

Now when Christians of Thessalonica were going through their time of trouble, many of them thought they were in that time of tribulation. It was to respond to this question that Paul wrote this second letter. In the first letter, he wrote to comfort them in their distress over their loved ones who had died, but this letter is written to correct certain misunderstandings they had about the "Day of the Lord," and this time of trouble.

There are three chapters in this little letter, and each one is a correction of a very common attitude that many people still have about disturbing times. The first chapter is devoted to a correction of the attitude of discouragement in the face of difficulty. These Christians were undergoing persecutions and afflictions and although they were bearing up with good grace, nevertheless, many of them were getting discouraged. "Why try any more?" they were saying; "There's no justice. Everything is always against us."

And to counteract that attitude, the apostle reminds them that the day when God would repay them for the difficulties they were going through was coming. Paul says (1:5-10):

This [your steadfastness] is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering – since indeed God deems it just to repay [or to recompense] with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. {2 Th 1:5-10 RSV}

Although we in this country have not gone through much in the way of persecution, there are other parts of the world where intense persecution breaks out from time to time. If we lived in one of these places or times, we would appreciate the meaning of these words. Paul is reminding these people that God has not forgotten them – that he is going to straighten things out at last. When people go through a time of great persecution, they say, "Isn't there going to be a time when this injustice is corrected? How can a man like Hitler get by with putting six million Jews to death? Won't things ever get straightened out?"

And Paul says, "Yes, a day is coming when a three-fold repayment will be made."

1. First, to these believers who are undergoing such difficulty, the very trials that they're undergoing, Paul says, are making them worthy

of the coming kingdom of God. That aspect of suffering is what makes us able to take it. It puts strength in our muscles and sharpens our moral equipment so that we're able to endure.

2. And then, he says, there will be a day of recompense to the "unbelieving." There will come a time when God will set them straight, when those who have misused their opportunity of service in life will face a righteous judge who knows their hearts. His vengeance will have two aspects – destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord.

Hell is often pictured as a fiery furnace where people are dragging around in chains, being continually burned and never being able to do anything about it. The Bible does use some symbols of hell that reflect that idea, but hell is really exclusion from the presence of the Lord. God is the source of everything that is good – beauty and truth, life and love, joy, peace, grace, strength, forgiveness. All those things come only from God, and if a man won't have them, then God finally says to him, "I've been trying my best to get you to take these, but if you won't have them, then you must have your own way." And they are shut out from the presence of the Lord. And if they're shut away from the source of all goodness, then what's left? The opposite – darkness and death. That is what they had been dishing out, and that is what they will finally obtain. God will let them have their own way, and when they get it, it will be the last thing they want.

3. And then the Lord himself will be repaid on that day. He will come, Paul says (1:10):

... to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, {2 Th 1:10b RSV}

Notice that he doesn't say he is going to be glorified *by* his saints. But as the world sees the wisdom and the might of the God who can take a self-centered human being, full of anxieties and fears, and teach him how to walk in quietness and joy, rid of his guilt and his fears – a man as God intended a man to be – that is the greatest display the universe will ever see. And that glorifies God!

In Chapter 2 you have another reaction to disturbing times – fear. We read in these opening words (Verses 1-2):

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, [really, the word is *troubled*] either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. {2 Th 2:1-2 RSV}

These people had evidently received a letter from somebody signing Paul's name, telling them that in this terrible time of trouble all they had to look forward to was worse times. But Paul says, "don't be shaken in your mind." Literally, don't be shaken out of your wits by what's happening.

I think many of our young people today are fearful, and striking out against society because they don't know that God is in control of events.

"Well," Paul says, "in my last letter, I wrote to you about our gathering together unto Jesus. The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout and the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will be raised, and we who remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. That's our gathering together unto him," {cf, 1 Th 4:16-17}.

But now he says that the day of the Lord, this terrible time of judgment, is not the same as our gathering together unto him. But having introduced the subject of the day of the Lord, he goes on to tell them what it will be like and how they can tell it's coming. (2:3):

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, {2 Th 2:3a RSV}

I don't like that word, *rebellion*. Literally translated, the word means "the departure" which of course could mean a departure from the faith, and thus, a rebellion. But I think it means the departure he just talked about – the departure of the church behind the scenes to be with the Lord in his second presence on earth.

And then he says (2:3-4):

and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. {2 Th 2:3b-4 RSV}

Now this is an amazing passage. When Jesus was here, he offered himself to the Jewish people as the promised Messiah, and most of them rejected him, so that John begins his gospel by saying, “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not,” {John. 1:11 RSV}. Jesus also had said to them, “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” {John 5:43 RSV}. Thus he painted the picture of one who would appear to be a deliverer to the world, whom Paul calls the “man of lawlessness” and “the son of perdition.” This character would be an utterly godless individual, and yet so remarkable that people would actually accept him as a divinely empowered being who could deliver them from their difficulties. (It is very interesting that statesmen, historians, politicians, and others are saying repeatedly today that we need a single worldwide leader who can unite all the various world forces, and bring us out into harmony and peace.) And he will be manifest, says Paul, in the temple of God.

When Paul wrote this letter, in about 52 A.D., the temple in Jerusalem was still standing, but in 70 A.D. it was destroyed, and there has never been a temple in Jerusalem since. In some way, however, the Jews will find a way to reconstruct another temple on the site in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock is now. And it is in that temple that Paul says “the man of lawlessness” will take his seat.

Paul has a further comment on the subject (2:5-8):

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed. {2 Th 5-8a RSV}

There was something at work which he called the mystery of lawlessness. One thing that has

puzzled statesmen all through history is that they can never solve the basic difficulties of the human race. Why is it that we can come to a certain point in building good government, with widespread blessing and help for all, and then it all seems to crumble and fall apart? This has been the pattern of history. General Carlos Romulo, who was the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, said, “We have harnessed the power of the atom, but how can we bridle the passions of men?” That is the problem – this lawlessness, this spirit of rebellion against authority which is always the greatest danger to any nation.

But Paul says that something is restraining it. Something through the course of the centuries has been restraining lawlessness, preventing total anarchy. And Jesus told us what that is; he said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth; ...” {Matt 5:13a RSV}. “You are the light of the world,” {Matt 5:14a RSV}. Salt prevents corruption from spreading: light dispels darkness, and it is the presence of the people of God on earth that restrains the forces of evil. This is a remarkable thing, yet it is the truth. Wherever godliness diminishes – sometimes because of forces within the church as well as without – a spirit of lawlessness takes over.

But Paul says here that the restraint is going to be taken out of the way, and then the whole flood of human evil will be let loose upon the earth. And when that happens there will come the greatest time of trouble the world has ever seen. Yet, Paul says, it will come to an end (2:8-12):

The Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. {2 Th 2:8b-12 RSV}

This is the characteristic of the spirit of lawlessness – deception – and it must, and will, be destroyed by the coming of Jesus, the Son of Man who destroys the destroyer of earth.

Chapter 3 deals, finally, with the conduct of these believers in the face of difficulty and pressure. Paul was correcting here a third very widespread attitude that many have in times of difficulty – what we might call “fanaticism.” There were certain people in Thessalonica who were saying, “Why not just wait until he comes? Why should we concern ourselves about making a living? Let’s just live and enjoy ourselves, and wait for his coming.” So Paul says to them (3:6):

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. {2 Th 3:3 RSV}

Because, he says (11-13):

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. {2 Th 3:11-13 RSV}

As we get nearer to the time of his coming, Paul says, remember that your responsibility is to keep on living normally and working with your hands, taking care of your responsibilities. The Christian life is a normal, natural life, fulfilling all the responsibilities that God places upon us. So Paul rejects the attitude of fanaticism and says that we are to give ourselves to the task that God has set before us.

In this little letter, discouragement is answered by looking to the day when God sets everything straight. Fear is answered by remembering that God is in perfect control of human events, and things will take place just as he has predicted they will take place. And fanaticism is rejected with a specific command – to be busy at the Lord’s work.

And then Paul closes with a very tender gesture. He says,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. {2 Th 3:17 RSV}

What is? The words with which he closes the letter:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. {2 Th 3:18 RSV}

And if you look at the letters of Paul, you’ll find that they all close this way. He always took the pen from his secretary and wrote in his own hand, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

The application of this letter to each individual heart is simply this: God’s people are called to be restrainers of lawlessness.

How often are you operating as a restraint to lawlessness?

The measure in which you oppose lawlessness will be the measure in which there is no lawlessness in your own heart, and your own life.

Prayer:

We thank you, our Father, for this letter that reminds us that the hope of the church has not grown dim, and that the very events which Jesus Christ predicted are finding some degree of fulfillment even in our own time, and are moving toward the predicted end. We reaffirm our fidelity and loyalty to the One who has loved us and has given himself for us, and who will come again to be acknowledged by every individual. In the hope of that, we thank you in Jesus’ name, Amen.

1 TIMOTHY: Pastor's Primer

by Ray C. Stedman

While Second Timothy represents the last word we have from the pen of the Apostle Paul, First Timothy was written a few years earlier, probably immediately after the apostle had been imprisoned in Rome for the first time. After he was released, he wrote this letter to the young man whom he had won to Christ years before when he was preaching in Timothy's home town of Lystra. Timothy was probably no more than sixteen years old at the time. He accompanied Paul on his second journey and was a faithful minister and son-in-the-faith with the apostle for the rest of his life.

This is one of three "pastoral letters" in the New Testament – letters written from a pastor's viewpoint. First and Second Timothy are two of them, and Titus is the third. In these letters, we have very intimate words from the apostle to these young men who frequently accompanied him on his journeys. I have often suspected that some of the young men who were with Paul were once members of the palace guard of the Emperor Nero. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that the gospel was reaching the palace guard, and that many of them were being brought to Christ.

But this letter was to Timothy, who by this time had served as a son in the gospel with the apostle for several years. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, and the apostle had sent him to Ephesus, the great commercial and pleasure resort on the shores of the Mediterranean in Asia Minor.

Both of these letters to Timothy reflect more than just a father-son relationship; although they have intimate remarks in them, nevertheless each one of them begins with these words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. {1 Tim 1:1 RSV}

The apostle felt it necessary, even in writing to his own son in the faith, to remind him that he was an apostle. Now surely Timothy did not need this reminder himself; he knew Paul's position well, but perhaps the apostle knew that these letters would have a wider readership than to Timothy alone. His previous letters had frequently been circulated widely among the churches.

It is therefore with the authority of an apostle that Paul begins these two letters, and what he has to say has meaning and authority in all the churches in Christendom. As we recognize that, we must take these words as having the same kind of authority for us as does every one of the other letters.

The apostles were men with a peculiar and unique ministry. Every now and then someone will refer to Paul in a disparaging way. Even Christians will sometimes say, "Well, you know, Paul wrote some things that we cannot take as authoritative. He was a confirmed old bachelor, and what he said about women is not really significant." But this is really to deny the apostolic office and to refuse the authority that the Lord Jesus gave his apostles. This is the mark of an apostle – that they were commissioned by the Lord himself, and given the task of speaking authoritatively in every area of doctrine or practice, whatever it may be.

This first letter has to do with the ministry of the church itself – its character and its nature, its function in the world. The second letter centers around the message that it has to convey – the great

theme is the gospel, and Timothy's relationship to that gospel.

There are two themes intermingled throughout this first letter. The one we will look at first is in Chapter 3, where the apostle says:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. {1 Tim 3:14-15 RSV}

Now when he talks about behaving in church, he is talking about the church not as buildings, but as people. One of the great weaknesses of the present-day evangelical life is that we still think so much of the church as a building, but the church is people, not buildings. And it was the concern of the apostle as he wrote to young Timothy that he would know how to conduct himself in the ministry and the relationships of the body of Christ, the church of the living God.

Then the second theme is found in the first chapter, where we are told,

the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. {1 Tim 1:5 RSV}

This is more personal. While the first theme is that of the church and its ministry, the second theme concerns the individual's relationship to the world and to God. As the apostle puts it, it is to be "love that issues from a pure hearts and a good conscience and sincere faith."

Now in the realm of actual experience, we begin with the last of these – sincere faith. That is the way you come into the Christian life; by believing the Word of God, and exercising faith in what he says. And that will lead you to a good conscience, derived from obeying the word. This is to be the mark of every Christian – that we obey what we believe. And that, in turn, will result in a pure heart – actually, a purified heart. None of us has a pure heart by birth; we need to be cleansed, purified by the washing of the Word of God and the cleansing of the blood of Christ. But if we have a good conscience about our faith, it will result in a pure heart, and from that pure heart will flow an unceasing stream of love.

The letter itself falls into two major divisions: the first chapter, and the last five.

In the first division we have the background of Paul's charge to his son Timothy. Remember that Timothy was in Ephesus, a city given over largely to the worship of a heathen goddess, Diana (also called Artemis), the love-goddess of the Greek world. It was Timothy's task to minister to the church that was opposing the blind idolatry, and pagan superstition of this darkened, heathen city – a formidable task.

So the first note that the apostle strikes is that Timothy is to oppose false teaching. This indicates that by now the church has begun to be infiltrated by false teachers; the early church had its share of heretics, as does the church of today. And Timothy is warned against them. He says, I left you there,

that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; {1 Tim 1:3-4 RSV}

And then he goes on to say that one of the things that was causing problems in the church was the wrong understanding of the Law. There were those who were trying to regulate people's conduct by imposing rigid regulations, to be carried through to the letter, without any understanding of the control of the indwelling life and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the wrong use of the Law.

The Law, he says, is intended for a specific purpose (and by the way, this is one of the best passages I know of to counteract the popular theory that it is perfectly proper to disregard the Law, and that we can resist certain regulations or deny them, in the name of God). Paul says that the Law is given, "for the lawless and disobedient" {1 Tim 1:9b RSV}, and he lists these: "the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers ... immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers" {1 Tim 1:9c-10a RSV}, and so forth. But if you have come to Christ, and your heart is intent upon pleasing him, you do not need the Law to keep you from doing wrong – love will do it! But only remember that love is interpreted by the Law; we understand what love is only when we see it spelled out for us in terms of the Law: thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal – these are ways of describing how love acts.

Then, the second reason Paul has for charging Timothy is his own experience of grace. Paul never forgot that he had been a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insulter of Christ. But God met him, forgave him, delivered him, and every now and then Paul breaks into a lyrical passage, like a spring of water that cannot be stopped up, expressing his love and excitement and thankfulness for the work that God has done in his life.

The rest of the letter is made up of the charge itself that the apostle has for his young son in the faith, consisting of five elements. First, there are certain instructions on conducting public worship, differentiating between the activities of men and those of women. Men, he says, are to lead out in prayer – praying for kings and for those in authority – so that we might live in peace and godliness. Then he turns to the women, and if we read this a little differently, we will understand what the apostle is saying:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should [pray] adorn themselves modestly ... {1 Tim 2:8-9a RSV}

The thought of the apostle is that women have the right to minister and pray in public as well as men, although some have misunderstood this passage. But he does include a restriction a little later:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. {1 Tim 2:11-12 RSV}

In the congregation, the idea is that women are not to teach men authoritatively. They are not to be the final word in that church as to doctrine or teaching. The apostle did not permit that, and he gives two reasons.

- First, he says, “Adam was formed first, then Eve” {1 Tim 2:13 RSV}, and,
- Second, “the woman was deceived” {1 Tim 2:14b RSV}, and therefore fell into transgression.

It is interesting to note that Eve's sin was primarily that of trying to arrive at a theological con-

clusion apart from the counsel of her husband. But the apostle goes on to show that women have a wonderful ministry, in a verse that has been somewhat garbled in translation, and greatly misunderstood:

Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she [literally, “if they,” the children] continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. {1 Tim 2:15 RSV}

Now what does he mean? Women shall be saved through bearing children? I must confess I have struggled long with this passage. There are three major interpretations of it, and I have been an adherent of all three at one time or another. But now, I think they are all wrong! I really believe we have a clue to the meaning of this troublesome passage in the fourth chapter where the apostle says to young Timothy,

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:16 RSV}

What does he mean here by “save”? Timothy was already saved; he had been a Christian for many years. And certainly other people were not saved by Timothy's obeying the truth. What does he mean, then? A resolution appears when we see that he is using the word *salvation* in a different sense than we normally think of it, and it appears in several places in Scripture in this way. *Salvation* here means “the solution to a problem.” The word is also used this way in Philippians, where it says “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” {Phil 2:12b RSV} – work out the solutions to the problems you confront with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you both the will and the doing of his good pleasure, {cf, Phil 2:13 RSV}. So here the meaning is that woman “will be saved,” in the sense that her desire for a ministry will be fulfilled – that problems will be resolved – through child bearing, if the children continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Now the apostle turns to the qualifications of church leaders, who fall into two major categories – the bishops (elders) and the deacons. Deacons and deaconesses are any who do a special task for the whole church, such as teaching Sunday school.

Those who represent the church in any outreach ministry are also deacons. And he says three things, first, about the elders:

1. They are to be “blameless,” so as to avoid being disapproved or set aside. Paul himself speaks of the possibility in his own life when he says, “I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified,” {1 Cor 9:27 RSV}
2. Second, they are to be pure; that is, they are to be men who understand how to tell the difference between good and evil, and how to apply the word so that it produces righteousness. And Paul gives this requirement of purity so as to avoid pride. The great risk in using an immature person is that he may be lifted up with pride, thus falling into the trap of the devil; pride is always a trap.
3. Third, these men were to be of good repute, to avoid public scandal which would bring the whole ministry of the church into disgrace.

Now deacons are treated somewhat similarly, but he adds one major instruction concerning them – they are first to be tested, to be given work to do on a trial basis {cf, 1 Tim 3:10 RSV}. If they perform it well, they are recognized as men and women who can be trusted with responsibility in the work of the church.

The importance of this charge is that it all relates to the fact that the church is linked with the mystery of Christ. Christ is the greatest figure in the universe – everything relates to him – and Paul uses a 1st century hymn to set forth what he means:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. {1 Tim 3:16b RSV}

That is why this charge is so important; these words must be taken with utmost seriousness because they link to this One who is the center of the universe.

In Chapter 4, quite appropriately, Paul turns to the subject of apostasy. Now apostates and heretics are different:

- A heretic is a Christian, one who basically accepts and knows the Lord Jesus Christ, but who tends to go wrong in some particular doctrinal issue.
- But an apostate has never been a Christian, although he testifies that he is.

As John tells us in his first letter, “they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would have continued with us;” {1 Jn 2:19a RSV}.

The Lord Jesus had told of the sower who went out to sow the good seed of the kingdom, and of the enemy sowing weeds in his way. And Jesus said these would grow up together until the harvest {cf, Matt 13:30}, which is why we will never get rid of the apostates within the church. Apostate attitudes arise from listening to doctrines of demons, of deceitful spirits – not merely from twisted ideas of men, but from deliberately deceitful ideas of wicked spirits who attempt to lead people astray.

Then, in the following verses, Paul says that until their apostasy becomes very, very evident, Timothy is not to excommunicate them. First, he is to inform the congregation about the truth; second, he is to set the example for them in his own personal life; and, third, he is to expound the Scriptures to them:

Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift ... which was given you by prophetic utterance ... {1 Tim 4:13-14a RSV}

This is the guarantee against apostasy – informing the congregation of the dangers, setting the example, and expounding the Scriptures.

In Chapter 5 certain specific church problems are discussed, including how to treat younger and older people within the church, and advice to women on various practical matters. Then he takes up the official problem of how to handle charges against the elders. And finally, he mentions certain personal problems that Timothy himself would encounter.

Chapter 6 goes into the matter of social problems, with a word, first, to the downtrodden and degraded – the slaves. This is a most instructive passage, to help answer some of the questions that are being flung at us from every side about how to counsel those who are degraded, and deprived of certain human rights. Paul addresses this to Christian slaves, and he reminds them that the urge to get material things can be a terrible danger to the spiritual life.

Then in a glowing and wonderful passage, he exhorts Timothy to walk honestly and steadfastly in the sight of God until the day when the Lord Jesus himself calls him home. And finally, having begun with the poor, he closes with a word to the rich, and to the learned, giving them their Christian responsibilities. They are rich, he says, because they have been blessed of God in order to help someone else, not to satisfy their own desire. They have a responsibility, he says, “to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life [right now] which is life indeed,” {1 Tim 6:18b-19 RSV}.

As he closes, Paul gives Timothy a word of warning to those who trust in human knowledge:

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. {1 Tim 6:20-21 RSV}

What an up-to-date letter this is! How thoroughly it speaks to our own time as well as to this 1st century. May God grant that we will understand it and live by it.

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Father, that we may take seriously these words from that long-ago first century. We thank you, Lord, that they come with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are designed for our times as well. Grant that we may saturate ourselves in this wise counsel so that we too may know how to behave ourselves in the church of God, which is the pillar and the ground of the truth. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

2 TIMOTHY: How Not to Collapse

by Ray C. Stedman

In the sixty-eighth year of the 1st century there was an old man in a prison in Rome – a little circular cell about twenty feet in diameter – who was writing to a young man far across the Aegean and Adriatic Seas in Ephesus, and the subject of his letter was how to keep strong in the midst of a collapsing civilization. That is the theme of the second letter of Paul to his son in the faith, Timothy. And that seems an appropriate subject for this twentieth-century hour, doesn't it?

As Paul wrote to his young son in the faith, who was troubled by a weak constitution (a weak stomach, to be exact), and a fearful spirit – a timid outlook on life – and by intense persecution and challenges far beyond his natural power to handle, Paul realized that he himself was about to depart and be with the Lord, and that he was passing on the torch to this younger man. This word from the Apostle Paul's pen is the last that we have from him, then. It constitutes his swan song, his last words of exhortation, and it is peculiarly appropriate to the hour in which we live.

The first verse catches the key of this letter:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus, {2 Tim 1:1 RSV}

Have you ever thought of the gospel, or of Christianity, that way, “the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus” – not life to come so much as life right now? It is generally agreed that one of the big problems faced by old and young alike is how to look at life. And one of the big obstacles in coming to a satisfactory view of life is that Christianity is seen somehow as a detour – that if you are a Christian, you have to give up most of the exciting things about life. But Christianity is anything but a detour around life. It is a highway right straight through the middle of it. It is the key to life; the fulfillment of the hunger and longing of

human hearts. And so, in this second letter to Timothy, the apostle is giving us this key to life.

Now he has four things that he wants to say to this young man, all of them important to him and all of them important to us. He puts them in the form of charges, or exhortations, that he gives to his son in the faith:

- The first one is, “guard the truth,”
- The second, “be strong in the Lord,”
- Third, “avoid traps and pitfalls along the way,”
- And, fourth, “preach the word.”

If I had to write to a young man today, I am sure I could never find anything better to say than those four exhortations.

In this letter the first note the apostle strikes is **guard the truth**. God has committed to Timothy a deposit of truth, which is his responsibility and Paul suggests certain ways to carry out this commission. Admittedly, this is addressed to a young man who is a pastor, the pastor of a great church in Ephesus. Timothy had the responsibility of shoring up the defenses of this church which were crumbling under the pressure of a secular society and a pagan attitude. But it is a word of advice that is needed by every Christian without exception, because to each Christian has been given the same deposit of truth – the fundamental revelation of the Scripture concerning the nature of reality: what the world is like; what God is like; what people are like; what you are like. What makes the world operate the way it does? Why does it fall apart all the time? Why is it that nothing good seems to prosper and everything evil seems to reign unchallenged? The explanation is the deposit of truth that has been given to us through Jesus Christ, and it is this that we are to guard.

