



WORDS FOR LIVING

A Collection of Articles for Life and Encouragement

BY HOWARD E. DIAL

Photo by Chuck Gasaway

A Collection of Articles

SEPTEMBER 2001 – DECEMBER 2020

By

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The faces of people I don't know are haunting me. There are some faces that are sneering with hatred for Americans. They are brandishing guns, burning the flag of the nation that I cherish. These faces grin with delight that thousands of Americans met a fiery death in the World Trade Center Towers in New York. I have feelings of anger when I see those faces. I pray to God to help me with my anger that it will not kidnap me and make me a bitter person. But I see other faces. There is the face of that old man, an Afghan refugee, standing at the border of Pakistan wanting desperately to flee to some safe place. I pray that he could know the love of Jesus Christ through some act of kindness from a Christian. There is the face of the eleven-year-old boy sent by his parents out of Afghanistan to a school in Pakistan. His eyes looked sad and lonely as he sat in his classroom with memories of home and family that he may never see again. I pray that he could know the security and hope that is found in Christ. We must set our gaze upon God. He alone can help us deal with these faces.

The War with Evil (October 7, 2001)

Is it possible to "rid this world of evil?" Our president has committed us to this task through the war on terrorism. A world without evil; it is a thought that stirs our imagination. But the eradication of evil begs for an explanation of how this can be done. What is evil? The only acceptable answer is that it is all that is in conflict with the character and will of God. Can evil be overcome? Yes. But only God is capable of defeating evil. How can evil be overcome? Evil is being defeated by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ is a knife in the heart of evil. The resurrection life of Christ in His church throws evil into a full retreat. At the second coming of Christ, the last enemy, the evil of death, will be conquered. Take hope, church of the living God. Evil is doomed because the Head of the church is the mighty warrior, the exalted Son of God.

Grace Giving or Oil Giving (October 21, 2001)

Billions of dollars have been poured into oil rich Middle East countries. An industrialized global economy depends on the black gold of fossil fuels to run its economic machinery. It is out of this reservoir of riches that the spread of Islam has been largely financed. Saudi Arabia alone has endowed Muslims with the money needed to build mosques, underwrite education in the Koran, and carry on an effective public relations campaign. But God has reservoirs of riches available which eclipse the paltry sums of human devices. God enables His church to give bountifully as He works in Spirit-transformed lives. Out of love for God and a passion for the exaltation of Jesus Christ the glorious work of global evangelism is financed. God delights in choosing "the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world to nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God." Why has God not put oil deposits under church property? God mocks the vaunted ways of man to display His grace. And in so doing He gets all the glory. Our gifts to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ are an investment for all eternity. Being grace rich beats oil rich any day.

The Waste of Zeal (October 28, 2001)

What a pity to waste one's zeal on the wrong things. Zeal is desire on fire. God has made us with a capacity to focus our mental and physical energy on the pursuit of pleasing God. That's the good news. The bad news is that sin has twisted our desires with the result that we ardently pursue the lesser gods of our own making. Think of the energy that is spent in the quest for pleasing a self-made god who demands mountains of works to enter his paradise. There are people who devote themselves to years of study and plotting in order to crash an airplane into a one hundred and ten story office building. And they do this with the full knowledge that thousands of innocent people will be murdered. Why? It is because the human heart is filled with the sewage of self-deception. Is there a way perverted human zeal can be directed toward the worship of the true God? Redemption is possible. It is because of the zeal of Jesus Christ for the accomplishment of the will of His heavenly Father that sin and its child, self-deception, have been rendered a mortal blow. One of Jesus' own men is an example of God's power to change a heart and life. Jesus drew to Himself a man who was filled with a red-hot passion for the liberation of Israel from Roman rule. He was Simon the Terrorist (a.k.a. Simon the Zealot, Luke 6:15). Simon was transformed into a zealot for the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a colossal tragedy it is to fervently seek heaven but awaken to find oneself in the everlasting torments of hell.