Now the apostle suggests three specific ways to do this:

First, by exercising the spiritual gift that God has given to you.

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. {2 Tim 1:6-7 RSV}

If you want a more exact rendering of that verse, put it this way: “It is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity, but he gives a spirit of power and love and a sound mind.”

Someone asks me, what is going to happen in our relationships with Soviet Russia; with the Communist Chinese? What is going to happen in the Middle East? What is going to happen at election time? I do not know what is going to happen in the elections, or whether there will even be an election this year. I do not know; no one knows. But I know this, that it is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity. If we are anxious, if we are troubled, it is not from God. The Spirit of God is a spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind: a spirit of power in order to do, a spirit of love in order to react properly emotionally, and a sound mind in order to be intelligently purposeful about what we do. And the way to discover that is to exercise the spiritual gift that God has given you.

If you are a Christian, you can do something for God. You have an ability given you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, and if you are not putting that to work, you are wasting your life. It does not make any difference what you are doing, if it is not built around the exercise of that spiritual gift, it is all a waste of time, pointless, useless. And in the judgment of the Holy Spirit – the only judgment that counts – it will be counted as so much wood, hay, and stubble.

Now what has God given you to do?

Do you know? Have you found out yet?

Do you know what to look for, do you know how to find it? Find out, because in doing so you will discover that God does not give a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind. When you start exercising what God has given you, you discover that he is right with you to back it up. So that was the first word to Timothy on how to guard the truth, how to keep the faith.

A popular saying, and a book by Adam Clayton Powell, is *Keep The Faith, Baby*. I read the book, but I did not learn much on how to keep the

faith. How do you keep the faith? Well, you keep it by first exercising the spiritual gift. You see, our Christian faith is not a delicate, fragile flower that needs to be protected in some hothouse. Charles Spurgeon was exactly right when he said, “Truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Turn it loose and it will defend itself.” That is what we need to do with this truth. We do not need to apologize for it with long, exegetical arguments as to why we should believe this, or why we should believe that. Just begin to exercise it – that is the admonition.

Second, the apostle says, guard the truth by suffering patiently. And he reminds Timothy that every Christian, without exception, is called to suffer for the gospel’s sake. “Oh,” you say, “that isn’t me. I don’t suffer.” And I think sometimes we tend to feel we have been excluded from this. It may be because we always think of suffering as something physical – torture and thumb-screws and iron maidens and being torn apart on the rack, this sort of thing. Well, Christians do suffer in this way from time to time. In fact, the 20th century is the most tortured Christian century of all. Did you know that? More Christians have been put to death for Christ’s sake in this century than in any other century since the very beginning.

But the suffering that is involved here is not only physical, it is mental as well. It is the kind of suffering we endure when somebody smiles knowingly and winks at our faith, or jibes at us, or laughs at us, or excludes us from an invitation list, or treats us with considerable and open disdain or contempt because we are a Christian; someone who pokes fun at a prayer meeting, or laughs at the Bible. We are to take this patiently, says the apostle. And as we react, not with anger or with disgust or vengeance, but quietly, patiently, as our Lord did, we guard the truth.

You know, one of the reasons the gospel is not widely accepted in many places today is that Christians have been impatient in suffering, have refused to take patiently the attitude of the world in this respect. Instead they have acted offended and hurt when people have treated them poorly, or they have given up and gone along with the crowd, refusing to take suffering for the Lord’s sake. Now you cannot challenge the world in its wrongness without its being offended. And although we must challenge it in the least offensive way possible, nevertheless the Scriptures make clear that there is

constantly a place for Christians' suffering, and it is one of the ways in which we guard the truth.

The third way Paul suggests in this first chapter is to "follow the pattern of the sound words," that is, to read and trust the Scriptures. I love that phrase, "the pattern of sound words." There are so many today who are departing from the pattern of sound words. They believe that some secular writer, out of the blindness and the darkness of his own heart, has more insight into the problems of life than the Scriptures. They repeat these arguments, or live according to this philosophy, and they soon find themselves engulfed in problems – often neuroses and psychoses and nervous reactions – and they do not understand why. Why is it that our age is suffering so from such a tempest of emotional disturbance? It is because in our blindness we have refused to follow the pattern of sound words.

And so to young Timothy Paul suggests these three ways to guard the truth: exercise your gift, suffer patiently, follow the pattern of sound words, and God will see you right through,

... for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. {2 Tim 1:12 RSV}

That is the proper way to read this verse. It is not, "what I have committed unto him," (as the King James Version has it); it is, "he is able to guard ... what has been deposited with me." That is, the truth – the body of faith. And as I perform faithfully what the apostle suggests, I discover that God protects that truth in my life, and protects me in it, and thus keeps me in the faith.

The second exhortation was, "**be strong in the Lord.**" It is important to understand that you never say this to somebody unless he is capable of fulfilling it. What is the use of saying "be strong" to somebody who is a physical weakling? And when Paul writes this to Timothy he realizes that this young man understands how to be strong. You see, Paul is not saying here how to be strong; you have to get that from other Scriptures. That is simply resting, learning how to trust in the work of Jesus Christ. That is the way to be strong in the Lord. But what Timothy needed was an exhorta-

tion to do it, to actually put it into practice. And that is what we need.

I once heard a little couplet at a conference I attended that helped me a great deal. One of the speakers said this:

When I try, I fail;
When I trust, he succeeds.

I like that. That puts it exactly, doesn't it? When I try, I fail, but when I trust, he succeeds – and that is the way the Christian life is lived.

Now there are three figures the apostle uses here to describe being strong in the Lord.

First, *be strong as a soldier*. The thought here is an utter dedication to the task. No sideline. Give yourself to this so that you might please him who has called you to be a soldier. How can you follow Christ if you are involved in a lot of other aims in life? You have several conflicting purposes. No, says Paul, if you want to be strong, be dedicated as a soldier is dedicated to one thing.

Second, *be strong as an athlete*. That means discipline: no shortcuts, no cutting corners or breaking the rules. Just as an athlete is not crowned unless he observes the rules, so if you are going to be a Christian do not take any moral shortcuts, but follow him.

Third, *follow him as a farmer*. That means diligence. Go to work on this; do not slow down. Any farmer knows that if he expects a crop in the fall he has to spend some time working and planting in the spring. And it ought to be that simple with the Christian. The Christian life is not one in which we simply relax while it rolls along its own way. No, it calls for diligence and discipline and reading and giving yourself to the task of knowing the Scriptures and deliberately applying the great principles of truth that you learn. And if you do these things, Paul says you will be able to be strong, strong in the Lord.

He closes this charge with a reminder of the strength of the Lord. Not merely to be strong, but be strong in the Lord.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David. {2 Tim 1:8 RSV}

Two things about him to remember: he is a risen Christ, able to be with you at any moment, at any time; he is not limited in time and space and

geography; he is available to you now. And he is a human Christ. He has been where you are, he has been through what you are going through. He knows the pressures you feel, he has felt the same fear. “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David,” a risen and a human Christ.

The next charge extends from Chapter 2, Verse 14, to the end of Chapter 3. Here Paul is telling us to **avoid the traps and pitfalls** along the way, and he outlines three of these for us:

The first trap is *battles over words*. Have you ever seen the way Christians get all upset sometimes over some little word in Scripture – the mode of baptism, or the millennium – Christians dividing up into camps and choosing up weapons and battling it out. No, the apostle says, avoid this kind of thing. These are stupid and useless controversies and they will spread like gangrene. Not that these questions are not important; in a sense, they are. But there are areas in the Scriptures in which honest, searching, earnest scholars will find differences. Well then, avoid getting into controversies in those areas; do not make final decisions and divisions over that kind of thing.

Second, he says to *avoid dangerous passions*. Here is a word to a young man, a young man who felt the stirrings of passion within him – sexual drives and other hungers – living in a sex-saturated society much like ours. He was being told, “anything goes, satisfy yourself, it’s nothing but a natural urge,” and all the other propaganda and false doctrines that we hear from so many directions today. These were all hitting at Timothy, and Paul says, “Remember, Timothy, ...”

In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. {2 Tim 2:20 RSV}

Now this is a beautiful figure because Paul is talking about the whole world as a great house. And he says God has certain kinds of people in that great house. There are those he uses for ignoble purposes and you will find that in contemporary history, God is using men and women to accomplish his will through ignoble ways, that is, wars. All war is ignoble, and yet God uses men in those wars killing and slaying, to accomplish his purpose.

But there are others who are used for noble purposes – not destructive, not divisive, but gathering and building, uniting, healing, and harmonizing. Each of us is going to be used of God in one way or another.

Now, he says if you want to be used for a noble purpose rather than for an ignoble purpose then separate yourself from these things that destroy your life.

... shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. {2 Tim 2:22 RSV}

One of the great destructive forces of our time is the looseness in sexual matters today. It is tearing apart the fabric of our civilization and yet men are blinded to this fact. But Christians are enlightened and instructed; therefore this word comes right home to us who are living in the midst of this loose society. “Shun youthful passions.” Do not suppress them, as Paul says in another place, but give thanks for them and walk honestly, in purity, before the Lord and God will use you for noble purposes not for ignoble.

And then the third trap or pitfall along the way was *a rebellious attitude*:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. {2 Tim 3:1 RSV}

I just note in passing that the “last days” here is not referring to the final end time of the church on earth. The last days include the whole period of time between the first and the second comings of Christ. From the very day that our Lord rose from the dead these were the “last days.” And in these last days, Paul says, there will come recurrent cycles of distress – we are going through one right now – when peace has forsaken the world and men are all upset; when there are strange, demonic forces at work in society creating immense problems. And through those times of distress we will see certain characteristics at play, and he lists them:

For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates,

fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. {2 Tim 3:2-5a RSV}

What to do? Here, basically, are the characteristics of rebellion, a lawless attitude. How do you avoid falling into this pit? Well, says the apostle, first of all, avoid such people. Do not join with them in their causes. He does not mean not to speak to them, but do not join them, do not associate with this kind of defiant rebellion.

And then, remember that this kind of rebellion always results in a rapid revelation of the weakness of it. This is what happened to Jannes and Jambres, those two magicians who withstood Moses before the court of Pharaoh {Exod 7:11}. And these people today will not get very far either, but their folly will be plain to all as was that of those two men. That is a comforting word in this hour of lawlessness, when we wonder how far today's lawless forces are going to go. Well, says Paul they won't go too far, because their folly will soon become obvious to all.

And then in the closing part of the chapter, the apostle tells Timothy the way out; again, it is two-fold – patience in suffering, and persistence in truth. “Remember the way I behaved “ he says to Timothy. “You watched me, you've seen how I've endured all the trials that came my way. Remember that if you're quietly patient in suffering and continue in the truth holding to the Scriptures and what God has said, you will find your way safely through all the involvements and the perils and the pitfalls of the world in which you live.”

And then comes his final charge:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word. {2 Tim 4:1-2a RSV}

Give this out. Proclaim it. Do not merely believe the word but talk about it, speak it, tell it to others. Declare the great truth that God has given you.

... be urgent in season and out of season, convince [those who are full of doubt], rebuke [those who are full of sin], and exhort

[those who are full of fear], ... {2 Tim 4:2b RSV}

Three things: convince, rebuke, and exhort to counteract the characteristics of a decaying age. And Timothy is to be motivated in this by two things:

- First he is to do it in view of the fact that he lives in the presence of God and Jesus Christ. A whole universe is watching us; our faithfulness is under observation all the time. God is watching Christ is watching, and in his presence we are to live.
- Second, he is to do it in view of the peril of the times.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears ... {2 Tim 4:3a RSV}

Do not give way to this, Paul says. Speak the truth; proclaim the word.

Then he closes with this marvelous word of testimony of his own experience:

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. {2 Tim 4:6-8 RSV}

That is magnificent – especially when you remember its setting. Here is the apostle in this tiny little cell, cramped and cold, in semi-darkness writing by the light of a sputtering lamp. He knows that his fate is sealed. He has already appeared once before Nero, that monstrous wretch of an emperor and now he must appear before him once more, and he knows what the result will be this time. He will be taken outside the city wall and with a flash of the sword, his head will roll in the dust, and that will be the end.

But you notice he is looking beyond all that. Death is but an incident to the believer. And Paul

is seeing the day when he appears before the Lord himself, when he is suddenly ushered into his presence, in which he has always been by faith, and he discovers himself with the Lord on that great Day. Yet, mixed with this is a very human element. Notice how he says to Timothy,

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; ... {2 Tim 4:11a RSV}

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. {2 Tim 4:13 RSV}

He is bored in mind, lonely in spirit, and cold in body. Though he could look beyond to all the greatness of the glory of God to come, see how human he is. Now there is nothing wrong with this. When we get cold or lonely or bored, we can just admit it freely; there is nothing sinful about that. But we must also look beyond these circumstances and add that dimension of faith that sees the reality of an unseen world, and changes the whole complexion of the circumstances in which we live. I have often thought about that appearance of Paul before Nero. He says:

But the Lord stood by me [at his first appearance] and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, ... {2 Tim 4:17a RSV}

Isn't that challenging? Paul stood before that wretch, Nero, and proclaimed the word fully,

... that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. {2 Tim 4:17b RSV}

That was his first appearance, but he knows it will be different this time. And in that day when Paul did stand before emperor the second time, the name of Nero was a name honored among men and known throughout the Empire. Who had heard of this; only little Jew from Tarsus, with his bald head

and his bowed legs and his poor speech? And yet today, 1900 years later, we name our sons *Paul*, and our dogs *Nero*.

Then he closes with some personal words to his friends. What a wonderful letter this is! What a challenge it must have been to young Timothy's heart. I would love to have gotten a letter like that from Paul, wouldn't you? And actually, that is what it is: He is writing to us as well –

- to stand firm,
- to hold fast to the pattern of sound words,
- to take our share of suffering for the gospel's sake with joy and equanimity of spirit

– not returning evil for evil, but good for evil, and remembering that he is able to keep that which he has deposited with us.

Prayer:

Our gracious Father, how these words have stirred our hearts anew as we find ourselves in a similar time of declension and despair. We ask that you who have called us with a holy calling and have imparted to us the Holy Spirit, and given to us your holy word, may keep us and make us to be faithful. Give us the diligence of a farmer, the discipline of an athlete, and the dedication of a soldier that will make us equal to the times in which we live. God grant that our eyes may be lifted above the commonplace obscurity of our daily life to the great things that lie beyond the invisible curtain and see ourselves living constantly in thy presence, even in this hour. Challenge our hearts to be strong in the midst of weakness, and to be faithful in the midst of that which is false. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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TITUS: Truth And Proof

by Ray C. Stedman

Titus, one of the young men who accompanied the Apostle Paul on many of his missionary journeys, first came to Christ as a Greek in the city of Antioch. At the time this letter was written, he was on the island of Crete, just south of Greece.

The church in Crete was probably begun by Paul and Titus after Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. As far as we can tell, Paul was released from that imprisonment, recorded at the end of the book of Acts. You may recall that he had expressed the desire to go to Spain, and many scholars feel that after his journey to Spain, he and Titus went to the island of Crete and began the church there. As he tells us in this letter, he left Titus there to:

... amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I [Paul] directed you. {Titus 1:5b RSV}

This letter provides an interesting little insight as to what went on in the early church, as the apostle travelled about and sent these young men as apostolic delegates to do special work for him in various places.

In the background of this letter, we can discover the character of the Cretans. In one of the most unusual passages in the New Testament, the apostle quotes from one of the ancient writers of his day, a secular Greek poet who describes these people among whom young Titus had to labor. He says,

One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always

liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." {Titus 1:12 RSV}

Paul is obviously writing a private message to his son-in-the-faith, Titus, and wants him to understand the formidable nature of the problem he is to resolve. He is dealing with people who are characterized in these three ways, and he underscores this by saying, "This testimony is true," {Titus 1:13a RSV}. These people are like this. And as we look at the message of this letter, we see that these three characteristics of the Cretan people seem to be described and amplified in various passages. For example, Paul says about certain ones,

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds [they're liars]; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed. {Titus 1:15-16 RSV}

Now this was the kind of society in which the Christian church was living, and this was the kind of national character that Titus was up against. Here were people whose minds and consciences were corrupted -- they profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds.

He also calls them "evil beasts," that is, they were like animals in their attitudes toward one another. That theme is amplified in chapter three, where the apostle says,

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels

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over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self-condemned. {Titus 3:9-11 RSV}

These words are referring primarily to those who at least professed to be Christian, but who were reflecting the attitudes of the world around.

When the church has a problem, it is because the world is invading the church instead of the church invading the world. The gospel is intended to be a disturbing element, to change society. Therefore, whenever the church is true to its authentic message, it is always against the status quo. The church is a revolutionary body -- it always has been -- and we can thus be very much in sympathy with some of the revolutionary movements of our own day. But the difference is that the church challenges the status quo with the power of God, something that no other organization or group can do.

Now what would you do with people who acted like animals, snarling and griping at one another, people who engaged in stupid controversies and quarrels over the law, and who were factious one with another -- how would you handle people like that? And that was not all; these people were further characterized as "lazy gluttons," easy-going, pleasure-loving people. This too is amplified in chapter three, where the apostle speaks not only of them, but also of himself and of all men as they are before they become Christians. Here is an amazing description of the world as God sees it:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; {Titus 3:3 RSV}

This is the kind of a world into which the apostle sent this young man, with the power of the gospel.

Now the basic need of these people was to have "sound doctrine," a phrase that occurs several times throughout the letter. Paul knew that to change society, people must be told the truth -- this is the problem with men and women everywhere. This is why they walk in darkness and act like animals, tearing one another apart

and hating one another -- because they do not understand themselves or the world. So you have to begin by teaching them truth.

Along with that is another very basic need -- the matter of "good deeds." That phrase appears five times; chapter one closes with that idea, "unfit for any good deed," {Titus 1:16b RSV}. Then in chapter two, "Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech," {Titus 2:7-8a RSV}. And chapter two also closes with that idea, "to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds," {Titus 2:14b RSV}. In chapter three it says, "be careful to apply themselves to good deeds," {Titus 3:8b RSV}, and once again, "let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds," {Titus 3:14a RSV}.

Isn't this what the church is looking for, what the world is looking for? Sound doctrine -- good, solid teaching, straight from the shoulder revelations of truth -- and good deeds to back them up and prove the reality of the teaching. Now, first, as to doctrine, the apostle emphasized several points. To begin with, they had to be clear about the basis of men's salvation. How do you change human hearts? Today we are still striving to change people's nature by education, by legislation, and by a change of atmosphere or environment. But as someone has well said, "If you bring a pig into the parlor, it won't change the pig, but it will certainly change the parlor!" And this is the problem here; so they needed to know the truth about salvation. In chapter three the apostle says,

... but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, ... {Titus 3:4-5a RSV}

He saved us. He saved us! He is the only one who can. He saved us -- we did not save ourselves. In fact, he goes on to say that:

... not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, ... {Titus 3:5b RSV}

Everyone tries to do good deeds. But good deeds will not save you, and the apostle makes that clear. Only the Savior can save; and he goes on to point this out:

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he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, ... {Titus 3: 5 RSV}

He makes us over from the inside; he does not patch us up from the outside. He does not give us a new leaf to turn over, or try to bolster up our moral courage a bit, or get us to try a little harder, but he changes us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Psychology is absolutely helpless when it comes to that kind of a procedure. But the gospel does what neither psychology or anything else can do. The supreme message of the church is to declare and proclaim this great good news that there is a means of being regenerated and renewed in the Holy Spirit,

which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. {Titus 3:6-7 RSV}

Now when the Bible speaks of hope, it does not speak of only a faint possibility, the way the world speaks of hope: "I hope I'll be rich some day," or, "I hope I'll be healthy." But when the New Testament speaks of hope, it is a certainty: the hope of eternal life rests upon the One who came to give us eternal life, and we are justified by his grace.

Now beyond these fundamental facts of the gospel, these Cretans needed to learn some truth about present conduct. In chapter two, in connection with the coming of the gospel, Paul writes:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, [that is, all who believe] training us to renounce irreligion ... {Titus 2:11-12a RSV}

Psychologists are telling us that many people, especially young people, are suffering from "future shock." That is a kind of emotional reaction that sets in when someone contemplating the future sees it as hopeless, with no possibility of accomplishing anything. And many young people today are giving up on the future, saying, "What's the use?"

But here is the answer to that despair -- "awaiting our blessed hope." What a phrase to set against that other -- "future shock" and

"blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ," {Titus 2:13b RSV}. Do you see how clearly Jesus is called God in this passage? There is one Savior, and it is Jesus Christ who is the great God who will appear in glory to set right the things that are wrong in this world.

Next, these Cretans needed to learn something about the church order, and in the opening chapter Paul indicates that he had left word with Titus to appoint elders whom he later calls "bishops;" they are the same -- "elders" refers to the man, "bishop" to his office. And he gives qualifications:

... if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; {Titus 1:6-8 RSV}

Where do you find such men? Well, Paul expected to find them in Crete, and he expected to find them among those who had once been characterized as liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. This is the change the gospel makes, and he did find them there, because Titus was sent to put them into office to carry on the work of the church. In this way, the church becomes a sort of therapy group, introducing into the community at large the healing virtues of love and light and grace that will gradually transform a community. That is what a church is sent to do.

Finally, these Christians in Crete needed to know something about civic responsibility:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men. {Titus 3:1-2 RSV}

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What a contrast that is with some of the activities that are carried on today in the name of the church! But the church is exhorted here to recognize that the authorities are in some sense the ministers of God, sent and used by him to maintain order, and that there should be courtesy and obedience in every area in which the law speaks, except in those areas where it definitely challenges a spiritual precept or ungodliness: to repudiate it, to use our minds and wills to say no to these things.

...and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, ... {Titus 2:12b RSV}

Not in the church, but in the world -- in the midst of the business of life, in the midst of commerce and trade, and all the usual enterprise of life -- that is where we are to live sober, godly, upright lives. This is truth that they needed to know.

And third, they needed to know truth about a future expectation, and he goes on in that same passage,

... awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ... {Titus 2:13 RSV}

Now, turning to the need to have good deeds, there is some practical advice here for various age groups: older men are told to,

... be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. {Titus 2:2b RSV}

Then there is a word for older women:

... to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and to train the young women to love their husbands ... {Titus 2:3-4a RSV}

That is the task of older women -- to teach the young women how to behave themselves, and to be good wives, and further,

... to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited. {Titus 2:4b-5 RSV}

How practical this letter is! And yet, as the apostle gives these practical guidelines, he is in

effect quietly injecting into this Cretan community a power that would soon become a vital factor in changing the whole life of this island.

Finally, as the apostle closes with some personal words of admonition and advice, we have a glimpse into his own life. He says,

When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. {Titus 3:12 RSV}

Nicopolis was on the western shore of Greece, just across the Adriatic Sea from the heel of the Italian boot. The apostle was apparently writing this letter from Corinth, and was sending two young men down to replace Titus in Crete, so that Titus could rejoin Paul. Later we read that Titus went on up to Dalmatia, on the northern coast, sending Zenas, the lawyer, and Apollos on their way (perhaps to Alexandria, which was Apollos' home), and the apostle admonishes Titus to see that they lack nothing.

Then he closes the letter as he opened it; he says, "And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds." {Titus 3:14a RSV}. How did he open the letter?

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, ... {Titus 1:1 RSV}

There is the theme of this letter; truth which matches up with godliness; sound doctrine and good deeds going hand in hand. And the basis of it, as we have already seen, is "in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago ..." {Titus 1:2 RSV}.

That promise is found in Genesis, where God promised before Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden that there would come a redeemer, who would bring life to men (Gen. 3:15), and this is the reference that Paul makes here. Then he speaks of the method by which it would come: "at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by command of God our Savior," {Titus 1:3 RSV}. If your life has been changed at all, it was by preaching, by hearing this delivering word set forth; and when you believed it, you found that you, too, experienced the washing of regeneration and the subsequent

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renewing, the continuous renewal, of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are encouraged again ourselves, as we look at this letter of Paul's to Titus, to adorn the doctrine of God in these days. Generation after generation of Christians have

lived and died since those days, but the world is still here, and the promises are still here. And this is our day, Lord: you have called us to be saints, to be members of the Body of Christ, as these early Christians were. Grant to us courage and strength, steadfastness and vision, and faith, that we may manifest these truths clearly in our hour of human history. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman
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PHILEMON: A Brother Restored

By Ray C. Stedman

To me, one of the exciting things about Bible study is to find all the hidden secrets that the Lord has put into the pages of scripture. And it can get as exciting as a detective story. If you try tracing down some of the clues that are given to you in scripture, all kinds of amazing things begin to come out. I hope you are learning to discover this for yourself in scripture, because it adds so much excitement.

I think this little book of Philemon is perhaps one of the most fascinating stories of this type of anything found in the pages of the New Testament. I wonder if you found any of these clues and the story developed before your eyes as it did for me. Perhaps when you read this little book through as I hope many of you did this afternoon, you wondered why this book is in the Bible. After all, it is unique in the sense that it is the only private letter we have in the apostle's hand. All the other letters he wrote to churches or to young men who were pastors of churches. And they concerned the business and the doctrines and the heresies that were being faced and so on. But in this letter there is no doctrine brought out at all, there is no heretical problem to encounter or to oppose, there is nothing but just an account of a problem that Paul had connected with a certain man and it is a private letter of the apostle's to this man named Philemon. Well, why is it in Scripture, then? What do we learn particularly from this letter?

Well I suggest that we trace some of the clues down and if we do, it might help us in this and as we do we might find something very fascinating about this little letter. It has an unusual number of names in it for such a short

letter, and these names I think will help us a great deal. It starts out,

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker, and Apphia, our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

{Phmn 1:1-3 RSV}

Now Bible scholars tell us that this letter was written at the same time that Paul wrote the letter to Colossians and the letter to Ephesians. Both of which were written from Rome at the time that he was a prisoner on his first imprisonment in Rome recounted for us in the close of the book of Acts. And you recall that he was in a hired house where he had freedom to have his friends come in to see him and could send out messengers to them and messengers through them though he was chained day and night to a Roman soldier but he had to stay in his own hired house. And it was during this time that he wrote these letters.

Now most people feel—most Bible scholars feel—that Philemon lived perhaps in the city of Colossae because he is associated with the church of that name and it was written at the same time that the letter to Colossians was written. But there is a very interesting suggestion here that centers around this young man Archippus. As you read this letter through you'll see that Philemon was evidently a rather wealthy man, a man who had certain servants, slaves that did his bidding, and Apphia was doubtless his wife, whom Paul calls his sister,

and most scholars feel that Archippus was their son, and Paul refers to him as “our fellow soldier.” But the letter is also addressed to the church which met in their house. And that’s a little glimpse into New Testament church life. Here was a gathering of Christians. And the church met in their house. Now this could be the church of the Colossians to which the other letter is written but there are certain things that suggest that perhaps this is a different group. And it is interesting that this man Archippus is also referred to in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. If you want to turn back to that in the closing verses of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he says to them,

Give my greetings (in verse 15) to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you (Colossians), have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry which you have received of the Lord."

{Col 4:15-17}

Now, when we talked about the church in the letter to the Colossians, I pointed out that we have no record of the letter written to the church at Laodicea, though there are some who feel it may be what we call the letter to the Ephesians. But there is another possibility. Since Archippus is mentioned here in connection with Laodicea, there is a possibility at least that Philemon lived in Laodicea which was a city very close to Colossae—only a few miles away. And that when Paul wrote to the Colossians here and asked them to read the letter and to have the letter read in Laodicea, he added this special word for Archippus: “Tell Archippus to fulfill his ministry,” because as a fellow soldier (which he calls him in the letter to Philemon) it suggests that he was in some sense perhaps a pastor of the church that met in the house of Philemon in Laodicea. Furthermore, he says, that the letter to Laodicea should be read to the church of Colossae. This suggests that perhaps this letter to Philemon is the letter to Laodicea. And that therefore it was a matter to be brought before all the churches. Well, that’s one clue. Let’s see what else is mentioned here.

Reading on a little further, skipping down to verse ten, you’ll notice that the theme of this letter gathers around a runaway slave named Onesimus. In verse ten Paul says to Philemon, “I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.” That means Paul led him to Christ. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.” This is a very encouraging verse to me, because it indicates that the apostle delighted in puns because there is a pun in this verse. I’m often accused of indulging in the lowest form of humor, punning. But Paul did, too. And here it is: the word “Onesimus” means useful. And so after he refers to Onesimus he adds this little pun. Formerly, he admits, he was useless. But now he’s really fulfilling his name—he’s become “Onesimus” to you. He’s become useful to you and to me. Then he goes on,

I’m sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own free will. Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever. No longer as a slave, but more than a slave. As a beloved brother especially to me but now much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

{Phmn 1:12-16 RSV}

Now that tells us something interesting about Onesimus. I think it’s quite evident from this verse that Onesimus was Philemon’s brother, his literal blood brother. They were sons of the same parents. And at the same time he had been Philemon’s slave. Now this was not uncommon or impossible in the Roman Empire. Roman writers tell us that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. Fifty percent of the population were slaves. And because such a tremendous proportion of the population were slaves, the ruling classes thought it was very necessary to treat them with great severity. And a slave who ran away was almost certain to lose his life if he was caught and returned to his owner. And the only way that

the Romans thought that they could keep this vast population of slaves under subjection and prevent a widespread rebellion and revolt was to have very severe laws that would be put into full effect the minute any one of these slaves stepped over the line. We see something perhaps somewhat similar to this in South Africa today [this course was recorded originally in 1968—ed.] in the rigid laws unto which the colored people live in South Africa and are kept under rigid control so that they do not dare step over the line in any way.

Here was a man who evidently had fallen perhaps into economic debt to his brother. And, as often happens, in order to pay the debt he became a slave to his own brother. Now doubtless this happened before Philemon became a Christian. But as you put the story together, Onesimus must have tired of this relationship and one day he helped himself to some of his brother's goods. He got enough money to take off for Rome. And there in Rome, perhaps to his amazement, he ran across the apostle Paul. At any rate, they met in Rome. And Paul led this young man to Christ. And having led him to Christ he now learned that he was a former slave of his master Philemon and his blood brother and it's this that prompts this letter to be written.

Now this meant that if Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he was putting his life at stake. That is if Philemon chose to exercise his rights because as I'd suggested the Romans were very cruel in their treatment of slaves. One Roman writer records the fact that a slave was bringing a tray load of goblets—crystal goblets—into his master and he happened to slip and one of the goblets fell off and smashed upon the pavement and immediately his master ordered him to be thrown into a fountain of water where he was torn apart by some savage eels that lived there. And this was the way they treated slaves in those days. And Paul therefore is forcing the issue here by sending Onesimus back to Philemon. But it's accompanied by this gracious and charming letter in which he pleads earnestly for this man's life and reminds him that he does not come back now only as a slave but as a brother in Christ as well as his brother in the flesh.

Well now what kind of a man is Philemon? Well as you look at this letter in verse 4-7 there is a wonderful picture drawn of this man. We read,

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ, for I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

{Phmn 1: 4-7 RSV}

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Here's a man who evidently is a very gracious and generous person, and Paul commends him for this sharing which his faith prompts, that is the generosity and the charity that he manifests and he remembers him with great joy because of the many times that he's heard reports of how Christians traveling through have been blessed and refreshed and strengthened by this man.

Now, putting all these factors together I think we get some clues as to why this letter is here in the Bible. When we recall the fact that the fifty percent of the Roman Empire were slaves and that the Christian gospel is directed toward freedom, freedom for men at all levels of life, it would be simply impossible to think of having a tremendous message of declaring the greatness of the gospel which God has provided that does not somewhere touch upon this question of slavery. This has often been a problem to many people.

I find today that when the racial issues are now so hot and turbulent in our country that many are raising this question. Why doesn't the New Testament say something about this? Why didn't the apostle Paul condemn this institution of slavery with its terrible abuses and its awful injustices? And if we today can get stirred up over the fact that Negroes and others are second-class citizens as they certainly are in many parts of our country, then certainly the apostles themselves ought to have said something against this terrible institution of slavery. And yet when you read the letter to the Colossians and the Ephesians which were written at the same time as this letter here, you'll find passages in both of

those that exhort slaves to be obedient to their masters and not to revolt and not to rise up and not to try to undermine them but to be faithful in their service and to obey them and to serve them with singleness of heart as unto the Lord.

Well what does this mean? I think we have here a most helpful passage to show us how to handle problems that arise of this nature. Here, in other words, is kind of a test case which the apostle has been led in the Spirit of God to set before us for the benefit of the whole church through all the centuries that would follow. And it is brought out in Philemon's case because of the extremely favorable situation that prevailed. Here is a man who was a Christian, a gracious, generous, open-hearted, forgiving, type of individual and the man who was his slave was his own blood brother. So that surely here is the case of all cases where the apostle could thrust a wedge into the heart of this terrible institution of slavery and this is what he does.

Now notice how Christianity handles a problem like this. First, it never encourages direct revolt. We're being told today that the job of the church is to encourage people who are mistreated and injusticed to rise up and revolt and to demonstrate and to refuse to work and to strike and all these things but you never find a whisper of that kind of thing in the New Testament. Why? Because the New Testament always works it out on a spiritual level. And it indicates that a new principle has come in to establish a new relationship.

Here's this man who was a runaway slave who is now a brother in Christ. And Paul sends him back to his master with a confident expectation that he'll treat him as a Christian ought to treat any other Christian. Because in Christ there is neither bond nor free. There is neither male nor female, all differences are abolished in Christ. And men and women, slaves and masters, rich and poor are all one alike before the son of God. And that principle interjected into human society eventually abolished slavery in the Roman Empire without overturning it in its economic basis.

But notice also Christianity never says to a runaway slave, "Look, forget about the past. Never mind the fact that you once were a slave. Just go out and enjoy yourself anyhow. Don't worry about the past; just take care of the

future." Christianity doesn't say that. What it said to this slave was, "Look, go back and face the past. Go back and face your master. Clear this thing up right and trust that the God who called you and won you and saved you will be with you to work this whole thing out." And then as Paul so beautifully puts it, writing to Philemon,

If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

{Phmn 1:18, 19 RSV}

So the fourth principle by which the apostle indicates the church had handled problems like this is that it is to be in full accord with the principles of Christian life. Another pays the price. We share the burden one with another. There is no blame attached.

And finally you'll notice that the whole church is involved in this. The letter is written not merely to Philemon but to the church that is in his house. And this was obviously intended to be a test case though the decision was to be a private one which Philemon was to make. Nevertheless the whole church was to be informed as to what was done and this letter was to be read at the church at Colossae as well and thus the ball started rolling that finally, gathering momentum, rolled over this terrible thing and flattened this institution of slavery until it was eliminated from the Roman Empire. That's the reason why this letter is in the New Testament.

Now there's an interesting thing here in closing. History tells us that fifty years later a man by the name of Ignatius who was the bishop of Antioch, one of the early church fathers, was making his way as a prisoner from Antioch to Rome in order to be martyred for the gospel of Christ. And on his journey he wrote several letters to encourage the churches that he knew which are still extant, are still available to us. He wrote one to the church of Smyrna that's mentioned in the book of Revelation. And he wrote another to the church in Ephesus and he addressed it to the Bishop of Ephesus.

And who do you think the Bishop of Ephesus was? Yes, you guessed it: Onesimus. And the interesting thing is that Bishop Ignatius

makes the same pun over Onesimus' name that the apostle Paul does. He, too, refers to him as one who is both profitable in name as well as in nature. But it looks very clear that it is highly likely—there is the possibility of course they were men of the same name, uh, two different men, but it is very likely that Onesimus here did return with his letter to Philemon and in full accord with the apostle's eager desire here, Philemon sent his brother free as a slave, welcomed him back, and he became a leader in the church at Laodicea and later became the bishop or the prominent pastor of the church at Ephesus. And it was this letter that set this man free that was thus included in the scriptures in order that slavery might be abolished in whatever form it manifests itself wherever the spirit of Christianity come.

Now one other thing. Where do you think the letters of the first testament were first gathered together, or as you know these letters for a while were sent here and there as the Apostle and others wrote them and they traveled. Some churches had some letters and some did not. But the first gathering together of all the letters of the New Testament took place in Ephesus where Onesimus was the bishop. And if we put all these things together, it seemed highly likely—if your imagination runs riot like mine does, that Bishop Onesimus was the one who said, “Brethren, you can put every other letter you want in here but let's include this one to Philemon. That's the one that set me free.”

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the impact that your word has had in the history of this world and in the lives of men and women throughout history. We thank you for this little letter which breathes such charity, such love, such joy, which is so filled with charm and wit, which still speaks to us with all the warmth and glory of that first century day. We thank you for what it reflects, the spirit of love and grace which sought us out like Onesimus, runaway slaves that we were, found us, paid the price for us, set us free that we might be men and women able to live in the freedom and liberty of the children of God and for this our hearts reflect our gratitude and we give thanks in Christ's name. Amen.

HEBREWS: All About Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

Hebrews is one of the three New Testament commentaries on a single Old Testament verse:

the just shall live by his faith {Hab 2:4b KJV}

This is the verse that struck a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, and began the Protestant Reformation 450 years ago. This verse opened the eyes of Augustine, and helped him to become a mighty man of faith, and it is still striking fire in many hearts today. It is expanded and amplified in Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews. Each of these epistles emphasizes a different aspect of that statement.

- The book of Romans talks about “the just” – the justified – those who have been accepted as righteous in Jesus Christ: *The just shall live by faith.*
- The book of Ephesians emphasized the words “shall live,” and it tells us about life as a justified person – the walk in the Spirit, the life in Jesus, the life of Christ in us: The just *shall live* by faith.
- And finally, the book of Hebrews takes up the last two words, “by faith,” and it shows us how to lay hold of the life by which we are justified.

But I hope you know that faith is derived, not from anything in itself, but from its object. This is a source of great confusion among many Christians. People are always saying to me, “If I only had enough faith, I could do so and so, and such and such,” as though faith were a commodity sold by the pound; as though all you have to do is buy another pound of faith and add it to the store you have now, and you could do great things for God. But the quantity of faith is of very little signifi-

cance. Jesus said so: “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed” {Matt 17:20b RSV}, you could move mountains. It is not quantity that is important in faith; it is quality; it is what your faith is fastened to. What is the object of your faith? The strength of faith is directly related to the strength of what you believe in:

- What are you believing in?
- Who are you believing in?
- What kind of a person is he?

When Hebrews talks about faith, therefore, it must help us to see the object of faith, because our faith will be strong if we believe and understand that the object of our faith is strong. That is why this is the most Christ-centered book in the New Testament. It focuses on Jesus Christ: therefore, it is one of the greatest books for hours of discouragement, defeat, or depression, because it emphasizes the character and the qualities of Jesus Christ. If we see him as he is, we cannot help but be strong in faith.

There is an old story of a man who had just become a Christian. He was experiencing some of the difficulties that new Christians often have of uncertainty in his faith; he was wondering if he really was a Christian, and was feeling frustrated with his own lack of growth. He felt he had come to the place where he just could not stand any longer; he could not live as a Christian any more. He came into a church service where a pastor was speaking on the verses in Ephesians that tell of Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father, and that we are dead, and our life is hid with Christ in God. He talked about Christ as the head of the body, and said that we are the body, and that Christ as the head is seated at the right hand of the Father. As the truth of this gripped this man’s heart, and he

realized that although he was struggling to swim against the current down here below, his head was seated in victory and triumph already at the right hand of God, he jumped out of his seat, and shouted, "Hallelujah! Who ever heard of anyone drowning with his head high above water!"

That is what Hebrews does to us: It helps us to focus on the One who is already in the place of victory. We are fighting a battle already won, and that is what encourages us. When we walk in the flesh, we are fighting a battle already lost; there is no chance, no hope of victory; but when we walk in the Spirit, the battle is already won.

In the first ten chapters of Hebrews, there is a very simple structure. Jesus Christ is being compared to a number of other leaders and systems and religious values that the people to whom this letter was first written had once felt were important. It is a little like an athletic contest or an elimination match where certain contestants are vying for the championship. One after the other challenges the hero, and one after another is conquered, and the hero emerges triumphant, superior to everyone else. Throughout this letter, Christ is compared with the basic thing that men trust in days of peril and trial. And every one of them is found insufficient – except him!

The first one is **the prophets** of the Old Testament. The letter opens on that theme:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; {Heb 1:1 RSV}

– these impressive writers of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Habakkuk. All these names that meant so much to the Hebrew mind and heart. These men were well ahead of all the philosophies and philosophers the world has ever known, contemporaries with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and yet their views of reality far outstripped these men. These were great men, the fathers, the prophets – and God spoke to them and through them in the past.

but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. {Heb 1:2a RSV}

Almost with a wave of a hand, the writer dismisses the prophets as having no equality with Jesus Christ. After all, they were just spokesmen,

instruments, but he is the God enthroned as king of the universe, forming the boundaries of history and upholding everything by the word of his power. How can a prophet compare with someone like that? He is much better than they; therefore, the writer argues, anybody who trusted in prophets ought to be interested in listening to Jesus Christ.

The next challengers are **the angels**. In the Greek world in which the New Testament church found itself, angels were regarded as very important beings. Most of the Greek gods and goddesses – Venus, Zeus, Mercury and others – were angels in the eyes of the Greeks. They knew they were not supreme God, but they were regarded as a kind of God, junior-grade, sub-deities, and they treated them as such.

But here the writer takes up the question of which is greater, the angels or the Son. He points out immediately that the Son, the Lord Jesus, is superior to any angel:

For to which angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son ..."? {Heb 1:5a RSV}

No, he never said that to any angel. The Son is superior to the angels, and furthermore, the angels worshipped him; therefore, they themselves admit that he is superior, and they obey him – this is the argument – so how could you ever compare an angel to the Son of God?

He goes on to point out in Chapters 2 and 3, moreover, that Jesus was the true man; he was the second Adam. He came to fulfill the destiny of human beings – the lost destiny which Adam threw away. This right of mankind to be rulers and kings in the universe is reflected in the eighth Psalm:

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou are mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; {Psa 8:3-6a RSV}**

That is God's design for man, but, in our fallen state, we find it very difficult to fulfill. But Jesus is

there, and the writer says that although we do not yet see man fulfilling his destiny, we see Jesus sitting at the right hand of God – the true man; man as God intended man to be. He is certainly higher than the angels, because God made man ultimately to be higher than the angels. He said of man, “Let us make him in our image.” He did not say that about any angel, but of man.

In the midst of this argument about the angels, the writer of Hebrews gives a warning. There are five warnings through the book of Hebrews, and this is the first one:

- **Do not neglect to listen to this One.** If Jesus is higher than the prophets, and higher than the angels, then we ought to listen to him. If prophets have affected the stream of history as much as they have, and the angels are the invisible agents of God working through all of history, then surely we ought to listen to the Son. Do not neglect to listen! {cf, Heb 2:1-3a RSV}

Now the next challengers who move into the picture are **Moses and Joshua** out of the Old Testament, these great men of God whom God greatly used. The Hebrew people almost idolized them as the supreme examples of men mightily used of God – especially Moses. In Chapter 3, Jesus is compared to Moses, and in Chapter 4, to Joshua.

And what is his argument? Well, it is very simple. Moses was a servant in the house of God; but Jesus is the Son to whom the house belongs, and for whom it is built, so he obviously has superiority.

When I was a boy in Montana I was invited to visit a well known, wealthy ranch, by one of the hired men. As we came up to an imposing ranch house, he did not take me into the house: instead, he took me to the bunkhouse out in back. I asked him what it was like in the ranch house, and he said, “Well, I can’t take you in there; that belongs to the family.” I saw a beautiful palomino horse in the pasture, and I told him how I would love to ride on that horse. And he said, “I’m sorry, you can’t; that belongs to the family.” All day long I was frustrated, because everything I wanted to do, he could not let me do, because he was only a hired man. But later on, I got to know the son of that family, a boy of my own age, and do you know what we did? We rode that palomino horse all over the place, and

we went into the house, and we even went into the kitchen and helped ourselves to food in the refrigerator – anything we wanted – and we made ourselves perfectly at home. A son has greater liberty than a servant.

Moses was just a servant, but Jesus was the master. Moses led the people of God out of Egypt towards the land of Canaan, which was the symbol of the rest of God – the rest which God wants people to learn to live on inside their hearts.

As we will see later on in this letter – and there is a hint of it here in the beginning – the house of God which this writer talks about is man. Moses was but a servant in the symbol of the house of God. Jesus is the Son in the very house itself. Moses led toward a symbol of the rest of God, but Jesus leads into the actual place of rest.

That rest is defined for us here in Chapter 4. It says,

whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. {Heb 4:10 RSV}

That is, if you stop depending upon yourself and your self-effort, you have learned to enter into rest, because you start depending upon another – God’s work in you. That is the lost secret of humanity. That is the secret that Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden, and which Jesus Christ came to restore to us. When we learn to operate on that, we learn to be perfectly peaceful, calm, undisturbed by circumstances, trusting, powerful, effective, accomplishing things for Christ’s sake. And that is rest.

Now Joshua could not lead into that rest, says the writer. He tried to, but he could not take the people into real rest. Oh, he took them into the symbol of rest, the land, but he did not take them into real rest. But Jesus can! Therefore, he says,

Let us strive to enter that rest, {Heb 4:11a RSV}

lest like those people in the wilderness, we fall away and lose out on what God has for us.

The second warning is:

- **Do not harden your heart** {Heb 4:7b RSV}, and resist God’s lead. Do not say to yourself, “I’m all right the way I am. I’m doing OK. What do I need with any-

thing further?" No, do not harden your heart. Do not resist what God is saying. You may be satisfied with the way you are now, but it will not last very long. Sooner or later you will find that what you have got now is not enough: therefore, do not harden your heart, but let God lead you into his rest, or you will be in serious trouble.