Why We Are Going to Romania (November 4, 2001)

Communism attempted to strangle the church in Romania. It allowed some churches to remain open, but it tightly controlled the number of students who could enroll in theological school to train for the Christian ministry. When the communistic dictatorship collapsed in 1989 there were few trained Christian workers to meet the leadership demands of the church. Karl and Jo Ann Kosobucki and their four children are in Iasi (pronounced Yash), Romania under UFM International to help the Romanian church develop biblically grounded pastors and teachers. I have been invited to teach a course on eschatology in the seminary in Iasi, founded by Karl. There will be 45 to 50 students in the class who will have made many sacrifices to be there. On Saturday, November 10, a number of ladies will be crowding in the Kosobuckis' house to hear Beth teach two sessions on Ephesians. This house, by the way, was purchased and renovated with gifts from Berachah. Thank you, Berachah family, for making it possible for us to make our contribution to building up the body of Christ in Romania.

One Act of Selfishness (November 25, 2001)

Hartsfield International Airport became Hartsfield International Airport on Friday, November 16. Thousands of people were inconvenienced, and millions of dollars were lost to the airlines when one man decided that retrieving his camcorder and violating security procedures was a priority. His life will never be the same. People are mad and who knows what mental anguish he and his family will have to endure. Selfishness is an ugly thing. It plagues us all. Think of the times that our own self-centered actions have harmed others. Sin is like that. When I insist on satisfying my own desires rather than doing God's will, I am drinking the poison of idolatry. A thousand consequences are unleashed when I insist on being at the center of the universe. Before we go

looking for the spiritual scalp of a self-centered fellow human, take a look in the mirror and cry out for God's grace that we may overcome our own love affair with ourselves.

Religious Totalitarianism (December 9, 2001)

Are we as Christians guilty of theological tyranny by insisting that there is only one way to God's heaven and that is through Jesus Christ? Thomas Friedman, columnist for the New York Times, has made the assertion that unless Judaism, Christianity, and Islam realize that "God speaks multiple languages" (translate that, "there are many roads to God") the future of the world is bleak. Friedman's problem is one not only of flawed logic but a massive failure to understand the issues of ultimate importance, namely, the eternal realities of God, sin, death, heaven, and hell. Is man the final authority in determining what is truth and what is error? Jesus Christ made the claim without equivocation that no one, no matter how sincere, well intentioned, or religious they are can go to heaven apart from faith in Him (John 14:6). The apostles of Jesus taught this, the early church believed this, and Christians through the centuries have died for this. The exclusivity of the gospel message is also universal in its invitation. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). Those who advocate an ideology of pluralism ("the idea that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth," Friedman's words) are engaging in a recrucifixion of Jesus Christ by their version of "if you don't like the message, kill the messenger." The life and redemptive work of Jesus Christ is the world's only hope, not the theological anarchy of ideological pluralism.

Hummingbirds (December 16, 2001)

I recently listened to a bird watch update on PBS. The bird story of the day was about two hummingbirds, a kind found in the northwest United States that had found their way to New York City. The bird watching community is humming (no pun intended) over the extraordinary appearance of these two featherweight creatures (each weighs less than a copper penny). They winter in Mexico. Did the unseasonably warm weather draw them to the East Coast? How did they get there? That's a lot of miles for little wings. The story ended by offering a doxology to Darwinism. The narrator would have us believe that this amazing flight across country was a marvelous insight into the adaptive abilities of creatures in the evolutionary process. I was fascinated by the story, but the ending was pathetic. Rather than worshiping the God who made the hummingbirds we were invited to bow at the shrine of Darwinism. I am in awe of the creator God not the flawed theories of Charles Darwin. I am looking forward to the return next spring of my little feathered friends from their winter vacation in Mexico.

A Well-Scrubbed Christmas (December 23, 2001)

I have noticed some significant changes in the way our culture celebrates the Christmas season. While standing in the line at the post office the other day I had time to observe the "holiday season" images on mugs and other bric-a-brac. Santa Claus appeared in many different poses. Any acknowledgement of the religious meaning of Christmas fails to appear. God, it seems, has been banished to the time of our foxhole fears. He is a convenient idea when we want to feel

better. But we Christians must not resign ourselves to disappointment and frustration because of the world's behavior. Spiritual blindness should draw from us mercy and ministry to those who don't know the joy of life in Christ. Celebrate the birth of the King of kings and the Lord of lords in everything you do. That will put Jesus Christ on display in a world that attempts to scrub Him out of this special time of the year.