Now the next challenger to the superiority of Christ is **Aaron, the high priest of Israel**, along with the whole system of priesthood. A great deal of this letter has to do with this subject of priesthood, and it is very important, because priests have great value.

What do you think priests are for? In the Old Testament, the priests had two very important functions – to relieve guilt and to relieve confusion:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relations to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. {Heb 5:1 RSV}

That is relief of guilt; to lift the load and the burden of sin, and,

He can deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward, {Heb 5:2a RSV}

– those who are confused and miss the path, who do not know where to turn. The modern equivalent of a priest, perhaps, is a psychiatrist; priests did what psychiatrists do today. They tried to relieve the load of guilt and to straighten out people's confused and ignorant approaches to life, and therefore, they were very important.

But now this writer goes on to show that Jesus Christ has a higher priesthood, symbolized by a man named Melchizedek. Melchizedek appears in the Old Testament in a very mysterious way. He steps out of the shadows for a moment and deals with Abraham, and then returns to obscurity and is never heard from again. He is referred to several times in the Old Testament, but he is a figure of mystery until you come to the New Testament, and here in Hebrews, we are helped to see what this strange man signified.

He was a picture of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. His characteristics were those of the priesthood Christ has today:

- First, he was instantly available. The story, recorded in Genesis 14, tells of Abraham meeting the King of Sodom after his defeat of the five kings. Although Abraham did not know it, he was in trouble. The King of Sodom was out to make him a very subtle offer that would derail Abraham in his walk of faith. He could not possibly have detected the subtlety of this offer; but Melchizedek suddenly appeared. He was instantly available.
- Furthermore, because he was a king without father or without mother – this is far as the record goes in the Old Testament – he was a picture of Christ in his eternal relationship – he was permanently available. His service to Abraham at this time was to strengthen him, picturing the way Jesus Christ actually strengthens us. Melchizedek strengthened Abraham by the offering of bread and wine which in the communion service are the symbols of the body and the blood, the life of the Lord Jesus.

That is why Melchizedek appears in this book, to present the picture of Jesus Christ as instantly available to us. This is why the glory of the priesthood of Christ is so intensely superior to anyone else. Your psychiatrist may go on vacation – he might even die – it has been known to happen! But Jesus Christ never dies, and he is never off duty – he is instantly and permanently available, and he actually strengthens you with the impartation of his own life, symbolized by the body and the blood, the bread and the wine.

In connection with this, there is a third warning

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- **The danger of delay:** This is one of the most serious warnings in the book, found in Chapter 6. Although we may have tasted the outward experiences of Christianity, and seem to have much that is real in our Christian life, if we have not pressed on into this place of rest and of trust in Jesus Christ, these external evidences of Christianity are of no value to us. In fact, if that is all we have, a time will come when they will fail us, and then it will be impossible to find the true – that is a terrible warning; if you trust too long in the

untrue, the unreal, the phony, there will come a day of desperation, when you will look for the true, and you will not be able to find it.

The fifth challenger is **the tabernacle and the Law**. Here are more things that people trust in – buildings and self-effort, which is represented by the Law. And the writer now compares Christ to this, and he draws a sharp contrast. He takes the old tabernacle in the wilderness, and he says “that’s just a building, that’s all,” but the real tabernacle is man or woman, a boy, or a girl – it is you! You are the one God’s been aiming at for centuries – not buildings! He is not interested in buildings. That is why I think it is such a desperate error to refer to a building as the house of God.

I like that story of the little boy who was chewing gum in a church building, and a lady said to the pastor, “Look at that boy chewing gum in church. Do you let children chew gum in the house of God?” And he said, “My dear lady; it’s the house of God that’s chewing the gum!” And he is exactly right. So the old tabernacle, or the temple in Jerusalem, or a cathedral, or a church is nothing but a building. The true house of God is you. We are his house. He dwells in us. Christ in you – the hope of glory {Col 1:27b RSV}.

Now, in connection with the tabernacle was the Law, which made its demands upon people: “Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not bow down to idols, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God,” and so forth {cf, Exod 20:2-17} – all the Ten Commandments. And these are wonderful, but they fail, as Paul says in Romans, because of the weakness of the flesh which is not able to meet the demands of the Law. We find ourselves unable to come through with what the Law demands. Even when we try our best, all we can achieve is an outward external obedience, but the heart and the attitude within is frequently wrong, and we know it.

Well, says the writer, the Lord Jesus has a solution to this. His solution is to write the Law on your heart. To put the Spirit of God within you to keep prompting you to love, and love is the fulfilling of the Law. If you yield yourself to love of the Spirit, which is pouring out from within you, you will be automatically and unconsciously fulfilling the Law. He writes his law upon our hearts, he

never leaves us; he deals fully with our guilt during those times when we do fail – he has already solved that problem in the cross – and he provides all the power we need to walk in righteousness if we will take it. Can you beat that? The Law never does that. All it does is demand; it never enables; but Jesus comes in and demands and enables. He who is faithful is he who calls us, who also will do it.

Now, here, we have another warning:

- **Do not deceive yourself.** Do not say you have got all this and try to put up a good front, because that is presuming upon God. If you do that, the writer says there will be nothing left for you but a certain end of evil:

For if we sin deliberately [that is deceitfully, yet deliberately] after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? {Heb 10:26-29 RSV}

Think of it! God has provided for us at infinite cost a way of being righteous before him, strengthened within, kept strong and pure in the midst of all the adverse circumstances around us, and we set it aside and say, “No thank you, Lord, I’ll make it on my own.” Could anything be more insulting to God? And so he warns us not to presume on God’s grace.

Well, that eliminates buildings, and works, and there are no challengers left.

So, in the last section of the letter, he comes to the **means of obtaining all that God has**, which is faith. In Chapter 11 you can learn

- what faith is,
- how it acts,
- how it looks, and
- how to recognize it.

And as you read through that wonderful chapter of the heroes of faith, you find that faith anticipates the future, acts in the present, evaluates the past, dares to move out, and persists to the end – that is what faith is.

The last two chapters tell us how it is produced in our lives, how God goes about making us strong in the faith.

1. First, we are made strong by “looking unto Jesus” {Heb 12:2 KJV}; you cannot read about the Lord Jesus, you cannot live with him and think of what God has revealed about him, and believe these great declarations of his power and his availability and his life without finding your faith strengthened. Isn’t that true? You can look at all these other men of faith – Abraham, David, Moses, Barak, Samson, and a whole host of others – Martin Luther, John Wesley, D. L. Moody – and all they will do is inspire you, but they cannot enable you. But when you look at Jesus, he will not only inspire you, but he will empower you. That is why we are exhorted to look away from these others unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of faith, who will make us strong in the time of weakness.
2. Second, our faith is increased by living constantly in trouble – the disciplines of life. God puts us into problems, because that gives us the opportunity to exercise faith. If you did not have any problems, how could you exercise faith? If you did not have any difficulties how could you ever learn to depend? That is why you can count on trouble. That is encouraging isn’t it? You can count on it!
3. And, finally, we exercise faith – we learn faith by encouraging one another in view of the resources God has given us. Listen to this majestic passage:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the

sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. [That was the Law given on Mount Sinai.] For they could not endure the order that was given, “if even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” {Heb 12:18-20 RSV}

That is terrifying isn’t it? You have not come to that.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born [the church of God] who are enrolled in heaven, and to a Judge who is God of all, [pagans, Communists, atheists, everybody] and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, [a new arrangement for living, inside you, not outside of you] and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. {Heb 12:22-24 RSV}

Isn’t that wonderful? Doesn’t that encourage your faith?

- And so, in connection with this we have **the last warning:**

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. {Heb 12:25-27 RSV}

I believe we are in those times when everything that can be shaken is going to be shaken. What does this world depend upon? Governments, politics, administration, education, legislation? All

these things are the fundamentals of history – the things men reckoned on, rested on, and counted on to keep human life going – but every one of them is something that can be shaken. We are facing the times when God is going to allow everything to be shaken that can be shaken – that is everything visible. But what cannot be shaken? Well, he tells us:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. {Heb 12:28-29 RSV}

The kingdom of God, the rule of God in our hearts; the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord within us can never be shaken. And that is what is being tested today so that all phony is being exposed. I have never seen a time when more people who are apparently strong, virile Christians have fallen away,

and have renounced the faith in our present day. But the things that cannot be shaken will remain, and that which is based on the phony and the untrue will crumble and fall.

A few verses toward the end sum up this letter and give us the word of encouragement we need in the face of perilous times. It is at once a prayer and a blessing:

Prayer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. {Heb 13:20-21 RSV}

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JAMES: The Activity Of Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The New Testament falls into various sections, each dealing with specific themes. A last section, introduced by the book of Hebrews, is concerned with the single theme of faith. The whole thrust of these letters of the New Testament is to explain to us what faith is and how it works, and each letter makes its unique contribution to that theme. James is the second book, then, in this section that deals with faith.

This letter is of unique and peculiar significance to us because it comes from the one who knew more about the Lord Jesus than any other human being – at least as far as the record that is passed on to us is concerned. James, the brother of our Lord, was raised in the same home in Nazareth, grew up with the Lord Jesus, saw him through all those silent years of which we have no record, and joined with his three other brothers – Joseph, Simon, and Judas – in opposition to the Lord Jesus during the early days of his ministry. James was finally converted by the resurrection of the Lord; and the Apostle Paul tells us that after the resurrection, the Lord appeared to James (1 Cor 15:7).

Many of us would give a lot to know what happened during that time when James had looked upon Jesus as nothing more than his brother. He was one who had grave doubts that Jesus was indeed the Son of God as he claimed; once he had regarded him as a madman, and came with his mother and brothers to have him locked up – or at least go home with them, get him out of the public view. But finally, by the resurrection, he was convinced that here indeed was God manifest in the flesh – “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” {John 1:14a RSV}, and James, too, saw “his glory as of the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,” {John 1:14b KJV}. And so he begins his letter,

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, {Jas 1:1a RSV}

That is a great testimony, isn't it, to the deity of Jesus? That this one who was his half-brother by nature should address him this way: “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” And throughout this letter, there breathes a reverence and a respect for the person of the Lord that is unequaled anywhere in the New Testament.

There has been considerable controversy as to whether James, the brother of Jesus, was the one who wrote the letter, but if you look carefully into its background, you can see that it almost certainly must be the Lord's brother who pens this letter. In the early days after the resurrection, he became the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, and was regarded by all with reverence and respect even by the Jews – so that he gained the title, “James, the just one.” Tradition tells us, supported by Eusebius, one of the great church fathers and a respected historian, that James was finally martyred for his faith by being pushed off the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle was the point in the wall around the temple that jutted out over the Kidron Valley. There is a drop of about a hundred feet from the height of that wall straight down into the valley. (I once stood on that wall, on the pinnacle of the temple, and as I looked down I was reminded that this was the very place where the devil took Jesus and tempted him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.) Eusebius tells us that in about the year 66 A.D., James the Just, the brother of our Lord, was pushed off this pinnacle by the Jews who had become angered with him for his Christian testimony. Eusebius says that the fall did not kill him, and that he managed to stumble to his

knees to pray for his murderers. So they finished the job by stoning him to death, and he joined the band of martyrs.

Now it is very evident that this letter was written during the early part of the life of the church. It comes out of that period reflected in the book of Acts, and may therefore be the earliest Christian document that we have, written perhaps even before the Gospels of Mark or Matthew.

You cannot read this letter of James without being struck by its likeness to the teaching of Jesus; in fact, if you take the Sermon on the Mount, and the letter of James, and lay them side by side, you'll see more than a dozen exact parallels. So, it is quite evident that this man James listened to the Lord Jesus and heard these messages, even though perhaps he struggled with them at the time. Also, this letter, more than any other letter in the New Testament, is characterized, like the teaching of the Lord himself, by figures of speech taken from nature. You have the waves of the sea, the animal kingdom, the forests, the fish, and others, all drawn from nature, just as the Lord Jesus himself used to do.

The theme of this letter, as I have said, is faith. If you do not have faith, you will receive nothing from God. Without faith, the book of Hebrews tells us, it is impossible to please God {cf, Heb 11:6 RSV}. Faith, therefore, is the channel by which all God's blessings come to us; and, without faith, all that you do is sin. "Whatever does not proceed from faith," says the Apostle Paul, "is sin," {Rom 14:23 RSV}. So all activity that does not stem, nor derive, from faith is sinful activity. If you are not acting out of what you believe, then what you are doing is distasteful and disgusting to God, even though it may be highly applauded by everyone around.

In this letter, then, the Apostle James is telling us several things about faith. In Chapter 1 you have a wonderful answer to the question, "What makes faith grow?" Jesus said that it does not take very much faith to start – if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, just a little bit of it, just enough to get you to act, even though you are filled with doubts in the doing of it, that is enough – that will move mountains, he said.

There are two things, James tells us, that make faith grow:

- The first is trials. This is a wonderful chapter for those who are facing trials. He said,

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness [or patience] have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. {Jas 1:2-4 RSV}

You need trials. And then he goes on to describe how to take trials. Accept them, he says, as from God, and if you lack wisdom about it, ask God to explain to you what is going on. But you have to ask in faith; you have to expect him to do this. And if you are poor, do not let that bother you – that is a trial, but it is a trial that can lead to blessing:

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. {Jas 1:12 RSV}

As I was thinking about this – about trials – I was mentally contrasting the way these early Christians faced trials with the way we do. I was thinking particularly of the Apostle Paul. You remember that in Second Corinthians he tells us, "Five times I have received ... the forty lashes less one" {2 Cor 11:24 RSV}. On five occasions he was bound at a stake, and the Jews took their leather whip and beat him thirty-nine times across his back. So that when he wrote to the Galatians, he said, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus," {Gal 6:17b RSV}. Three times he was beaten with rods. And "Once," he said, "I was stoned," {2 Cor 11:25b RSV}. And what was his attitude in all this? Well, the wonderful thing about these early Christians is that when they went through trials, they rejoiced – they counted themselves fortunate to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of the Lord. The writer of Hebrews says, "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one," {Heb 10:34b RSV}.

I could not help but contrast that with us. We get all unhappy over finding crabgrass in

the lawn, don't we? Or if we hear that our mother-in-law is coming for a visit, it makes us almost ready to commit suicide. We become disturbed over these little things.

Not long ago, a pastor told me about a woman who came down to see him, and she wanted a divorce from her husband. But when he got to the heart of the matter, he found that she was upset because she had fixed a special luncheon for him, and had done all kinds of special extra work, expecting him to come home, and he had called up at just the last minute and said he could not come home. She was furious! And she wanted a divorce! Now what kind of an attitude is that?

God sends trials, the Scriptures say, because we need them. They teach us lessons which we could never learn otherwise, and if we did not have them, we would be weak, spindly, incomplete Christians, unable to take the great responsibilities that will be placed upon us in the day when we are with the Lord – when we enter into his kingdom and into the fullness of his service.

- Second, the instrument that makes us grow is the word:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For is any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, {Jas 1:22-25a RSV}

He reminds us that it is the Word of God that makes our faith grow – expressed in our actions. “Faith comes by hearing,” says the Apostle Paul, “and hearing by the word of God,” {Rom 10:17 KJV}. And I have never seen anybody grow strong in faith who neglected the reading of the Bible. How can we expect to know the great thoughts of God, the deep things of God, the underlying secrets of life, unless we spend time with the book that reveals them? There is no other source. No university in the land moves at all into this realm of unveiling the secrets of life. So, let

your faith grow by rejoicing in trial and by understanding and doing the word.

Now in Chapters 2 and 3, James answers for us the question, “How can faith be recognized?” How is it made visible? How do you see that you have faith, or that someone else has faith? And he suggests three things that are the indication of faith:

1. First, there must be no partiality nor prejudice. If a man is prejudiced against another, because of the color of his skin, or the state of his bank account, and he treats him as though he were unimportant simply because he is not wealthy or the right color, then obviously he has no faith, says James {cf, Jas 2:1-8}:

If a poor man comes into church and you say to him, “You go over there and sit in the corner;” but you bow to the wealthy man and take him down to the front and see that he has a comfortable pew, and turn to the place in the hymn book for him and fawn over him, he says, “don't link that with faith in Jesus Christ,” because the one is canceling out the other.

You cannot manifest faith that way. Faith destroys prejudice.

During a time of particularly severe racial tensions, I was privileged to speak on the subject, “The cause of racial violence” at a State College campus. I pointed out the fact that the major cause of the racial conflict we have in our land is the church of Jesus Christ. Had the church been what it ought to have been, had Christians in both the North and South actually received Negroes and others on the basis of being brothers in Christ Jesus, this whole conflict would long since have disappeared, if indeed it had arisen at all, because the church controls the attitudes of society – not by legislation, not by propaganda, but by simply being what it ought to be. And when the church failed, society failed, and thus prejudice took root deeply in our social life.

2. Second, he said, faith is made visible by actual deeds of mercy. James was eminently practical. Suppose someone shows up at your door, he says, and tells you, “I don't have anything to eat – we're starving over at our house.” And

you say, “Well, brother, I feel for you – let’s say a prayer together.” And you pray for him and say, “Now go your way – the Lord will work everything out.” He says, “You hypocrite! You call that faith? You don’t have any faith at all.”

If your faith does not lead you to share with your destitute brother, there is something desperately wrong with it. You don’t have faith at all, because the faith of Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ, means that you actually have the life of the Lord Jesus. Can you imagine the Lord treating anybody who had a need in that way? Why, he would give him the coat off his back. He would do anything in order to supply the lack and the need of that individual. And can Christian compassion, therefore, shut its heart to the needs of those around, either on an emotional or a physical level? So, if you want your faith to be seen and recognized, it must manifest itself in actual deeds. This is why the Lord Jesus said that in the judgment, he will say, “I was hungry, and thirsty, and imprisoned, destitute and in need, and you did nothing about it,” {cf, Matt 25:41-46}

3. Now James devotes a whole chapter to the third way by which faith can be recognized: a controlled tongue. And what a vivid series of figures he uses to tell us what the tongue is like, “set on fire,” he says, “by hell,” {Jas 3:6b RSV}. You can tame every beast and bird and reptile, but no man by himself can control his tongue. The tongue, he says, is the member of our body most closely linked to our real nature. It shows what is motivating us, and, therefore, what you say is very determinative of what you are. It reveals what you are! And so the Apostle James makes very clear here that if you really claim to be a Christian and to have faith in Jesus Christ, something will be happening to your tongue. Faith will be reducing its sharpness and stopping its caustic bitterness; turning it off, and keeping it from lashing out in sharp reproof and criticism. Not that there is not a place for reproof among Christians, but not in a sharp, caustic, bitter, uncensored way.

Then in Chapter 4 and most of Chapter 5, James answers the question, “What happens when

faith fails?” What if you do not exercise faith? What if you are a Christian, but you do not live by faith, believing continually what the Lord Jesus has said and done? What happens?

1. First, wars and fightings break out, and the direct cause is a lack of prayer. Prayer is an example of faith. Prayer is the most perfect expression of faith, because prayer is the manifestation of dependence upon God. James traces this whole matter of wars, fightings, arguments, and disagreements among us to a lack of prayer. He says,

You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. {Jas 4:2 RSV}

That is the trouble. We fight with each other because we do not ask God for anything. We do not take from him the nature of love and compassion that he offers us. We do not choose to receive from him that sweetness of tongue that will give a soft answer back, but we would rather lash out at one another and fight with one another. So it is a direct result of the lack of faith that wars and fighting break out.

2. Then the next thing is that the love of the world will come in.

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? ... whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. {Jas 4:4 RSV}

And if you stop believing what the Scriptures say, you will find yourself being drawn to the lies and the alluring illusion of the world around. You will start thinking that “things” matter, and that keeping up with the Joneses is the most important part of your life; your money will start going in that direction; your time and thoughts will be invested in those things, and you will soon find yourself drifting into a state of concern only for this life, for the acceptance of others, your peer group, and you will live like this perfectly conformed to the

world. That is a direct result again, of a lack of faith.

3. Then there will be critical judgments. We have already seen something of this, but here he says,

Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law ... {Jas 4:11a RSV}

That is, he has forgotten that we are to sit under the judgment of the Word of God, and the man who criticizes another has put himself above the Word of God, saying that he is the judge. Instead of letting the Word judge him, he becomes the judge of someone else.

4. Another result of lack of faith is *presumptuous assurance*:

Come now you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain" ... {Jas 4:13 RSV}

Why? Don't you know that you have no assurance for tomorrow at all, that your life is like a breath of air that is gone just like that? You ought to recognize that only God can permit plans for the future like that and carry them out. In other words, do not get to thinking you own all of life!

A young student once came to me and he said, "I don't need this Christianity. I've got all it takes to live life – I don't need God." I said, "That's strange; tell me, are you running your diaphragm right at this moment?" He said, "What do you mean?" "Well," I said, "Your diaphragm is operating – are you the one who's operating it? Have you commanded it to work?" "Well no," he said, "it takes care of itself." "No," I said, "it doesn't. Nothing takes care of itself; someone's running it. Have you ever thought how much of your body's activities operate quite apart from your will, and what you're dependent upon them for just the very next moment?"

And then I told him the story of my friend who was back in Washington, D.C. during

World War II, and he wanted to go by plane from Washington to New York. It was in the days when you needed a priority for air travel, so he went into the ticket office and said to the girl, "I want to get a ticket for New York." She said, "Do you have a priority?" And he said, "I didn't know you needed one; how do you get it?" And she said, "Well, if you work for the government or for the airlines, I could give you one." And he said, "I don't work for either one of them. But I'll tell you who I do work for – I work for the One who owns the air that your airline flies its planes through!" And she looked at him rather strangely, and said, "Well, I don't think that's good enough to get you a priority." He leaned over, and in his characteristic way, he said, "Did you ever think what would happen if my boss shut off your air for ten minutes?" She said, "Just a minute, I'll see what I can do," and in a moment she was back and gave him the priority, and said, "You can go right aboard." You can't get much higher authority than that!

5. The final thing that James brings in is that fraud and neglect come from forgetfulness:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, ... {Jas 5:1-2a RSV}
... the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; {Jas 5:4a RSV}

What makes a Christian get over-sharp in business practices? What makes him think he can cheat on his income tax? What makes him pull a shady deal in business or line up with a partner who is perhaps willing to slice things pretty thin at times? What makes a Christian do that? He forgets; he does not believe the Word of God any more. He forgets that there is a judge watching, listening, hearing everything, weighing all that he does. He forgets that the Lord Jesus is coming again and that all that men have done in secret will be shouted from the housetops. And so he goes on to encourage those who have thus defrauded to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord, for

“the Judge is standing at the doors,” {Jas 5:9 RSV}.

And then in the final section in Chapter 5, there is a wonderful picture of early Christian fellowship. It involved four things, this chapter brings out:

- First, honesty – honesty in word, integrity.

Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, ... {Jas 5:12a RSV}

Be dependable, be trustworthy. One of the characteristics that makes for fellowship among people is that they can count on you. Part of the fruit of the spirit is to be trustworthy.

- Then the second was confession {cf, Jas 5:13-16}. Talk to one another about your problems, he said. Pray for one another; confess your faults to one another, bear one another’s burdens, open up your hearts, take down your facades and your fences, come out from behind your masks, quit trying to pretend to be something you are not, but be what you are! And immediately, the grace of the God of truth, who loves truth, will begin to flow through your group, and it will develop a fellowship that will make the world press their nose to the glass, trying to get in.