Sowing and Reaping (February 10, 2002)

Bribery, greed, fraud, cheating, résumé "padding", and decapitation. It's an ugly picture. But that is some of the societal sewage that is flowing through the streets of our national life. In one sense this is the history of the human race. The human heart has not changed since Adam and Eve were banned from Eden. But societies can worsen the bad conditions in which they already live (i.e., a fallen world). I am not surprised when I hear about hundreds of college students who have cheated on computer science projects. Think about the message that has been communicated to an entire generation. Morality is something that is self-determined, the refusal to acknowledge human sinfulness, and the banishment of God to a church pew on Sunday morning. Our nation is reaping what it has sown. The attempt to construct a civilization based on certain political ideals without moral absolutes and a sense of accountability to the Creator God is doomed to decay and disintegration. Our only hope is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's live it and spread it everywhere we can.

Unprepared (February 17, 2002)

On September 8, 1900, a monster hurricane hit the city of Galveston, Texas. It is estimated by some that up to 15,000 people were killed by what has been called the nation's deadliest natural disaster. The winds and water swept away property and people who for the most part were unprepared. Many thought they would ride out the storm, but soon realized that they were no match for the power of the winds of God. John Edward Weems, in his book, [A Weekend in September](#), describes the devastation that Galveston experienced over a hundred years ago. The hurricane warning system was not what it is today, but still there was a failure to prepare for what can happen to a city on the Gulf of Mexico. One can't help but think of the warnings of Jesus as to what it will be like when He comes to this earth again. The world's population will be living as if there were no tomorrow and no accountability to God. The apostle Paul echoes the same warning in his letter to the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 5:3). Are you ready to meet God, the Judge? Is your life a witness to the fact that you believe that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Rom. 14:10)?

Is Jesus God or Is He Not? (March 10, 2002)

Mormons, Muslims, and other professed friends of Jesus are perfectly willing to say what they consider to be good things about Him. Mormons are insisting that they be called Christians. Muslims tout Jesus, mentioned ninety-seven times in the Koran, as a prophet of God and ascribe to Him such titles as "Messiah," "the Word of God," and "the Speech of Truth." But unless one is willing to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, i.e., God incarnate, He is maligned and rejected. The words of C. S. Lewis clarify the issues at stake, "Either this man was, and is, the

Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” Jesus of Nazareth made a clear and unequivocal claim that He was equal with God (John 10:30, 33). If He is not who He said He was, there are not acceptable alternatives. We have no Savior, and we have no hope.

It’s Palm Sunday. Easter is coming. (March 24, 2002)

During what may have been a twenty-minute ride on the back of a donkey, Jesus publicly announced that Israel’s King had come. But nobody seemed to understand the kind of King He was. The fact that Jesus didn’t come into the city of Jerusalem brandishing a sword, wearing a crown, and riding on a prancing warhorse was by design. King Jesus was presenting Himself as God’s Servant who had come to bear our sins in His body on the cross. He was Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world. But the crowds didn’t get it. The praise and applause of the crowds were theologically flawed. In a few days they would be calling for the crucifixion of their “king” saying they had no king but Caesar. A pagan monarch was better to them than God’s suffering Servant. But thank God Easter Sunday was coming! The spilled blood of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ would purchase His crown rights. And then Israel’s King would come out of His tomb. Everything changed. There has never been a week quite like it.