I am convinced this is the missing element in society today. We have a lot of Christians who are living in little isolation cells; they do not want to let anybody in at all. They let nobody see what they are like, never admit to failure, never talk about any pressing problems, always screw on a smile when they get

together. You ask them how are things going, “Oh, great!” they say. But they are not great at all, and this kind of hypocrisy must come to an end. James says that God will be in your midst if you take down all these fences and be open and honest with one another.

- And then, prayer is a mighty factor in this fellowship. And he reminds us of Elijah in this verse that has been such a help to me: “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects,” {Jas 5:16b RSV}. I do not think we Christians have any idea of the power that is committed to us in the ministry of prayer. Power to control the effects of daily life, and to quiet dissension and riot and tumult within so that, as Paul put it, “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life,” {1 Tim 2:2b RSV}.

- Finally, a concern for each other is evident:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. {Jas 5:19-20 RSV}

What a wonderful glimpse this is into the life of the early church. No wonder these Christians turned the city of Jerusalem upside down. Under the leadership of this man James, the church grew until there was a vast multitude of believers who were just simply setting the city on its ear, they awakened a tide of resistance finally that had to move out and crush this thing lest it turn the whole earth upside down.

That is what God can do in us also, when we live as the book of James suggests.

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The Message of First Peter

by Ray C. Stedman

In the month of July in the year 64 A.D., a great fire broke out in the city of Rome and the entire city was engulfed in flames. Hundreds of public buildings were burned to the ground, hundreds of acres were blackened in the city, and thousands of homes were destroyed, so that there were thousands of the inhabitants of the city left homeless. History has concluded that the Emperor Nero set that fire in order that he might destroy the ramshackle buildings of Rome and give him room to erect some marble palaces and other monuments that he thought would establish his name in history. It was during this time, of course, that the story was born that “Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” but it has since been conclusively proved that the violin was not invented at that time. What he played is hard to tell, but it is pretty clear from some of the contemporary historians that the Emperor was seen looking over the city and enjoying the view while it was burning. There are some who claim that when the fire was put out in one part of the city, suddenly and mysteriously it was lit again, so the historians of that day seem to be almost unanimous in concluding that Nero did burn down the city.

The populace was incensed, they were ready to revolt and overthrow him, so Nero quickly looked around for a scapegoat that he could blame for the fire. There was in Rome a group of people who were just in the right situation to lend themselves to take the blame for the fire. They were called *Christians*. They followed a man named Christ, about whom strange things were said, and they themselves did very strange things. Rumors were flying all around Rome that they were cannibals, because they talked about getting together in their houses, drinking someone's blood and eating his

body. They spoke about “love feasts,” – at which they greeted one another with a holy kiss, and shared their innermost problems with each other. This soon became enlarged into stories of sexual orgies. So they were a people already under deep suspicion. When the Emperor needed a scapegoat, therefore, he started the rumor around Rome that the Christians had burned down the city.

There were a lot of people who refused to believe that, but there were some who did, and in order to enforce it the Emperor began a very serious series of persecutions against the Christians. It was during this time that Christians were dipped in tar and burned as torches to light the gardens of Nero when he threw an outdoor party. They were tied to his chariot and dragged through the streets of Rome until they were dead. They were thrown to the lions; they were tied up in leather bags and thrown into water so that when the leather bags shrank, the Christians were squeezed to death. In a hundred other delicate ways, Nero sought to impress upon them the folly of being Christians.

Now it was during this time of the outbreak of the persecution of Christians in Rome that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter. And he wrote it, most scholars believe, in Rome to “the exiles,” he says, or “the strangers in dispersion:”

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. {1 Pet 1:1b-2a RSV}

And thus we get this beautiful and wonderful letter – what we call *The First Letter of Peter*.

You will notice that, at the close of this letter, Peter says he wrote it from Babylon. There are some who say he meant the literal Babylon on the Euphrates River, but most scholars seem quite agreed that he was using the term that was common in the Christians of that century to refer to Rome, because all of the licentiousness and idolatry and evil of Babylon had now been transferred to the capital of the Roman Empire. So it is very likely that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter from the city of Rome in about 67 A.D. And he wrote it to Christians, mostly Gentile Christians, who were scattered about in cities in the northeast province of what we now call Asia Minor, or Turkey, and to them this letter came. They were being hounded and persecuted all through the empire because of Nero's proclamation, and so the apostle wrote to encourage them in the face of their difficulties.

This, then, is one of the letters of the New Testament especially helpful to anybody who is going through some difficulty. If you are facing the problem of suffering of any kind, I would urge you to read First Peter. If you are wondering what God is doing in the world of our day and what is going to happen in the face of all the tensions and pressures and possibilities of terror that await us in the future, this is an excellent letter to read because it was written to Christians under similar circumstances.

Peter begins with the greatest fact in the life of any Christian, his relationship to Jesus Christ with the new birth. Peter says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew ... {1 Pet 1:3a RSV}

That is the greatest thing that ever happens to anyone. When I was a boy I remember Christians giving testimony and very frequently they would say, "The greatest thing that ever happened to me was the day I met Jesus Christ." Well, I was a Christian, but down deep in my heart I did not really believe that it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. It seemed to be a rather minor incident in my life. I did not have any great experience. I was only 10 years old when I came to know Jesus Christ and though it was a very precious thing to me, yet it did not seem to be a very important thing. There were other decisions that I would have to make a little later on that seemed more im-

portant, like what kind of work was I going to do, who was I going to marry and where would I live – a few things like this. But now as I look back over more than half a century, I can say that unquestionably, beyond a shadow of a doubt, far and above every other decision I ever made, that decision I made as a lad 10 years old was the greatest decision of my life. Everything has been related to that some way or another.

Now Peter goes on to point out here why this is true. He says that there are three things about this decision that are extremely significant, which you can get there and no place else:

- One is *a living hope*. What a word for this hopeless age! Peter says, (Verses 3-5):

... to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, {1 Pet 1:3b-4 RSV}

Did you know you had reservations in heaven already? Now some people say "That is pie in the sky by and by. That is opiate for the masses – you know, to keep us happy while we struggle along down here." That is what Karl Marx told the world. And I suppose it can be looked at that way, in a sense. Yet when you see young people who ought to be filled with a sense of life and living, lying sometimes for hours like zombies, corpses in our public parks because they have nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to live for, you can see what a living hope does. It activates us. It motivates us now. This is a great thing about Christianity. If you take away the hope of another world, another life, you destroy the meaning of this life. So Peter begins there.

- But that is not all. He says that we not only have a living hope, but *a present power*. We are kept by the power, Verse 5:

who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed ... {1 Pet 1:5a RSV}

A present power – a power that sustains us. It grips us when we are in terror or anxiety or

need and strengthens us and comes to us in spite of all the obstacles life throws at us.

- And third, *a rejoicing love*, for he says (Verse 8):

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. {1 Pet 1:8 RSV}

I hope all of you know what he is talking about here. That kind of quiet joy that fills the heart inside simply because you know Jesus Christ. Not because of anything he does for you, but because he is, and he lives and loves you, and you love him. Even though you cannot see him you love him.

Now Peter goes on to say that all this has been predicted by the Old Testament prophets. This is not something dreamed up nor imagined – something that is cooked up in somebody's fantasmagorical pot. It is not a fable, he says a little later on, but it is the truth predicted, and it was confirmed exactly as it was predicted. It occurred that way and thus we can rest upon it. So in this way he encourages us by the fact that we have this inner witness and this outer testimony. These are the grounds upon which Christian faith always rests, in any age or at any time.

Peter goes on to show us that growing out of this there have to be certain changes in our life as a result. If this is what we are, then what we must somehow do is relate to that, or otherwise it really is not happening to us. All that, he says, and all the New Testament continually says to us is, be what you are. That is all. Just be what you are. Do not be hypocrites. That is being something that you are not. But be what you are.

There are three marks that he sets forth in this letter for these Christians and for us.

1. First he says, “Be holy.” Now what do you think when you hear that word *holy*? Do you think of someone who has been stewed in vinegar? Sour? So pious that he is always mouthing pious sayings and talking about religious things? Is this what *holiness* means to you? Well, obviously you have missed the whole meaning of it if that is what you think.

Do you know how the Old Testament refers to *holiness*? It calls it “the beauty of holiness.” And there is something beautiful about a holy person because *holiness* means “wholeness.” This is a real person. To me the ingredients of wholeness are basically first, single-mindedness. He is a person who has his eye on a goal, on a person whom he follows, and that person is so thoroughly all-important to him that he is not interested in anything that does not relate to that person. That is single-minded, dedicated. There is something attractive about that.

Any time you meet a Marine who takes pride in his outfit you can see the kind of single-mindedness I am talking about. He is proud that he is a Marine, and he walks like it, and he talks like it.

Now there is that same quality about a Christian who understands his Lord. He is holy, in the sense that he is dedicated. And then he is at peace with himself. He is not struggling with anyone, or certainly not within himself. He is at rest. He is adjusted. He does not get upset when everything around him starts crumbling apart. That is what holiness is.

Then he is interested in you. He is outgoing. He is not always thinking about himself and his likes and concerns and his comfort. But he is thinking about yours, and how you are doing. They are a most attractive kind of people to be around. I love holy people. I wish all you were holy. It would be so much fun coming to church!

2. Then Peter says, “Be fearful.” Yes, he does. (Verses 17-19):

And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, {1 Pet 1:17-19a RSV}

What does he mean “fearful”? Well, he means have an honest respect for the kind of

Being God is. Remember whom you are dealing with. You are not dealing with another man who can be fooled by your actions and attitudes. You are dealing with One who knows you more thoroughly than you know yourself, and he is no respecter of persons. You cannot buy his favor. You cannot trick him into treating you differently than he treats anyone else. You cannot become his favorite. God does not act that way. Now if you begin to play fast and loose with him, the results that he says will happen will happen to you just as surely as to anyone else.

Now that kind of a being knows us so well that it kind of frightens you, doesn't it. That is what Peter means. "Conduct yourself with fear," remembering that you are dealing with One you cannot fool. Therefore, be honest, remembering that you have been bought, not with things men use in the market, but with something that no one else could have given, the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

3. And third, as a result of belonging to him, he says, "be priests," Chapter 2, Verse 4:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices ... {1 Pet 2:4-5a RSV}

This, by the way, is the answer to the question that many people ask today. What did Jesus mean when he said to Peter, "Peter, your name is Peter, and upon that rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now, we know that the word Peter means "rock," and the Catholic Church tells us that Jesus meant that he was going to build his church upon Peter. But Peter says, "No." He was there. He ought to know. He says, "Jesus is the rock," and every believer who comes to Christ is like a stone built upon that rock, that great underlying rock upon which God is erecting the building called the church today. But Jesus is that rock, and you are built up upon him like stones upon the great rock in order that you might be a priesthood, says Peter, in order to offer something unto

God, something that God greatly desires and wants. What is it? What can you give God that he wants that he doesn't have? Think of that. What can you and I, mere human beings in this great universe give to the One who flung the stars out into space – something he very much wants. What is it? Here Peter tells us, (Verse 9):

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. {1 Pet 2:9 RSV}

That is what God wants. He wants you to talk about what he has done for you and tell others what he is like to you. And when you do you offer a sacrifice unto God that is like a sweet-smelling offering and a savor of worship unto him.

Peter now goes on now to deal with the more practical aspects of life. He deals with how they should live their life as citizens. Here these people were living in the Roman Empire, and under this persecution, and yet they had certain obligations. In Chapter 2, Verse 11 and on, he deals with these obligations. He says as citizens submit yourself to the government and the powers that be. Verse 17:

Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear [love] God. Honor the emperor. {1 Pet 2:17 RSV}

What emperor? Nero, who drags Christians around behind his chariot and burns them as living torches in his garden? Honor the emperor? In these days when young people, even sometimes Christian young people, think they have the right to take the law into their own hands, disobey the powers that be, and do so in the name of God, ought to read a passage like that and remember that it was of the very emperor who was causing the heartache among Christians that Peter wrote these words, "Honor the emperor."

Then he talks on about servants.

Servants, be submissive to your masters. [Do not boycott them, or riot against them, or demonstrate.] ... not only to the

kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. {1 Pet 2:18-19 RSV}

And then he reminds them of the example of the Lord Jesus. He says, "That is what he did." Verse 23:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; {1 Pet 2:23a RSV}

He committed himself unto the Lord.

Then he moves from that into the home. Just as the Lord took the unjust treatment that was accorded to him, he says,

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands. {1 Pet 3:1a RSV}

– even though they are not always right.

Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives. {1 Pet 3:7a RSV}

– even though they sometimes nag you and disturb you and bother you, "bestow honor on them," just as you Christians are to honor this monstrous wretch who sits on the throne of Rome, where Peter says: so you husbands should honor your wives. Verse 8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. {1 Pet 3:8 RSV}

That is the mark of a Christian in society.

Then comes this difficult passage about spirits in prison and baptism now saving you and all these things many have struggled over. But the key to that whole passage in Chapter 3 is Verse 18:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. {1 Pet 3:18a RSV}

That is the key. He did this in order that he might bring us to God. Christ underwent suffering. He came in the flesh. He died in the flesh. He did all this that he might accomplish the great end that he might bring us to God.

Now this reminds Peter of the way the gospel was preached in Noah's day and how the Spirit of

Christ, speaking through Noah, preached to the people of his day in order that he might bring them to God. But they refused, and so the ark came in as a picture of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ to carry them over the floods of judgment and bring them to God. Baptism, which is also a picture relating to the ark, now saves us just as the ark saved Noah. Baptism (not water baptism, and it says so, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but the baptism of the Spirit which puts us into the ark of safety, our Lord Jesus) is that which now saves us as an appeal to God from the clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you read the passage in that light, I believe you will have no difficulty with it.

So Peter concludes this matter of suffering, exhorting the Christians to remember that though they walk in honesty and faithfulness to God, not living like the Gentiles do, and all of the biblical writers say this, "You are to no longer live like the Gentiles do but you are to return good for evil." That is the idea. We are not to be concerned about our own satisfaction and our own rights. We are so concerned aren't we, that we get what we have coming. This is the spirit of our age, that we get our rights, that everything we have coming, we receive. But this is not the spirit of a Christian, and we Christians must learn that and begin to operate on that level because until we start acting like Christians, we have no testimony at all before the law. If we start insisting upon our rights, even in little ways, we cancel out what witness we have.

You have perhaps read of the story of the boy who got concerned about all the work he had to do around the house. So one morning he laid beside his mother's breakfast plate a little list of things: for mowing the lawn, \$1.00, for cleaning the room, 50 cents, for vacuuming the rug, 50 cents, and several other things and then he drew a total and put it down there and laid the bill beside his mother's plate. And she read it. She did not say anything. But the next morning he found a list beside his plate. It said: for washing your clothes, no charge; for fixing your meals, no charge; for taking care of your room, no charge, and a list of other things. And then she drew a total and wrote underneath, "No charge. Done out of love." She laid it beside his plate. That day he did everything he had to do in the house without a word of complaint. He got the point.

This is what a Christian is to do. He returns good for evil. And this letter of Peter's is to people who are undergoing real punishment.

The last section deals with life in the body of Christ. It is a wonderfully helpful section that starts with Chapter 4, Verse 7:

The end of all things is at hand: {1 Pet 4:7a RSV}

And if that was applicable to his day, think what it is for today.

... therefore ... {1 Pet 4:7b RSV}

What is the first thing now? What if the Lord came next year? What if we are at the end of the age? "The end of all things is at hand." What is the first thing that ought to be said? Well, Peter says it,

... keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: {1 Pet 4:7c-10 RSV}

That is his program for the end of the age. It does not look tremendously impressive in the eyes of the world but it is tremendously impressive in the eyes of heaven. And this is what will accomplish the will of God –

... that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. {1 Pet 4:11b RSV}

And then he speaks about the suffering and the way to rejoice – because we share Christ's sufferings –

not to suffer as a wrongdoer but to rejoice in the fact that God is at work.

Peter then speaks of the mutual ministry of the elders to the members, and the members one to another. And he closes his letter (5:10):

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. {1 Pet 5:10 RSV}

Can you ask anything better than that?

To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {1 Pet 5:11 RSV}

Well, those are wonderful words, aren't they? – for people living in the close of an age. Let us take them to heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this look from the 1st century to us in this 20th century. We pray that these words which were true then and are still equally true today may find a response in our hearts, young and old alike. Lord, help us to remember that we are strangers and exiles. This is not our home, even though we are temporarily assigned here on duty. Help us to be faithful to you and obedient to your Word and responsive to your grace and your love until him whom we have not yet seen but love with a full heart shall welcome us and restore to us more than all we could have ever dreamed of above that which we think has been taken away. We ask in his name, Amen.

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2 PETER: In The Face of Falsehood

by Ray C. Stedman

It almost seems that Second Peter was written for us today, in the present hour in which we live. Every word of it is so pertinent, so contemporary, so filled with practical advice for the day in which we find ourselves, that it is at once confirmation of the freshness and the vitality of the Word of God, which never gets out of date. It also suggests that perhaps the cycle has come full turn – that we are now living in days very similar indeed to those in the 1st century, and that the conditions we are facing in our world are almost the same in kind, if not in expanse, as the conditions that were faced then.

There is a considerable difference between Peter's two letters. The first one was full of rejoicing hope in the face of suffering. But the theme of this second letter is that of faithful truth in the face of falsehood; how to detect error, how to live in the midst of deceit, how to distinguish between right and wrong, when wrong is subtly alluring and deceptive.

First, let me give you just a brief outline of the letter. It falls into three chapters, each of which strikes a different note. In the first chapter, the apostle is giving his readers a word of exhortation on what the Christian life is all about. In the second chapter, he gives a word of warning on how to recognize and handle false teachers. And in the third chapter, he gives us a word of certainty about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the facts that underlie our faith. And then he draws a conclusion. It is a very simple outline, isn't it – a very

practical letter, as you might expect coming from such a practical, hard-headed Christian as Peter.

This letter was very likely written from the same place as the first letter, when Peter was a prisoner, perhaps of Nero of Rome. At least, it is evident that he is in great danger, because in this letter he says that he feels the time is drawing near when he is to put off his body – his tent, his habitation – to go and be with the Lord. And he says the Lord himself showed him this, as recorded for us at the close of the Gospel of John. The Lord Jesus had said to Peter that there would come a time when men would bind his hands and lead him where he did not desire to go.

Peter understood this to mean that he was to suffer and die as our Lord died, on a cross. And tradition tells us that Peter was indeed crucified, that he was so humbled by the fact that he was counted worthy to die the same kind of a death that the Lord Jesus did, that he begged his captors to crucify him upside down.

In writing to these Christians in the midst of trouble, he is not in this letter trying to encourage them with how to rejoice in the face of suffering, but rather he is trying to help them to be **true in the face of falsehood**. In this opening chapter, there is a wonderful word in the first verse; the letter is addressed,

to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours ... {2 Pet 1:1b RSV}

Think of that! We have been so tempted to think of these mighty apostles as men of such sterling character and of such abundant faith that they are far above us in their grasp of knowledge and truth, but the apostles themselves never thought of themselves that way. They regarded themselves as nothing but ordinary believers with the same equality of opportunity in faith as any other believer enjoyed.

Years ago, I ran across this expression, and it has been an encouragement to my own heart ever since: “Even the weakest believer holds in his hands all that the mightiest saint ever possessed.” That is the theme of Peter’s opening chapter. Listen to these words:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}

All the necessities both for handling life and for manifesting righteousness, or godliness – godlikeness – in this world are ours. That means that everyone who has genuinely come to Jesus Christ, without exception, has all that it takes to handle all that life can throw at him.

Do you believe that? A lot of people do not; they are always looking for something more – some new experience, some different reaction, some further revelation, some outstanding feeling of some kind – and they think that without these things they can never be the kind of Christian they ought to be. But do you see how flatly Peter denies this? He says, if you come to Christ, you have him; and if you have him, you have all that God is ever going to give you. You have all power and all things that pertain to life and godliness though the knowledge of him.

Now if this is true, then there is no excuse for failure, is there? That means if we have everything in Christ, we only need to know more of him, and we will have all that it takes to solve the problem we may be confronting.

I wish I could drive that home in some practical way. To me, the great thing about being a Christian is that, in Jesus Christ, I really am finding practical answers to every problem that I am confronted with. Now, of course, when you become a Christian you do not automatically know everything in all the books in the world. But you do gain an insight and an understanding, as you grow in the

knowledge of Christ, to handle all of the difficulties, heartaches, and problems, and to understand life and yourself.

His divine power has already granted to us everything we need. But when you first come to know Christ, although you have all that it takes, you have not yet discovered it – you have not yet found all this in terms of experience. There are two channels by which it comes:

First, the promises:

... by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, {2 Pet 1:4a RSV}

These are not just mere glowing words; this is not just so much theological twaddle designed to stir your heart a bit. These are sure and certain guarantees that God has given us, that he will honor with all that he has. His very nature, his very character, his magnificence is at stake in these words; they refer to promises that are sure and certain.

Therefore, the first thing we need to do is to learn what he has promised, which means acquainting ourselves with the Scriptures. That is why it is impossible for you to find fulfillment in your life, and really discover the kind of person God wants you to be, unless you understand the Word of God.

You can take as many courses as you like, and all you will get is the accumulation of man’s knowledge with its mixture of both truth and error, with no ability to distinguish one from the other. That is why even the most educated person who does not know the Bible can make the most grievous and atrocious blunders, and it happens all the time. But if we begin to understand these great and mighty promises, then we will understand what life is all about. That is what they are for, to reveal things as they really are.

Now, notice the effect of relying on these promises:

that you may escape from the corruption that is in the world ... {2 Pet 1:4b RSV}

That sounds inviting, doesn’t it? There is so much corruption around. Corruption means anything that defiles and pollutes and destroys. How will you escape from it unless you have the truth from God? No escape is possible. We would all be caught inextricably in a mesh of lies and deceit

without the truth from God. Corruption is in the world because of passion. Three passions are at the root of all human evil:

- Lust, which means sexual passion, in a wrong sense – which destroys the body;
- Greed, which is materialism; and then
- Ambition, the pride of spirit that seeks popularity and fame and the praise of man.

Those three things are wrecking the lives of men and women all over the earth, and those are the three things which the truth of God particularly delivers us from as we understand and obey it.

Now the second avenue of discovering all of these things that are available to us is found beginning in Verse 5:

For this very reason make every effort [be diligent] to supplement your faith [literally, “to round out” your faith] with virtue [that means, basically, “the courage to face life”], and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness [patience], and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. {2 Pet 1:5-7 RSV}

Now you have all this in Christ, but you need to work at discovering it and applying it in your life. That is what we are all engaged in doing now, trying to apply these in practical terms with the people we live with and work with, and the irritating folks that are always rubbing our fur the wrong way – our in-laws, and our out-laws – no matter who they may be, we are to apply this there. And what is the result?

For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful ... {2 Pet 1:8a RSV}

as a Christian. Do you want a recipe for success as a Christian? Well, there you have it – faith and obedience. The knowledge of the promises of God and the application of them in specific situations – these will keep you from being unfruitful and ineffective.

Furthermore,

whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted; [even though he’s a Christian, he is living just like anybody else, and he has apparently forgotten that] he was cleansed from his old sins. {2 Pet 1:9 RSV}

Even his regeneration has seemingly had little effect upon him.

... be the more zealous [says the apostle] to confirm your call [make it sure] for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. {2 Pet 1:10b-11 RSV}

That means, when it comes time for you to go home, the trumpets will be blowing in glory at your entrance into that kingdom because you have found the secret of successful living.

Peter goes on now to show us the two guarantees that undergird this statement:

- First, the eyewitness account of the apostle himself: He says,

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... {2 Pet 1:16a RSV}

And then he recites an instance: He says, “I was with him on the holy mountain when he was changed before me, and I saw him – I was an eyewitness of that event – and I’m making known to you what I saw, the coming and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. We were eyewitnesses of his majesty,” {cf, 2 Pet 1:18}

And that is where Christian faith rests – on the eyewitness accounts of men and women who were there and who simply reported what they saw and heard, and what Jesus did.

- Peter goes further to say that this is confirmed by another voice – the voice of the prophets of the Old Testament. These men wrote not by their own inspiration – they did not write their private opinions – but they wrote what they were given by the Spirit of God, and they accurately predicted events that were to follow

centuries afterward. If that is not confirmation of the truth of this thing, what could be?

Two things – eyewitnesses, and prophetic words – underlie our faith.

In the second chapter, Peter gives us a warning against certain **false teachers**. Again, this sounds as though it were written for our own hour:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, ... {2 Pet 2:1a RSV}

What a strange thing that we have reached the stage today when a great denomination is now trembling on the very verge of declaring that there is no such thing as heresy, because actually everything is true, or at least nobody is certain of anything, and therefore, how can you charge anyone with heresy.

But Peter says some will arise in church who “will bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them,” which tells us that these men are not mere atheistic antagonists of Christianity – we have always had those – but these will be men who claim to be Christians, who profess to love the Lord Jesus, who profess to be followers of Christ; yet the things that they teach will deny everything that he stood for. What echoes of some of the voices that are raised in our day!

And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. {2 Pet 2:2 RSV}

People will look down on those who believe the Bible as being simple-minded, ignorant folk who have no understanding of the great issues of the day, who are back in the dark ages.

And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep. {2 Pet 2:3 RSV}

Then he passes to the certainty of the judgment on these men, and he recounts three instances from the past which prove that God knows how to handle a situation like this. Do not be alarmed when false

teachers arise and scoff at your belief. God knows what he is doing, and he will handle them.

- He did not spare the angels when they sinned, but he judged them.
- He did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah when they sinned, but he judged them; and
- He did not spare the ancient world, but he judged it in the flood.

And yet, through all of them, he preserved a remnant of integrity. Therefore, his conclusion is,

... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment. {2 Pet 2:9 RSV}

Then follows a very vivid description of the characteristics of these false teachers:

1. First, they will be presumptuous; that is, they will be eloquent with impressive words about things having to do with life and death and salvation and other great themes, but they will really be ignorant – they will not know what they are talking about.
2. They are like animals, says Peter, who are “creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant,” {2 Pet 2:12b RSV}. The second characteristic, then, is ignorance; and
3. The third is shamelessness; they will encourage licentiousness and sexual misconduct. They will openly urge people to indulge their lusts freely and shamelessly.
4. The fourth mark is that they will be greedy;

They have hearts trained in greed. {2 Pet 2:14 RSV}

For the sake of money, they will teach almost anything they think people want to hear.

5. And, finally, they are pretentious:

... uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions ... men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. {2 Pet 2:18 RSV}

And then we have this word, most illuminating in our day: They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. Doesn't that sound like some of today's proponents of drug use, such as the so-called *mind-stretching* hallucinatory drugs? "You will experience an opening of the mind," they say, "and enter into an experience of liberty such as you have never had before." And when people try it, there is indeed a sense of freedom, but with it comes an increasing bondage that destroys. So the apostle concludes with some of the most sobering words in Scripture:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. {2 Pet 2:20-21 RSV}

Think of this. Men who work with the Scriptures, who have in their hands the Word of God; who study it, and attempt to explain it, who hold the position of teachers of the truth – they themselves deny all they have taught and learned, and become victims of their own delusions.

The final word then, is a note of **certainty**. Do not be discouraged, he says, by this prevailing atmosphere of error. Remember that One is coming who will settle the whole thing. He speaks of the assurance of the coming of the Lord. He says there will be scoffers who will base their arguments against the second coming of Christ on the fact that all things have continued as they were since the beginning of creation.

This is a stable universe, they will say, nothing ever happens out of the ordinary; there can be no intrusion into this universe of a divine power that operates in any way differently than what you can observe around you. But, says Peter, they are

wrong. They have been wrong in the past, they will be wrong in the future.

This is not a stable universe. This universe has been upset terribly in the past, and it will be upset again. The flood is the record of the past and it points to a day in the future when the world will be destroyed again – not by water, but by fire. And in a most unusually descriptive passage here, many of our nuclear scientists who are Christians have seen a description of a nuclear explosion:

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. {2 Pet 3:7 RSV}

And then skip to Verse 10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. {2 Pet 3:10 RSV}

Very instructive, isn't it? Now, he says, you need to remember two things about this:

1. Remember that the past has proved what the future will be and the record of the flood is the guarantee that God is going to move as he said he would in the future. And the world that now exists is kept together by the same word as the world that existed before the flood. The one thing that keeps life operating at all is the Word of God, the authority of God. Therefore, all God needs to do is to alter things in our physical universe, and the whole thing begins to fall apart. And Peter says, if you get impatient and wonder about the time, remember this: God does not look on time as you do. A day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day; therefore, what seems to drag on endlessly for us is but a few moments for him.
2. Second, remember that God has a purpose in delaying, for which we ought to be very grateful; once God begins judgment, everyone will be included. He delays his judging hand in order to give us all a chance to think over what

life is all about. That is what the word “repentance” means; it means to think again; to take a good square look at the facts, and act upon that basis. God withholds his hand in order that men might have a chance to think things over and change their ways. Isn’t that wonderful? Aren’t you glad he waited for you?

A man told me some time ago that he was walking with a friend past a church, and on the bulletin board out in front he noticed the subject of the message for next Sunday. It was, “If I Were God,” and it started these men thinking. One of them turned to the other and said, “Do you know what I’d do if I were God? I’d just lean over the battlements of heaven and take a great big breath and blow it out of existence!” Well, we know how he feels, don’t we?

Why does God put up with the insults of men? With the violence, and the cruelty, and the injustice and the darkness, and the deviousness, and the impurity, and the shameless things that go on in our world? Why? Because he is a loving God, and he is not willing that any should perish. He waits and delays, in order that men might have a chance to think things through, and see where it is all going.

The apostle’s conclusion raises a searching question:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be? {2 Pet 3:11a RSV}

Since this is how the world is going to end, what kind of a person ought we to be right now in terms of holiness and godliness, waiting for and (this is almost incredible, isn’t it?) hastening the coming of the day of God.

How do we hasten the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? How do we bring at last into being what men have hoped and dreamed for for centuries – a world at peace, a world of plenty, a world of blessing and quietness and joy, and unlimited opportunity for all? How do you bring about a world like that? During an election year, every politician promises this, doesn’t he? And we do not know which one to believe, because frankly, down deep, we suspect that they are all phonies – none of them can produce what they promise, because they are not getting at the heart of the problem. But this

word says that we, the people of God, have the ability to hasten the coming of this day.

How is it done, then? Three primary things are suggested in the Scriptures:

1. First, prayer: Remember what the Lord Jesus taught us to pray? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” {Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2 KJV}. That is a prayer for hastening the day of God.
2. Second, by witnessing: This gospel of the kingdom must be preached to all the nations, and then shall the end come, says the Lord Jesus {cf, Matt 24:14}. So as we share our faith, not in a mechanical way, trying to hammer the truth into people, but in genuine love and compassion, administering to the needs of others, and speaking of a hope that enflames us and engages all our heart, we are hastening the coming of the day of God. And,
3. Third, by obedience: There is a saying among the Jews that if all of Israel would obey the Law fully for one day, the Messiah would come. What God is looking for is men and women who will be obedient, who will be His. The only freedom that men have at all is the freedom either to serve God or to serve the Devil, one or the other. That is the only choice afforded to us. And the freedom that comes from serving the Devil is only a temporary, apparent freedom which soon vanishes in a darkening despair leading to nothingness. But the freedom that the Lord Jesus provides is a growing, enriching freedom that widens out to the fullness of life. It never ends until all things are yours; all things present and things to come; the world and everything else is yours who know Jesus Christ.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. {2 Pet 3:14 RSV}

Then in a final P.S., he says that Paul agrees too. Those things which our beloved brother Paul has written, he says, some people twist and distort as they do the other Scriptures {cf, 2 Pet 3:15b-16}, but do not pay any attention to them.

And then he closes with two verses which I feel should be written large across the present lawlessness of our day:

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. {2 Pet 3:17-18 RSV}

Stability is based on knowledge, Peter says – knowledge of all the unchangeable truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Since we have the facts then, we must not allow ourselves to be carried away, deceived, by those who seek to undermine us. In a time of very real attacks on the truth, now as in Peter's time, we must exercise our freedom in Christ and choose to remain faithful and obedient to him.

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1 JOHN: The Fruit of Fellowship with Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

There are two of Jesus' disciples whom I would particularly like to have known in the days of their earthly life. One is Peter, and the other is John. I like these two men. I am especially impressed by the change that fellowship with the Lord Jesus produced in their lives. This is what intrigues me about these two.

Peter, as you know, was erratic, impulsive, brash. As someone has well said, "Whenever Peter enters a scene, it's always with a thud." He seems to have a gift for putting his foot in his mouth – he suffered from hoof-in-mouth disease. Yet the Lord made him a steady, stable, dependable rock, as his name implies. He became a rallying point, a gathering point for the Christians in the days of the persecutions which broke out in the 1st century. It was only because he was with the Lord, and knew the Lord. Most of the change took place after the Lord's death and resurrection, however, so we do not need to feel that it was the personal presence of Jesus that changed these men. He changed them after he died and rose again, just as he can change us.

John was the other one who was dramatically changed by our Lord. He was a young man, the youngest of all the disciples. In fact, many scholars feel that he was a teenager when he first started to follow the Lord. Perhaps he was seventeen or eighteen years of age. Along with his brother, James, he was a hot-headed young man, given to sharp and impulsive utterances with a tendency toward blowing off steam. He was probably a

loudmouth, because Jesus nicknamed him 'Son of Thunder.' That was our Lord's gentle way of labeling John's problem. He just kept the thunder rolling all the time. So our Lord called both James and John "Sons of Thunder," {Mark 3:17}. But John became the apostle of love. He was noted for his gentleness and his graciousness and his goodness. He was called "the virgin." As far as we know, he never married. There is no record that he ever did. But he was called "virgin" primarily because of the purity of his life. He became a man who was characterized by such an outstanding devotion and love for the Lord Jesus, that all his life he was singled out as the apostle of love.

Now it is this John who writes these letters to us. You may know that this first letter of John is possibly the last of the New Testament to be written. It may well have been written after the Gospel of John. It is perhaps, therefore, the last word we have from the apostles. It undoubtedly comes from near the close of the 1st century, perhaps even the year 100 A.D., as some scholars tell us. It was written from the city of Ephesus, where John spent the latter years of his life.

It was possibly written to the Christians in this city of Ephesus, who were facing (as we are) dangers and difficulties of living in a godless, pagan world, given over to the worship of sex and to licentious practices, lovers of human wisdom (as all these Greek cities were) and especially desirous of exalting man and his abilities. Now that sounds very much like our modern western world, doesn't

it? First John was written to people in this kind of situation then, and therefore it has a lot to say to us.

In one of the commentaries of First John, the author says, “The Epistle of First John defies outlining.” For many years, I would have agreed with that statement. I thought John was kind of a rambler. He just wrote on and changed the subject frequently. It did not look as if there was any rhyme or reason to his letter. But as I preached through a series of thirty-five messages on this letter, I began to see its makeup.

John is concerned about one thing, primarily, and that is *authentic Christianity*! I suppose that even as early as the close of the 1st century, some of the dullness and deadness and drabness with which Christianity has sometimes been plagued, had begun to appear. The freshness, the vitality, the newness, the excitement, the drama of the Christian faith had begun to lose its glow and its glamour. John, therefore, is led of God to call people back to the vital things, the things that make for real life. So he is concerned about an authentic Christian manifestation, and authentic Christianity is always made up of the same three elements. The body of this letter of First John is an emphasis upon the three essential things that make Christianity genuinely Christian. They are truth, righteousness, and love. Those three, held in perfect balance, are a sign of genuine Christianity. These become, therefore, the marks that John emphasizes as proof to anyone that he or she is a Christian. The letter gives us a wonderful measuring stick whereby we can test our own lives:

- How are we doing?
- Do we fulfill the qualifications?
- Do we manifest truth, righteousness and love?

There is a prelude that I will discuss in a minute, but beginning at Verse 18 of Chapter 2, and carrying on through Chapter 4, Verse 21, you have his emphasis on these three things: truth, righteousness and love.

But before he begins that, he gives us a prelude, which is really the key to the way truth, righteousness and love can be made manifest in your life. There is a relationship that is necessary. That relationship John terms **fellowship with Christ** – oneness with him, an identification of your life with

Jesus Christ. Now, if you do not have that you cannot produce righteousness, truth and love. It is impossible.

Someone has said that it is possible to search through all the writings of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Confucius and Buddha, and other great world leaders of moral and ethical thought, to find everything that is written in the New Testament that exhorts man as to what to do. In other words, if all you need is good advice, you do not need the Bible. You can get plenty of good advice from these other religions. But one thing these other leaders do not give you is the how. How! That is what John is talking about.

How do you follow this good advice? You know the Golden Rule is not found only in the New Testament. You find an expression of the Golden Rule, always in a negative form, in other religions: “Do not do to others as you do not want them to do to you.” Ah, but in Christ you find the secret of how! It is by unity with him – union with him, fellowship with the Lord Jesus – he dwelling in you and you dwelling in him. That is what John begins to talk about.

He says from the very beginning that he has a personal experience of this. “I saw him,” he says. “I felt him. I heard him. I touched him. He was a real person; there was nothing phony or sham about him. In the fellowship of his life, I found it possible to begin to love, to walk in truth, in obedient righteousness with God,” {cf, 1 Jn 1:1-2}. That is the heart and key to this letter, as he begins with this note of fellowship with Jesus Christ.

You will notice that all through this letter he emphasizes the fact that Jesus appeared in history. That is the first theme he talks about under the heading of **truth**. The truth about Jesus is that he is God and man. He is both –

- the eternal God, linked with all the great revelations of the Old Testament that mark out the being and character of God,
- and he is man, having come in the flesh, he lived among us, was a man, suffered as a man, died as a man.

All this, so that we might share his life, his divine nature.

Now this was opposed to a philosophy that was very current in John's day. It was what we call *gnosticism*. The nearest thing to it today is Christian Science which is almost pure gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, the spirit of man is imprisoned in an evil body; the purpose of this life is to teach us how to somehow rise above the evil of our body and release the spirit from the evil, material body, thus achieving nirvana – or heaven, or whatever you want to call it.

Now, you will notice, that is still very commonly accepted in many places. It is against that idea that John writes, and says, "Now don't follow that" because Jesus has come in truth. The truth about Jesus is that he came as God, became man, and anybody who does not say that about Jesus Christ is a liar.

The problem was that there were many people back in those days who were wonderful. They gave the appearance of being suave and gentle and thoughtful and courteous. They were not out to destroy Christianity; they were out to improve upon it. So they just dropped out, de-emphasized some of the things that the New Testament says about Jesus and emphasized others that agreed with what they wanted to teach. Thus, they attempted to make Christianity intellectually respectable.

This process is still going on today. But John says that if you give way to this, if you succumb to this kind of delusion, you will find that you have been tricked and end up not a Christian at all. You will be following a lie and become a victim of a sham and a delusion. The results of that are terrible.

In the second section, the apostle emphasized **righteousness**. Christianity is not just signing the doctrine or creed. It is not just writing your name under a statement of belief – "We believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord who suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day..." and so on. It is not that; it is more than truth; it is also righteousness. It means that your behavior changes. The emphasis of John, as with all the writers of the New Testament, is this: "Look," he says, "if you really have Jesus Christ living in you, you can't be the same person. You cannot go on living in sin, doing wrong things, ly-

ing and stealing, living in sexual immorality. You cannot do it."

You see, these Gnostics were saying, "Look, if spirit is good and matter is evil, and our bodies are matter, then the only thing that counts is the spirit. What you do with your body doesn't make any difference. So if you want to indulge the lusts of it, go ahead. It won't affect your spiritual standing with God." As a result they were turning (as Jude puts it) the grace of God into licentiousness {Jude 1:4 RSV}. People were being taught, Christians were being taught, that they could practice all the immorality of their day, and God would still treat them exactly the same. It would not change their relationship one whit. But John says,

No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. {1 Jn 3:9 RSV}

The two are incompatible. You cannot have the Holy Spirit living in you and live an unholy life. If you live the unholy life and profess to be a Christian, you are a liar, says John. He is very blunt about it.

Yet, there is still a third thing. It is easy for Christians to say today, "Well, yes, this is true. We've got to teach the truth, obey the truth, and believe the truth about Christ. And of course, we've got to stop doing the things the world is doing." That is as far as they go. Have you heard Christians get up and testify along this line? They say, "I used to smoke and drink and dance and go to the movies and play cards and gamble and all these terrible things. But I don't do any of them any more. I believe in the Lord. I've stopped all these things." They leave the impression that it ought to make everyone become a Christian, to see such a tremendous change. But what you discover, soon enough, is that people are not a bit impressed by what you have stopped doing. Not the least bit. Why, worldlings can stop doing these things if they have a good reason. And they do it. If that is the basis of your Christian testimony, you have got nothing more to say than they do. No, the world is not a bit impressed by stopping something.

What does impress them is seeing you do something they cannot do. That is **love**. That is why John says that the third mark of a genuine Christian is that he begins to love – not those that

love him (anybody can do that, is Jesus' remark) – but beginning

- to love those who do not love you,
- to treat kindly those who mistreat you,
- to return good for evil and to pray for those who spitefully use you,
- to welcome and treat kindly those who are against you and are trying to hurt you.

This is the mark, isn't it?

You no longer treat those who have needs around you with callous indifference, but you respond to them and do not shut them out of your life. John says, "If a man comes to your door and says, 'I am hungry, and I don't have anything to wear,' and you have what he needs, and you say to him, 'Well, that's all right brother. We'll pray for you. Go away and be filled and be warmed,' it is ridiculous to say that the love of God dwells in you." It is absurd. How can you say that? If you do not love your brother whom you can see, how can you say that you love God whom you don't see?" {cf, 1 Jn 4:20}. See how practical he gets in these matters?

So he emphasized that fellowship with the Lord Jesus, a oneness, a day-by-day walk with him, opening your heart to his word, letting his light shine upon you – thus letting yourself be changed by the power of Christ – will result in truth about Jesus righteousness in your personal behavior and love toward your brothers, your fellow members of the human race, as well as those fellow members of the church of God.

Then the final result, and the closing note of the letter, is **assurance**. You know things with a knowledge that is unshakable, which nobody can shatter, and no rational arguments will disturb. You know that what God has told you is true. You know that what he has revealed about the world is true. You have a continually growing certainty that underlies your life. As we read in John's closing note:

We know that one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. {1 Jn 5:18 RSV}

That is righteousness. We know, he says, that we are of God, the very nature and being of God – the God who is love – and that the whole world is in the power of the evil one. That is why they cannot love. They talk about it and they want it. They search for it, but they cannot find it – because God is love. We know that we are of God, he says,

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 5:20 RSV}

What a declaration that is, in an age when everybody is telling us that you cannot know anything for sure, that nobody knows anything for certain. John says that we do. We know. We have been given an understanding.

Here is his final word and it is such an important one. One that I think ought to ring in our ears every day:

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 Jn 5:21)

Why? Well, because the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," {Matt 22:37b RSV}. That is the chief end of man. And idolatry is loving something else as God. What is an idol? It is a substitute God. Your God is

- what you get excited about,
- what you save your money for,
- what you spend it on,

that is your God.

What is important to you, that is your God.

Little children – you who have found the true God – keep yourselves from these secondary idols, these substitute gods that demand your attention. Give yourself, alone, to the One who can fulfill in you all your heart's desires. It is a great word, isn't it? – the word that will lead us safely through all the difficulties along our path.

Prayer:

Our Father, you know the many idols that loom before us each day: the god of pleasure; the god of selfishness; the god Narcissus, who makes us love ourselves, admire ourselves, look to ourselves; the god of love, Venus, how we follow her, Lord, and exalt her when we should not; the god Bacchus, who makes us revel in pleasure as if that were the chief end in life, as if fun were the reason for living. Lord, deliver us from these gods, these false gods, that will

rob us of our faith, of our love for humanity. Make us fall more truly in love with the Lord Jesus who alone is the only true God, who has come to give us an understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and has come to teach us righteousness and how to love with a heart that is self-giving instead of self-serving. These things we ask, Lord, in this 20th century hour, knowing that we are exposed to the same dangers that they were in the 1st century, and so desperately needing your power. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

2 JOHN: The Vital Balance

by Ray C. Stedman

The second letter of John is the only letter in the New Testament that was written to a woman. As we can gather from the letter itself, it was written to a mother with several children, perhaps a widow. It appears that she had written to the Apostle John to ask his opinion about certain problems that had come up.

Back in those days, of course, the New Testament was not available as it is to us. The leaders of the churches were dependent upon certain men, called prophets, who went from place to place, preaching the truth. Evidently some of these men had come to the home of this woman, probably in the city of Ephesus, and they had raised certain doctrinal matters which disturbed her. Not knowing quite what to do, she wrote to the Apostle John and asked for his counsel. This letter is his response to her question. As we go through this, we will see how it also answers many of the questions we have today – especially the question of how to treat people who teach wrong things.

The first six verses present the problem to us and give us John's approach in answering it:

The elder [as John terms himself] to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us for ever:

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children following the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. And now I beg you, lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, the we follow

his commandment; this is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning, that you follow love. {2 Jn 1:1-6 RSV}

Here John is setting the stage for the answer to this lady's problem. He is gathering together two things that must be taken into consideration in facing a problem of this kind. Two outstanding words are used all through the text. What are they? Truth is the first, isn't it? – and love. Truth and love. Notice how he links these two in Verse 3:

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. {2 Jn 1:3 RSV}

This ought to be the characteristic of Christians.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says the same thing – that a Christian should learn to speak the truth in love {cf, Eph 4:15 RSV}. The remarkable work of a Christian life is to gather these often opposing things together and keep them in balance.

Now that is our problem as well. Many of us emphasize one at the expense of the other:

- We may emphasize truth and center upon doctrinal matters, insisting that the Scriptures be followed carefully, but at the expense of love. When we do this, we are rigid and cold and judgmental, sometimes even cruel, in the way we say things. Even though what we say is exactly right, we are trying to defend the truth of God at the expense of love.
- On the other hand, there are those of us who make the mistake of emphasizing love at the expense of truth. They feel that we should ac-

cept everyone and everything, being tolerant in all directions.