Who Is Winning? (March 31, 2002)

One day this week I was running near the golf course. A man was playing by himself and had three golf balls at various places on the green. He was prepared to putt. I asked him, who is winning? He laughed. We human beings are like that as we think of life after death and our hope of heaven. Our best shot will count. If we are sincere enough and do enough good works, God will accept our best score. But the reality is found in another scenario. Suppose our golfing friend were playing with Tiger Woods and he is measured by that standard of play? The standard for our acceptance by God is the Lord Jesus Christ. We must be perfect to get into heaven. But Jesus has solved the problem. He has provided the final score that we need to get to heaven. The Bible calls this righteousness. God can declare us righteous, not on the basis of our own works, but on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice. We can know that we are going to heaven when we die because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. Christ’s perfect score becomes our score. And that is what God accepts. Are you prepared to face God with your present score? You have only eternal judgment in hell waiting on you, if that is your hope. Turn to Christ now and trust Him for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

A Cup of Trembling (April 7, 2002)

Suicide bombers, the Palestinians, the Arab states, and the nations of the world are rising up in concert as they express their anger at Israel. It seems that the Jews have few friends. How are we to understand international antagonism against such a small nation? There is something going on that is deeper than merely outrage over the alleged oppression of the Palestinian people. Several theological facts must be kept in mind. God has turned Israel over to national judicial blindness

(Rom. 9-11). She has rejected her Messiah and is being disciplined by God (Deut. 28:64-68). Satan hates Israel and attempts to destroy the covenant people of God (Zech. 3:1-10; Rev. 12:4). Sinful human beings resent Israel's historic claim to be a people called by God for a special purpose. Anti-Semitism has a long and ugly history. There are those who say that Jews are part of a conspiracy to control the financial markets of the world. The Holocaust stands as a hideous monument to how far hatred for the Jewish people will go given the opportunity. There is coming a time when the nations will band together and come after Israel but will be stopped short of their intended goal of annihilation by the return of their Messiah. The future siege of Jerusalem will become a "cup of trembling" for those nations that become intoxicated with their desire to destroy Israel (Zech. 12:1-9; 14:1-7). What we are seeing today is a dress rehearsal for that awful time of tribulation when the mighty hand of God will come against the venom of Anti-Semitism.

Posting the Ten Commandments (April 11, 2002)

There have been increasing confrontations in the public square over the right to post the Ten Commandments on local, state, and federal government property. The ACLU says that it is a violation of the separation of church and state. Christians and some political conservatives are insisting on their right to place the Commandments where they can be seen, and hopefully heeded. But the very first commandment puts God on a collision course with a secular society. It is a prohibition against the worship of other gods. This is a call to absolute devotion to the one true God, in other words a personal relationship with God. We need to think about what this first commandment is saying. Idolatry is giving any human desire precedence over God's will. Immediately we are confronted with the problem of the human heart. It is in the words of John Calvin, "an idol factory." Every human being has a god of choice (e.g., money, power, success, security, sex, happiness, sports, alcohol, drugs, clothes, automobiles, house, family, retirement, etc.). An idol is anything that has priority over God. It can be a person, thing, ideology, or purpose. What this really tells us is that idolatry is essentially self-worship. It is the refusal to let God be God, which is the very essence of sin.

But we must not lose sight of the positive side to this first commandment. Sinful human beings are commanded to have a faithful relationship with God. He is to be desired and Him alone. Jesus Christ makes it evident that He is the fulfillment of this desire, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." If the first commandment is to be obeyed in the fullest sense, then every sinner must turn from idols to the living and true God. This can only be done when Jesus Christ is acknowledged as Lord. Jesus Himself said, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (Jn. 5:23).

So, the liberals are right. The Ten Commandments are an infringement on personal freedom. The unsaved are free to go to hell. But God in His mercy has called sinners to Himself and the forgiveness He offers in His Son, Jesus Christ. The First Commandment stands as a sentinel on the road of life telling us that the desire of our heart must be God and the eternal life He offers in Jesus Christ (Psa. 42:1; Jn. 5:24).