This second group reminds me of the story Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell about the man who came to church, and on the way out, as he shook hands with the pastor one Sunday morning, he said to him, "Oh Pastor, I want to tell you what a blessing you've been to me since you've been pastor of this church. Why, when I first started here, I didn't have any regard for God, man or the devil. But since you came, I've learned to love all three."

Now the problem is to keep truth and love in balance. This is what you see so beautifully in the Lord Jesus; he walked in truth and love. He could deal in tenderness with the dissolute sinner, the outcast from society who came to him. And with a blistering word, he could scorch a Pharisee until he turned red with shame, as all the rottenness in that man's inner life was revealed. He spoke the truth and he dealt in love and he kept them in perfect balance.

John says, "When you go to handle a problem of doctrinal error, *emphasize both truth and love.*" A lot of people who read this letter miss these opening words; thus they miss the sanity of balance that pervades the letter.

In the next section, we have the answer to the lady's question:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and antichrist. Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1:7-11 RSV}

First, you have to recognize the nature of the error. Two things are said here that describe the fundamental types of Christian perversions. There are only two; all Christian error and heresies gather about one or the other of these:

1. There are, first of all, those who are deceived about the person of the Lord Jesus. There is one sign of the true redeemer and savior – he is the one who came from God into the world and became man. The incarnation is an essential doctrine of Christian faith. If you can trace a man's origin from his birth, and you know that he entered this human stream through the normal reproductive faculties, and he claims to be a savior, you can write it off, because he is not God's savior. And if he claims not to believe nor to accept this incarnation of the Lord Jesus, then the man is in error. No matter what else he may say, he is not speaking as the spokesman of God.

All through the New Testament letters, the mighty apostles of our Lord set this incarnation at the center of Christian theology – the Word becoming man. Everything else gathers around that, the person of the Lord Jesus. John says, if a man does not say that, no matter what else he may say, he is a deceiver. Now he may be deceived as well as being a deceiver, but he is an antichrist. He is against the doctrine of Jesus. Therefore, he is to be recognized for what he is – a man who is mistaken and trying to deceive others.

2. There is another type of error, however, that gathers around a misunderstanding or false conception of the teaching of the Lord Jesus:

Any one who goes ahead [literally, goes beyond] and does not abide in the doctrine [the teaching] of Christ does not have God. {2 Jn 1:9 RSV}

That is very revealing. That takes care of all groups that hold that the Bible is not an adequate revelation of God, and that say we need something else. Someone with such a view may be very persuasive and sincere. He may be a very great personality, but this is the test: If he does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, then he is not of God.

There are many people today who say that the teachings of the Scriptures are infantile. Modern man has grown beyond all this and can no longer accept these simplistic teachings of the Bible. The modern mind must find satisfaction in more scientific approaches. It cannot

rest upon these simple things. Do you see that that is another example of exactly what John is talking about here? Someone who goes beyond, departs from the revelation of Jesus, considering it too simple, and tries to add something to the teachings of the Word of God.

Those are the two types of error; now notice what the danger is. What will happen to you if you fall in with this kind of thing?

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. {2 Jn 1:8 RSV}

What do you lose, as a Christian, if you get involved with cults and heresies and liberal approaches that are so widespread? Will you lose your salvation? Not if you are really born again, of course. That rests upon the work of Christ for you. You are not going to lose your place in heaven, nor your redemption, nor your part in the body of Christ. But you do lose a great deal, as John makes clear. You lose the value of your life spent here; you waste your time. You throw away precious moments and years involved in that which is utterly worthless, and which will be displayed at last as wood, hay and stubble, to be consumed in the fire of God's searching gaze. You will lose your reward, {cf, 1 Cor 3:10-15}.

All through the New Testament, this possibility is brought before us. In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John says something similar: "Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown," (Rev 3:11 RSV). These crowns are symbols of authority and honor which are given to those who have made themselves available to the work of God, to those who have given their bodies as a living sacrifice for God to work through.

If you get involved in something that is grounded upon false teaching, all your efforts are wasted. You are building nothing but an imposing facade. It may look very good, but at the end it will crumble and find no acceptance before God.

What do you do about people like this?

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1:10-11 RSV}

As we read this, let us remember what John has said about truth and love. It is so easy for us who are concerned about the doctrinal matters of Scripture to forsake the courtesy and charity that is expected of every Christian. We interpret a passage like this to mean that we are to slam the door in the face of anyone who offers us some of these heretical ideas, or that we are to order them out of the house the minute they bring up some kind of heretical teaching. If that were the case, it would be impossible even to have foreign students in our homes. If this is what John means, then when we discover that someone is not a Christian, we are not to let him in the house. We would be very offensive people, wouldn't we? We could never extend our friendship to those of another religion who may be visiting in our country. We would be acting in defense of the truth, but not manifesting anything of the grace of love. Well then, what does he mean?

He means that truth should be uttered in love, and love should be bounded by truth. In other words, we are not to receive these people in such a way as to imply that we are authenticating or accepting their teaching. You see, in those days motels did not exist, and inns were very few and far between. When these teachers traveled, they stayed in private homes. So when they went into a home with false teaching, and the person continued to open his home to them, he would be endorsing their doctrine. But this does not rule out the need for common courtesy, or for a gracious approach to the person, or for the meeting of emergency needs. After all, the parable of the Good Samaritan makes very clear that if someone is in need, it does not make any difference who he is, we are to help him. As long as we can make it clear that we are treating him graciously, thoughtfully, kindly, as a fellow human being, but definitely not endorsing his wrong ideas, then it is perfectly proper for us to have some kind of contact with him – even a degree of friendship. But we are not to share in his wicked work; that is the idea that John sets before us.

Notice how he underscores the importance of this in his closing verses. He says to her.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. {2 Jn 1:12 RSV}

It was difficult to write letters in those days. Mails were uncertain, and I suppose the Apostle John, like most of us, found it difficult to sit down and write letters. So he said, "I'm not going to write more, but ... BUT – and this is the reason for the letter – this matter is so important that I have taken the time to write it anyhow. There are a lot of other things I would like to discuss, but certainly I could not wait about this."

Then he extends greetings from the Christian family he is evidently staying with, and thus underscores the need in Christian life for both truth and love.

Let us pray that we may so speak and deal with others that we will manifest the graciousness, the gentleness of Christ. Paul says that if a brother is overtaken in a fault, or if someone has strayed from the truth, the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle and understanding {cf, Gal 6:1-5,

2 Tim 2:24-25}. This is no encouragement, then, to rigidity and narrowness and bigotry, saying hateful and reviling things.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme of the gingham dog and the calico cat? I do not remember just how it went, but I remember how it ended. They ate each other up! I am afraid that is what may happen to some of these Christian groups, so-called, in their approach to one another. Let us not be that way – rigid, judgmental, scorching. We need to display love.

But our love must not be so wide, so tolerant, that it excludes the great fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to God:

- No other one has come.
- No other savior has been sent.
- He alone is the answer to humanity's hopelessness.

3 JOHN: A Tale Of Three Men

by Ray C. Stedman

Third John gives us an intimate glimpse into the life of the early church. It is a delightful accompaniment to the second letter, which was written to a Christian lady about how to handle the false teachers who were abroad in that day. The third letter of John was written to a Christian man about how to take care of the true teachers who were traveling about ministering the Word of God. There is thus both a contrast and a similarity in these last two letters from the pen of John.

Third John shows us something of the problem of personalities within the church, and three people are mentioned here. There is a man named Gaius, to whom this letter is written; another man named Diotrephes, and a third individual named Demetrius. These three men are like three kinds of Christians found in the church in any age. Like all the letters of the New Testament, this is a very up-to-date and relevant letter.

First, there is the man named **Gaius**: This may be one of the three Gaiuses mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, although Gaius was a common name in New Testament times, as is John. In any case, John evidently knew him, and addresses the letter to him in a warm and friendly way. We can gather from the letter that Gaius was a genial, gracious, generous individual. Three things that John says about him are important to notice:

- First, he was strong of soul; that was what warmed John's heart:

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health;

**I know that it is well with your soul.
{3 Jn 1:2 RSV}**

That is what the Revised Standard Version has, but I think the Authorized Version is a little more accurate:

... that you may prosper in health just as you prosper in soul. {cf, 3 Jn 1:2b KJV}

That is a wonderful thing to say about someone, isn't it? "I wish you could be as strong in body as you are in spirit."

It would be interesting to apply this test to people today. If your physical appearance reflected your spiritual state, what would you look like? Would you be a robust individual – strong and virile? Or would you be a doddering weakling, barely able to move?

Well, Gaius was the sort of man about whom the Apostle John could say, "I wish your physical life were as strong as your spiritual life."

- Further, he was consistent in his actions:

I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. {3 Jn 1:3 RSV}

He showed the truth in his life, what impressed John was not that he knew the truth, but that he followed the truth. He lived it. He had a consistent life. He did not preach cream and live skim milk. He walked in the truth.

- And finally, he was generous in his giving:

Beloved, it is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers, who have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey as befits God's service. {3 Jn 1:5-6 RSV}

One of the signs that a person has really been genuinely touched by God is that his pocketbook loosens up. His giving becomes generous, gracious, and cheerful, just as God loves. And this man is faithful (loyal) in his giving. This means that he is regular and systematic in his giving. He does not just give when his emotions are moved, but he plans his giving, and he carries it through, faithfully continuing with the work that he has promised.

It is clear, too, that he gave cheerfully, because John says he gave "as befits God's service," i.e., worthily of God. He does not want us to give because we feel we have to, or because somebody is taking a special offering, or to feel that, if we do not, we will be looked down upon by other Christians. And Gaius gives because he delights in giving.

We will come back to Verses 7 and 8 in a moment, but first let us look at this man **Diotrephes**:

I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, prating against me with evil words. And not content with that, he refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:9-11 RSV}

This is the first example in the New Testament church of a church boss – someone who tries to run the church. He may have been an elder or a deacon or perhaps a pastor, it is difficult to tell. But it was someone who conceived of his role as that of telling everyone else in the church what to do. Now the early church apparently had some kind of a mem-

bership roll, and if Diotrephes did not like somebody, he would scratch his name off the list, and put him out of the church. And John objects to that. John indicates here that Diotrephes was guilty of four particular wrong attitudes and actions:

1. For one thing, John says that this man was guilty of slandering the apostle, "prating [preaching] against me with evil words." He refused the authority of the Apostle John. We know from other letters that the apostles had a unique role in the history of the church. They were to lay the foundations of the church, and were given the authority to settle all questions within the church. It is this apostolic word that is passed along to us in the New Testament, which is why the New Testament is so authoritative to Christians.

So here was a man who not only disregarded the authority of the Apostle John, but he even spoke against him. He said slanderous, evil things against the apostle.

2. Furthermore, he says that Diotrephes is refusing to welcome the brethren who came, when these traveling ministers who went about from place to place, speaking the truth of God, came to this congregation. Diotrephes would have nothing to do with them. He turned them aside and refused to allow them to speak in the church.

3. A third thing is that he also puts people out of the church who would have taken these men in. He indulges in what we would call today "secondary separation." He not only objected to the men who came, but he objected to those who would have received them.

This has been one of the curses of the church ever since. Because of this tendency to refuse fellowship to someone who likes someone you do not like, a wide divisiveness has come into the church, doing injury and harm beyond recall.

4. But of those three offenses, none was as severe as the thing John puts first. The most serious problem Diotrephes had was that he put himself first. He loved to be first, which is a dead give-away that he was acting in the flesh. This is always the philosophy of the flesh – me first!

Me first, and the devil take the hindmost! In doing that, he was robbing the Lord Jesus of his prerogative. It is he who has the right to pre-eminence; he should be first, but here is a man who put himself first, and that is the really serious thing.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of men like Diotrephes in the churches today, and they are always characterized by this attitude. They want to be first. They want part of the glory. They rob God of his inheritance, stealing that which alone belongs to the Almighty.

I remember reading some years ago that Dr. H. E. Robertson, an outstanding leader among the Southern Baptists and a great Greek scholar, once wrote an editorial in the denominational magazine about Diotrephes. Later, the editor reported that twenty-five deacons wrote to cancel their subscriptions, feeling personally attacked.

Now let us see what John's counsel is in this situation. Notice that he does not advise Gaius to organize a split away from the church. Rather, he says,

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:11 RSV}

In other words, do not follow these men who want the preeminence. If you see somebody who is always jockeying for position in Christian relationships, always wanting to be in the public eye, do not follow him. He is following his own way and not that of God.

There is, finally, a third generation mentioned here, **Demetrius**, and all we know of him is what John says:

Demetrius has testimony from every one, and from the truth itself [a widely accepted and honored man]; I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true. {3 Jn 1:12 RSV}

He is speaking here as an apostle with the gift of discernment. Now he says, "I want to underscore what everybody thinks about Demetrius. Here's a man you can trust. He is a man of the truth. He has borne testimony from all that he is to

be trusted." Evidently, Demetrius was the bearer of this letter to Gaius, and was probably one of those missionaries who traveled from place to place. I reserved Verses 7 and 8 until now to comment on Demetrius, because they describe the kind of man of which he was a sample:

For they have set out for his sake and have accepted nothing from the heathen. So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:7-8 RSV}

These words describe the first group of traveling missionaries. As they went from place to place they would enjoy the hospitality of the various churches. They labored as evangelists in that area, reaching out into places where the church had not yet gone, being supported and strengthened by these various churches.

The Apostle John says three things of them. He says first that they have gone out; they have left things behind. They gave up their income and their work, and went out to obey this higher calling. Not everyone goes – that was true in the early church as it is today. There were some, such as Gaius, who were to stay to help support these men. But there were others to whom the Holy Spirit said, "Come, I've called you to a special task." Their motive is given here, too: "... for his sake." Literally, for the name's sake – the name of Jesus.

Back in Old Testament times, the Jews treated the name of God in a unique way. The name of God, *Jehovah*, which appears throughout the Old Testament, was called the "Ineffable Tetragrammaton": *Tetragrammaton* means "four letters," and *ineffable* means "unspeakable, or incommunicable." So whenever they came to these four Hebrew letters for God they did not dare speak them, so holy was the name. Even when the scribe wrote them, he would change the pen away and continue with another one. Scribes also changed their garments before they would write the sacred name, so reverently did they regard the name of God. In the famous passage of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" {Deut 6:4 RSV}, the name occurs twice, which would have required two changes of clothes and four pens to execute.

In the New Testament, then, the name is that of Jesus. The Apostle Paul says,

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... {Phil 2:9-10a RSV} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:11 RSV}

Concern for his name was the underlying motive for missionary work in the 1st century. It ought to be the underlying motive for missionaries today. It is not the need of people that calls us out to different places in the world to preach the gospel. Need is abundant everywhere. Everyone without Christ is in need. And sometimes the most pathetic cases are not those who have physical needs, but those who have everything materially, but who are wretched in their inner spirit.

I remember when John R. W. Stott, speaking at a conference, said that it was primarily a jealousy for the name of God, a conviction that he should not be denied what is rightfully his, that should be the great motive for missionaries – that the Lord Jesus had died for the sins of men everywhere and that he longs to have from every tribe and nation a people for his name.

Now notice the part that the people who stay home are to have:

So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:8 RSV}

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, after you got to glory, God wrote "FWT" after your name, in addition to whatever other degrees you may have: Fellow Worker in the Truth. What a degree to have!

Now John closes his letter with these very personal words:

I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them. {3 Jn 1:13-15 RSV}

What an intimate little letter. It seems as though it came not only from John, but from the Lord himself. I like to read this letter as if it is reflecting what the Lord Jesus is saying to his own church. He is really saying to us, "There is much that I'd write to you about." He has written a whole book here, and he has much more to tell us about, but he says, "I'd rather not write with pen and ink. But I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that your name has lost none of its ancient power to attract and bring us to yourself. We pray that you will strengthen our hearts and encourage us to honor your name here below until we see thee face to face. We ask in your name, Amen.

JUDE: Contending for the Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter of Jude is a thunderous word from a man who refers to himself in the first verse simply as,

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. {Jude 1:1a RSV}

That identifies him, for James was very well known as a leader in the early church in Jerusalem, and he was also the author of the Epistle of James which we have in our New Testament. But he was famous not only because he was in himself an outstanding man, but also because he was the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ – the physical half-brother of Jesus. He had grown up in the little town in Nazareth with Jesus himself.

But notice that he says nothing about this relationship in the opening of his letter, instead refers to himself as “a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In that we can see that this man who grew up with the Lord Jesus and his brother James has now learned to see Jesus no longer after the flesh, but, as he truly was, God become man. He now worships him. Jude and James had an unique experience in the Christian church, in becoming the disciples of the One with whom they grew up.

What clear testimony this gives of the deity of the Lord Jesus. If anyone would be in a position to refute the claim of Jesus of being God, it would be the brothers of Jesus. Although they did not come to believe in him until after his resurrection from the dead, nevertheless these letters constitute a seal of confirmation that the claims of the New Testament concerning Jesus Christ are valid, in that they are supported even by those who would have every reason to deny them.

I am struck, too, by the fact that Jude takes the place of second fiddle to his brother James. Often, brothers and sisters of famous personalities are disturbed by being introduced as the brother or sister of so-and-so. But Jude is quite content to say he is the brother of James. He has learned the spiritual secret that God always has a place for every one. If it helps to identify him that way, he is perfectly willing to take that place.

Then he tells us how he came to write the letter:

Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. {Jude 1:3 RSV}

He had started out to write a letter containing certain insights and understandings of the faith. Certainly he was in a position to do this, and had perhaps been pressured by others to write his memoirs and to recount what he had experienced as the brother of the Lord. He had determined to do that when news came to him of an outbreak of some false and very distasteful teaching.

He feels constrained by the Holy Spirit to stop the treatise that he was going to write, and to write a tract instead. The treatise evidently never got written, but the tract is a very valuable addition to the New Testament scripture. So he writes to them to “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

There are some striking things about that instruction. That says:

1. First, that our faith is not something that anybody has manufactured; it was delivered to us. It is not fabricated, or worked up by a collection of individuals. It is one body of facts that is consistently delivered by authoritative persons, the apostles. It has come to us through them.
2. Furthermore, Jude says that it was once for all delivered. It was only given at one time in the history of the world. It does not need any additions. This little letter, lying as it does at the very back door of the New Testament, is a wonderfully helpful letter to use in answering the claims of the cults, -isms and false doctrines abroad today. It is my judgment that the essence of every false doctrine that has ever been expounded by anyone is answered here in this letter of Jude. For example, the Mormons tell us that the revelation that God gave us did not stop with the New Testament, but that we need new books and new revelations. But you see how clearly Jude answers this when he says, "I want you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." It was given to us through the apostles, at one particular time in history, and it does not need any additions.
3. The third thing is that it needs to be proclaimed, or contended for. Now some think that contending for the faith means to roll the Bible up into a bludgeon with which to beat people over the head. Such people feel that they need to be very contentious in contending for the faith. But this is not what Jude has in mind at all. He is simply talking about the need for proclaiming the truth.

As Charles Spurgeon used to put it: "The truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose and it will defend itself." This is the way the Word of God is. If we begin to proclaim it, it will defend itself.

The reason for this counsel, as he goes on to tell us, is that there were certain false teachers who had crept into the church:

For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who per-

vert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. {Jude 1:4 RSV}

What bothered Jude was that this was not an attack from outside the church; these were not pagans. These were people who professed to be Christians. They had arisen within the church and were doing two things:

First, they were changing the grace of God into license to live an immoral, sexually degraded life. They were teaching basically that it did not make any difference what you did with your body as long as your spirit was right. You could indulge the body to the full, since it was no good anyhow; it was the spirit that counted.

Second, they were saying that the grace of God is so broad that God will forgive anything you do; therefore, the more you sin, the more grace, so go to it. This same idea is being promulgated in our own day. People from within the church are saying we have progressed beyond these old-fashioned Biblical ideas against licentiousness and immorality, and that we now have a new morality. It is based on the Christian theme of love. If you love someone, they say, it does not make any difference what you do with them. Love justifies anything. This is an exact duplicate of this 1st century heresy, that called forth such condemnation from the Apostle Jude.

Let us look briefly at how Jude handles this problem. First he points out that God will not ignore this kind of thing; the judgment of this kind of person is certain. That is Jude's theme and he supplies three Biblical examples to support it:

1. To begin with, he reminds the people that when God brought the people out of Egypt, he did a great thing; well over a million people were saved by the power and right hand of God. But they were a mixed multitude, as the Old Testament tells us. While some of them were really believers, others were not. They were all delivered and they were all set free. They all went through the Red Sea and all experienced the miracles of God's fatherly care. But when they came into the wilderness, God began to choose and judge among them. Those who

murmured and complained and rejected his leadership, refusing to enter into the land, he judged. Finally, out of all the multitude that left Egypt, only two men entered into the land – Joshua and Caleb. The rest all perished in the wilderness. Their children entered in, but this was God’s way of saying that he has a way of handling those who refuse to act by faith.

2. In the second example, he reminds us of the angels who did not keep their first position. These angels lived in the very presence of God and ministered before him, serving constantly at his bidding, and yet they followed Satan in his rebellion. They came to earth and became involved with the daughters of men. Thus, they too were reserved for judgment. His point is that even angels are not excluded from judgment, when they fall through pride and lust. And pride and lust characterized these men that Jude was talking about.
3. Third, Jude reminds them of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two cities in the plain, down at the southern end of the Dead Sea, had fallen into the practice of homosexuality. So open, so blatant, so widely accepted was the practice, that when the angels visited Lot, the men of the city surrounded his house and ordered Lot to bring those men out so that they might have their way with them. For this, God judged that city.

Jude reminds us that God does not take these things lightly. There is a judgment provided for it. It may be sudden, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. It may be long-delayed as in the case of the angels; or it may come about in the natural course of events, as in the case of those who came out of Egypt. God is not going to ignore it.

Reading further, we see what was wrong with these men:

Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones. {Jude 1: 8 RSV}

Verses 9 through 13 expand upon those three divisions, taking them in reverse order:

1. First, Jude takes the reviling of the glorious ones, and refers to an incident that is not recorded in our Bible. It comes from a book called *The Assumption of Moses* which was familiar to the readers of the 1st century. Many have been troubled by this because they think Jude is referring to a book that has perhaps been lost from the Bible. It has not been lost; we still have it. It, and other so-called “lost books” can be read in any reputable theological seminary library. But they are a mixture of truth and error, and what these New Testament writers sometimes do is refer back to them for some recorded instance that is true, so that what is recorded here is perfectly true, but not everything in *The Assumption of Moses* is.

A little further on in Jude’s letter, there is a quotation from the *Book of Enoch*, another book we do not find in our Bible, but which is also available today. The quotation Jude uses is truth; the entire book from which it was taken is not.

What happened is that when Moses died, Michael, the great archangel, the highest of the angels, had disputed with the devil over the body of Moses. The claim of the devil was twofold; he said he had a right to the body of Moses, first, because Moses was a murderer – he had slain an Egyptian. Second, the devil said the body of Moses belonged to him because it was in the realm of material things over which he was lord. But Michael disputed this. He claimed the body for the Lord, just as the whole of Scripture claims that our bodies are important to God. God has a plan for them as well as for the spirit.

The point he is making here is that even the archangel Michael did not speak directly to Satan when he confronted him face to face, but simply said, “The Lord rebuke you.” Jude’s argument is, if archangels, who have so much power and knowledge of truth, are careful to respect the God-given dignity of a fallen angel, then why should we, mere men, speak contemptuously of the principalities and the powers in high places? It is a thing to think about, isn’t it, when certain people today just sneer at the idea that the Scriptures present the existence of demons or Satan.

2. Now the second matter he takes up is that of rejecting authority:

Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain, and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perish in Korah's rebellion. {Jude 1:11 RSV}

Jude is tracing the way sin, especially rebellion, develops in a life. He personifies rebellion with three Biblical men: Cain, Balaam and Korah:

He speaks of "the way of Cain," which was essentially selfishness. Cain stands forever as the man who thought only of himself, who had no concern or love for his brother, but put him to death. He looked out only for his own welfare, and Jude says that is the first step on the way to ultimate rebellion – selfishness.

The second thing was the "error of Balaam." There are two stories about Balaam in the Old Testament. In one story, a pagan king hired him to curse the children of Israel. As he was riding along on a donkey to do this, the donkey balked because he saw the angel of God blocking the way. Balaam could not see the angel, and finally the donkey had to speak with a human voice in order to rebuke the madness of this prophet, (Num 22:21-35). The thing that leaps out at you in that whole story is the greed of this man, and this is confirmed by the second story. In return for money, Balaam taught the children of Israel how to sin, (Num 31:15). He sent the pagan women among the camp to seduce the men of Israel sexually, as well as to introduce them to the worship of idols, which involved sexual rites. Thus, he became guilty of teaching others to sin. That is the error of Balaam. To teach someone else to sin is far worse than sinning yourself. Jesus said, "it would be better for him [by whom temptations come] if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin," {Luke 17:2 RSV}. That was the error of Balaam.

And the development from selfishness, through teaching someone else to sin, ends finally in the defiant rebellion of Korah: Korah and his group were the ones who said to Moses

and Aaron, "Who do you think you are, making yourselves the leaders of Israel? We are as good as you; we have as much authority as you have in Israel. What makes you think you have the right to speak for God?" {cf, Num 16:3 RSV}. Thus, he openly and blatantly challenged the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron. Do you remember what happened to them? God said, "Look, Korah and your group, you stand over there. Moses and the rest of you, stand over here. I'll show you what is going to happen." Suddenly the ground opened up beneath Korah and his group and they went down alive into the pit {see Num 16:20-35}. This was God's remarkably dramatic way of saying that defiance of God-given authority represents ultimate sin.

3. Jude goes on, and is evidently getting pretty worked up. He now tackles the third matter, "defiling the flesh." He says these people are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly caroused together. Now love feasts were potluck suppers. In the early church, the Christians would gather together and bring the food with them to the service on Sunday. After the service, they would all partake together, and they called this a love feast.

What a blessed name! I like potluck suppers, but I do not like the name. I am physically opposed to the first syllable and theologically opposed to the second. But love feast! Now there is a term for you!

Anyhow, these love feasts were wonderful times for fellowship for a while. But then people began to divide into cliques, and some of them kept the chicken for themselves. Others set aside the best pieces of angel food cake, and soon there was division; people began to boldly carouse together, looking after themselves. That is the mark of this kind of a person.

As Jude goes on, we can see his remarkable sense of imagery. It reminds us of James and also of the Lord Jesus in his ability to use all the events and scenes of life around him as illustrations. Listen to all of these, all describing useless people:

...waterless clouds, [promising rain, but never coming through] carried along by

winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, [not only dead in Adam, but dead in that second death – rejecting Christ] uprooted wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved forever. {Jude 1:12b-13 RSV}

Then he quotes Enoch, in that quotation I referred to above. He says that these are exactly the kind of men that were before the flood, and finally, he describes them as,

... grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage. {Jude 1:16 RSV}

That hurts, doesn't it? Some of us are guilty of some of these things, even though we do not fall into this classification. But now comes the positive, as Jude comes to a close:

... you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; {Jude 1:17 RSV}

They told you this would happen, so what are you going to do about it?

... you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith: {Jude 1:20a RSV}

That means study your Bible; learn what the truth is. He doesn't say to them, "Organize a counter-movement. Try to get these people thrown out of the church." He says to oppose them with the positive; learn the truth. And second:

... pray in the Holy Spirit; {Jude 1:20b RSV}

To pray in the Holy Spirit means to pray according to his teaching, and in his power, depending upon God. Study and learn what prayer is, follow the teaching of the Scripture about it. Obey the Holy Spirit in your prayer life.

Third, he says,

... keep yourselves in the love of God; {Jude 1:21a RSV}

Now some have misunderstood that to mean that it depends on us to stay in the family of God – as if your salvation depended wholly upon us. But what he is saying is, "Look, God's love is just like the sunshine, constantly shining on us. But we can put up parasols and various barriers that shut it off." Jude says we must learn how to keep walking in the experience of the love of God.

When there is no unjudged sin in your life, God's love is constantly able to warm your heart, fill your life. Of course, he loves you whether you are walking in the light or not, but if you walk in the light, you will experience that love. That is what it means to "keep yourselves in the love of God."

Finally:

... wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. {Jude 1:21b RSV}

That refers to the second coming; keep your hope sharp and bright, looking for the intervention again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now what about others? Jude mentions three things concerning our attitudes and behavior towards other people:

... convince some, who doubt; {Jude 1:22 RSV}

Answer their arguments; reason with them. And next,

save some, by snatching them out of the fire; {Jude 1:23a RSV}

There are some with whom we need to move right in so as to try to bring them back from disaster. And then, finally,

... have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. {Jude 1:23b RSV}

That is a wise word. Be careful. There are some you cannot help yet; you are not experienced enough, or old enough yet. You are not wise enough to help these others. Even the wisest have to handle them with great fear, being very careful not to contract the disease they are trying to cure.

Now, at the end, we have this great benediction which is one of the great words of the New Testament:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen. {Jude 1:24-25 RSV}

This too falls into three divisions:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from falling” indicates the potential in the Christian life. It does not say “Now to him who does keep you from falling,” because God does not always keep us from falling. He is able to, Jude says, but he does not always do it. We need to fall sometimes; some of us will not learn any other way. If we were not so thick-headed and stubborn, and if we would obey him, he would keep us from falling. In that sense, we never need to fall.

But even when we do fall, he is able “to present us without blemish before the presence of his glory.” The word translated “without blemish,” is the word *anomas*, which means “apart from the law.” He has so completely dealt with us that even our falls have already been handled in Christ. Therefore, after we have learned the painful lesson of it, he is free to wipe it out of the record, and to present us faultless before his glory!

And this will be done, he says, “with rejoicing.” That means we will have had a part in this too. We are also involved in the process, and when we get where we’re going, we can say, “Hallelujah! Thank God, I’ve won!” As Paul says, “I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,” {2 Tim 4:7b-8a RSV}.

Then there is the final recognition of the only God, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. To him be “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and for ever.” That takes in everything, does it not? From the beginning, through the present to the eternal future, he is the One around whom the universe itself gathers.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

What is it that makes us want to read the last chapter of a book first? For some reason, many people begin reading the Bible with the book of Revelation, but this is a serious mistake. This book plunges you into a confusing array of dragons and trumpets and vials and seals, with many amazing sights and sounds and visions. A person starting here might well throw the whole Bible away in frustration, unable to make head nor tail of it.

It is very significant that the book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. And if you have read the rest of the Bible before you come to Revelation, you will be much better equipped to understand the climax of the entire revelation of God to his people.

Nevertheless, the reason many have difficulty in understanding this book lies not only in interpreting the symbols, but also in failing to take note of the suggestions that are given in the first eight verses. If you read these verses carefully and thoughtfully, you will have a tremendous key to this book. They are like certain introductory remarks often found on the title page of a book, and if you read them that way, you will be greatly helped. The title of the book is the first line:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him ... {Rev 1:1a RSV}

Notice that it is not “the revelations,” plural. The book is all about Jesus Christ, and it is his self-revelation: it was given to him by God the Father to reveal to his servants. The purpose of it is in the next line:

... to show to his servants what must soon take place; {Rev 1:1b RSV}

This book was written by the Apostle John when he was a captive on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, and it dates from about 95 A.D., toward the close of the 1st century. John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, he tells us, and he began to see visions – revelations given to him by the Lord Jesus through an angel – of things which must shortly come to pass, so it is clearly a predictive book. Then you have the method by which the book was given in the next phrases, and this is very important:

... and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, {Rev 1:1c RSV}

The words, *he made it known* are a translation of a Greek word which means, “he signified it,” which is the way the King James Version has it. Or, “he sign-ified it.” He made it known by signs, by symbols.

One of the reasons symbols are used in this book is that it is dealing with things in the future, which were beyond the imaginations of men and women of the 1st century. References are made to events that are just now beginning to break in upon the world as awful realities – nuclear warfare, world-wide plagues, biological warfare. How could these be described to a generation who knew nothing about guns or machines?

When we want to try to convey some abstract thought, we often put it in symbolic form. There was a story that made the rounds a few years ago about the governor of Montana who commissioned an artist to paint the thoughts that went through the mind of General Custer at *Custer’s Last Stand*. The artist worked away for weeks and weeks, and

finally, there came the day for the unveiling of this painting. Imagine the governor's surprise when he saw a cow with a halo around its head, standing in the center of the picture, and coming over the hill was a file of Indians with sacks of cotton on their backs. The governor said, "What do you mean by this? What does this portray?" And the artist said, "Well, governor, it should be very clear. These are the thoughts that went through General Custer's mind at the battle. He is thinking, 'Holy cow! Where did all these cotton-pickin' Indians come from, anyhow?'"

Now I mean no irreverence, but this is a very clear description of the need to resort to symbolic language when you are describing something that lies outside the experience of another, which is what we have in the book of the Revelation.

Another helpful thing to understand about these symbols is that every one of them has been taken from someplace else in the Bible. They are not suddenly introduced to us; they are, for the most part, picked up from other parts of Scripture and reused in a consistent manner here in the book of Revelation.

Now the third thing on this "title page" is a special blessing for those who read this book. I think the Holy Spirit knew that it would be difficult for many, and so these words are added,

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. {Rev 1:3 RSV}

Have you ever qualified for that blessing? This book is written for that purpose.

Now the time of these events is suggested in the phrase, "the time is near" (Vs 3); that is, the events of this book began shortly after John wrote. Then we have the destination of the book:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: {Rev 1:4a RSV}

The first part of the book is a collection of letters specifically addressed to seven churches that form a rough circle in what is now called Asia Minor. There were more than seven churches in that district, but these seven were selected because they are representative, not only of that day, but also of all churches of any day, and of the whole age of the church, from beginning to end.

Then the author, or authors, of this book is given to us:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. {Rev 1:4b-5a RSV}

There is the triune God: the Father in his eternal sovereignty; the seven spirits, signifying the Holy Spirit in his seven-fold plenitude of power; and Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness. They are united in giving us this amazing prediction.

Next is the dedication, similar to the dedication found in many books of any age:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {Rev 1:5b-6 RSV}

Here is the One who by his acts has laid the foundation for all human blessing, and it is to him this book is dedicated.

Then the subject, the general theme of the book, is introduced:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. {Rev 1:7 RSV}

This is a book about the second coming of Jesus Christ; how it will be accomplished, what will happen on earth that will produce these events, and what will be the result after he comes.

And finally, the signature of the book, the personal signature of the author:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. {Rev 1:8 RSV}

Bear in mind that when this was being written the church was being persecuted. This was during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who was one of the most vicious persecutors of the

church, a man who declared himself to be the lord and god of the Roman people. Therefore, these Christians badly needed some encouragement, and here, in effect, is the personal assurance of God, saying, “Don’t worry, I’m the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the A and the Z, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty One.”

One other thing about this first chapter, and then we will look at the book in general. The basic plan of the book is given in Verse 19; John is told:

Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. {Rev 1:19 RSV}

There are three divisions of the book of Revelation: the things John saw, which occupy Chapter 1; the things which are (which existed in his day) – the seven churches, which occupy Chapters 2 and 3; and then, beginning with Chapter 4, there is a long section which deals with things which are “hereafter.”

I believe that means “after the church is gone.” While Chapters 2 and 3 cover the whole present age, the latter part of the book deals with that final culmination of human events referred to in other places in the Bible as ‘the great tribulation,’ or ‘the time of the end,’ or Daniel’s ‘seventieth week’ – a period of seven years in which all that has been happening in the cauldron of human events suddenly sweeps to a startling conclusion. And that conclusion is traced for us here in the book of the Revelation. All the frightening turbulence of our own day is moving toward this event. And all that has been happening for twenty centuries of human history has been moving to produce this one event.

Now we will touch briefly on some of the highlights of this program.

First there were the letters to **the seven churches**: As I mentioned earlier, these churches were representative of individual churches of any given age, and furthermore, they represent a process in the history of the church.

1. The letter to the church in Ephesus, for example, is about a church which is outwardly successful, but was beginning to lose its first love, that underlying motivation that is so necessary for Christians.
2. The next church is the church in Smyrna, which means “crushed,” which exactly describes this church. And persecution would hang over the church during the general period from the 2nd century to the time of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome, in 320 A.D.
3. Smyrna is followed by the church in Pergamum, which means “married.” The trouble in this church was that the church had married the world. The two were trying to get along together. There was an infiltration of all the attitudes and value systems of an unbelieving world into the processes of the church. And this well reflects that period in church history from the rise of Constantine, who made Christianity the popular religion of the day, up to the full rise of the papal church in about the 7th century.
4. That is followed by the church in Thyatira. In this church spiritual adultery was going on, and the letter is a very accurate description of what is now called the Dark Ages of the church – the period when the church lost its zeal, its purity, its doctrines, became infiltrated with a great deal of superstition and paganism, and lost most of its power. This dark age lasted from the 7th century to early in the 16th century, and the time of the Reformation.
5. Then there is the church in Sardis, which is a picture of a church which has recovered much of its truth, but seriously lacks in vitality. This is a picture of the period of the Reformation. Although the Reformation churches began in a flaming fire of zeal, they soon died down and whitened to the ashes of a dead orthodoxy.
6. This is followed by the church of Philadelphia, of which the Lord has nothing evil to say, nothing to correct. He commends it because it is true and faithful to the word. It has a little strength, he says, and this pictures the church age of the 19th century, when the church is awakened and thrust out into the far corners of the earth in the great missionary movement of the last century.

7. The last church is the church of Laodicea, the rich church, the church that says, “we don’t need anything from God at all. We’ve got money, influence, power; that’s all we need.” And God says, “You blind fools! Don’t you know you don’t have anything; that you are wretched and poor, pitiable and blind? I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire.” And he pictures himself standing outside the door of the church, knocking for admittance. If, as I have suggested, these letters outline the record of history, then it appears that we are in Laodicean times.

Now beginning at Chapter 4, a change takes place. Notice he says again what is a key word in this book. As he was “in the Spirit” in Chapter 1, so he says here:

At once I was in the Spirit and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! {Rev 4:2 RSV}

The scene shifts now from earth to heaven. Now that does not mean somewhere out in space. In the Bible, heaven is really the realm of the invisibilities – another dimension, if you like, wherein God reigns hidden from our eyes but present among us – a spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on every side, but which we cannot taste or touch or see. And yet it is very real.

This kingdom was opened to John and he saw a throne, the One who sat upon it, and immediately he knew who it was – he did not need to be told. It was the throne of God, and God was in control of all history. What John saw here is a remarkable vision of the powerlessness and the weakness of man, but the greatness and the might of God. John saw a throne, and then he saw a Lamb standing in front of the throne, a Lamb with its throat cut. That may seem a strange symbol for the Son of God, but it is a very apt one – a Lamb that had been slaughtered. And somehow, as John watched, that Lamb turned into a Lion, and John saw that the Lion, who was the Lamb who had been slaughtered, was also the King of all.

He stood before the One seated upon the throne, who held in his hand a little book, a book that is very significant in the book of Revelation; it is the program of God for the establishment of his kingdom on earth. In heaven he rules unchal-

lenged; on earth his will is constantly being challenged by pigmy men who dare to lift their fists against the authority of God. But he is going to change all that, and he is going to do it by the Lamb who is the Lion, who alone has the right to take the book (actually, a scroll) and unfold it.

And as the seven seals of this book are loosened, the scroll unrolls until at last what is written on it is plain to all. John weeps as he first sees the scroll, thinking that no one has the right to open it, but then he sees the Son of Man and he knows that he alone has the right to unfold the scroll that will produce God’s kingdom on earth.

As the scroll unfolds, we see that there are **seven seals**. The number seven appears frequently in this book. We have already seen the seven churches, and now there are the seven seals, each one revealing a new power at work on earth. These are followed by seven trumpets, and then seven vials, or bowls, of the wrath of God. Let us look briefly at how these fit together:

1. In Chapter 6 we read about the beginning of this period of seven years which, the prophet Daniel tells us, is going to be the culmination of history, toward which all the events of our present day are moving. That seven years will be introduced by a worldwide preaching of the gospel (as we learn from our Lord’s talk to the disciples on the Mount of Olives).

In the book of Revelation, the church as a unit is viewed first, followed by historical events concerning the rest of the world. In light of this, I believe the church is caught up to be with the Lord prior to the period of seven years’ tribulation, and that the first event of that age is the worldwide preaching of the gospel, symbolized by the first of these seven seals:

And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. {Rev 6:2 RSV}

White is always the color of divine being, representing purity and holiness. And the bow speaks of conquering; here is the conquering of the gospel. Jesus had predicted this when he said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be

preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come," {Matt 24:14 RSV}.

2. The second seal means war; John said,

And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword. {Rev 6:4 RSV}

Might not that great sword symbolize the terrible power of the nuclear bomb, released upon humanity?

3. This is the second thing to come, John says, followed immediately by the third horseman, symbolizing famine, which is inevitable in the wake of worldwide war.
4. The fourth horseman is calamitous death – death by four means:

And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. {Rev 6:8 RSV}

Death was on the horse, and Hades followed with the hearse, right behind.

Now what John is seeing in these seven seals are the forces at work in humanity to produce the events of history in these last days. Human power is therefore prominent throughout this time, and we see what God allows to happen by the force and power of human beings.

5. The fifth seal is an expression of the inward power of mankind, the prayers of the martyrs.
6. This is followed by cosmic disturbances, which provide a key to the entire book:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to

the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. {Rev 6:12-14 RSV}

The earthquake here gives us a clue to understanding this book. The final event previewed here in the sixth seal, is always marked by the great earthquake, hail, and fire. That is the end of the seven-year period, described by Jesus when he said, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven," {Matt. 24:29b RSV}. This will happen just before the return of Jesus Christ with his church back to earth.

7. The seventh seal summarizes the events of the last half of this seven-year period, unfolded in Chapters 10 and 11, where we again encounter the earthquake when the seventh trumpet sounds:

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. {Rev 11:19 RSV}

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 introduce to us the great actors in the scene on earth:

First of all, *a woman* who is recognizable as Israel brings forth a manchild, whom history has already informed us is the Son of God. Against him in a great conflict are arrayed the angels of the devil and the great dragon called Satan. As John watches, a beast rises up out of the sea, and John was given to recognize that the beast was a form of human government linked to Rome, the fourth great world kingdom spoken of by Daniel. In some form, the Roman Empire is to exist until the end of time. (If you look at our western world, I think you can see how true that is. Every nation of the western hemisphere was settled by a member nation of the Roman Empire. We are Roman to the core; the whole western world is Roman in its thought, philosophy, and attitude.) Associated with this beast out of the sea is another beast, or religious leader, which rises out of the earth and whom many link with the antichrist.

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 by and large contain the description of *the vials* of the wrath of God, which are exactly the same as those terrible judgments of which Jesus spoke when he said the sun would be darkened, the moon turned to blood, and God's wrath would be poured out upon the earth.

And in the latter part of Chapter 16 and continuing on through Chapters 17 and 18, you find the judgment of the great religious harlot called "mystery Babylon the great." Now, Babylon was the source of ancient idolatry, and it is a picture of what we might call religious godlessness – that which looks godly but in its essence is actually godless; a religion which outwardly commands the power and attention of men, but which inwardly is devoted to trying to exercise political power by use of religious authority. Now if you read this through carefully I think you will see that this mystery Babylon is not any one system, or denomination, but rather an attitude that permeates the entire church. Wherever you find anyone acting religiously, trying thereby to gain political power or authority, you have Babylonianism, and it is found in all churches. As Jesus said, referring to the tares sown among the wheat, "Let both grow together until the harvest," {Matt 13:30a RSV}.

And in Chapter 19 you have *the harvest*, which was predicted in Chapter 14:

Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." {Rev 14:14-15 RSV}

That harvest actually occurs, as described in Chapter 19, when Jesus Christ returns to earth:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white

horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; {Rev 19:11-15a RSV}

By this time all the nations of the earth have gathered together in that battlefield called Armageddon, in the land of Israel, and it is there that the son of God appears with the armies of heaven. Now at last, all the supernatural forces, which men have long denied, suddenly reveal themselves to human eyes in such a way as to eliminate all the opposition of entrenched evil against the will and authority of God.

The book closes as the Son of God sets up his kingdom on earth, as he had promised. After the judgment of the dead there comes a new heaven and a new earth, and the city of God coming down out of heaven, where God makes his habitation with men. Remember the prayer? "Thy kingdom come, ... on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10 RSV}.

This city can only be described in negative terms. John saw no temple in it, for it did not need a temple, nor did it need the sun or moon to shine upon it. The light within it was the presence of God himself. And its gates shall never be shut by day or by night; a whole universe is at last cleansed of the rebellion of man, and there is nothing to be feared. All the beautiful dream of the prophets is to be fulfilled, where men shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and never make war anymore.

Finally, we are admonished to wait for the coming, to work for it, to be diligent and faithful and obedient until the Son of God comes. This is a book of extreme optimism. Although it paints a dark, dark picture, it does not stop there; it looks on beyond to the final victory of God, even more sure than tomorrow's sun.

C. S. Lewis has written these significant words:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what's the good of saying you're on his side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something it never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in. Something so beautiful to us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. This time it will be God without disguise; some-

thing so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love, or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down, when it's become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realize it or not. Now, today, in this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever; we must take it or leave it.

There is a great deal of encouragement in this book. It is a book that will stiffen your back when things are happening in human history that frighten you. It will give you great comfort and encouragement, if you know the Lord of it. But it is also a solemn book, designed to make us understand that the One who is unrolling the scroll is the One

who was once here and died on Calvary's cross, a lamb led to slaughter, so that he might win the right to be King of all the earth.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for telling us the truth, revealing it to us through John. Help us in these days to hold high the vision of this blessed One who is to come into the very world which his hands have made, and in which he once died upon a cross, and claim it for himself. What a day that will be for him when he who once was rejected shall be acknowledged everywhere as the rightful Lord of earth. We thank you in his name. Amen.