The Middle East Puzzle (April 21, 2002)

It is necessary to have all the pieces if a puzzle is to be completed. That is the way a full and clear picture emerges from the hundreds of puzzle parts. The Middle East conflict cannot be understood unless all its parts are taken into account. It is a political struggle, a free people in conflict with dictatorships. It is a social and economic struggle, desperately poor people controlled and manipulated by terrorists. It is an historical struggle, the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael at war over land (God said that Ishmael and his descendants would be “against everyone” Gen. 16:11-12). It is a theological struggle, two nations with competing religious histories and commitments. It is a part of the struggle within redemptive history. Satan wants to destroy God’s covenant people. It is a kingdom struggle. The god of this world is making preparation for the appearance of “the man of lawlessness.” The ultimate human solution is waiting in the wings to provide Israel a guarantee of security. These are some of the major puzzle parts. The picture we see is gloomy and frightening. But there is hope. God is the one who has designed the puzzle and is putting the parts together in His time and in His way. We wait expectantly, knowing He is working out His eternal purposes. One day Jesus Christ will come in glory and break the nations with a rod of iron. What are we to do in the meantime? Worship the Son of God. Only in Him is there safety from the wrath of God (Psa. 2:11-12).

The Power of Imagination (April 25, 2002)

On hot summer days long ago, I would talk my younger brother, Tim, into being my catcher for an imaginary baseball game. He would crouch behind home plate (the manhole cover in the middle of the street) and I would pitch to imaginary batters. I would strike out almost every batter and the ones that did get on base had to watch me throw nothing but pitches that couldn’t be hit. I won every game. But there were those times when my patient brother decided he had had enough and wanted to go inside where it was cooler. Imagination can be a wonderful thing. It is God-given and when filled with the right pictures can contribute to wonderful accomplishments for the glory of God. But there is a dark side to our capacity for creative mental imaging. Imagination can get us into trouble when it leads us away from truth-based reality. When we try to picture God in a way that is contrary to how He has revealed Himself (e.g., “I see God as perfect love and not allowing anyone go to hell.”), we are creating a false god. When we use the screen in our mind to produce a lust-filled PowerPoint presentation, we are creating a horror show that will come back to haunt us. Instead, we are to fill our daydreams with the perfections of God, the people who need our prayers, the kind of person God wants us to be, what heaven will be like, and how we can do our work better for the glory of God. This is the stuff of true worship. This is how God is to be loved with all our mind (Matt. 22:37).

Celibacy (April 30, 2002)

The Roman Catholic Church is in the midst of a major conflict due to the sexual abuse of minors by priests. The cover of this week’s issue of Newsweek asks the question, “What Would Jesus Do?” with a subtitle that reads, “Christianity at a Crossroads.” Allowing for an obvious overstatement (Roman Catholicism does not represent biblical Christianity), there are significant doctrinal issues being raised. One of those is celibacy. The insistence of Roman Catholicism that its priests remain unmarried is rooted in false teaching. Nowhere in the Scriptures is celibacy

touted as superior to marriage. The celibacy of the clergy entered the church through the false idea of the inherent evil of sexual relations. Also involved in the vaunted state of an unmarried clergy was the emergence of the priesthood as a class above the laity. The Bible makes it clear that a pastor/elder could be a married man (1 Tim. 3:2, 4), that marriage is a gift from God, as is celibacy (1 Cor. 7:7), and that sexual love in marriage is to be enjoyed for the glory of God (Song of Sol. 5:1; 1 Cor. 7:5; Heb. 13:4). While there are certainly some practical advantages to being single (e.g., freedom from marital responsibilities), there are also benefits that come with being married (e.g., the opportunity to portray the love of Christ for His church through sacrificial love for one's spouse, Eph. 5:25). Doctrinal error inevitably bears the bitter fruit of wrong living. The presumption that celibacy is a more holy state than marriage is being revealed for what it is, pompous nonsense.

Thank you, Seth (May 16, 2002)

Thank you, Seth, for filling the pulpit for me and feeding the flock. Thank you for overseeing the work of Christian education at Berachah, providing teacher training, setting up the teacher appreciation dinner, and bearing the burden of equipping our children for a life of service to God. Thank you for providing pastoral oversight of Awana and VBS. Thank you for helping the elders and deacons to work together more effectively by attending the deacon's meetings and giving me an extra pair of ears in meetings and places I could not be. Thank you for accepting assignments given you without flinching and joyfully doing them in a prompt manner. Thank you for handling a variety of administrative chores such as helping draw up the agenda for our elders' meetings, taking care of the computer issues, concerts of prayer, the church newsletter, and making all those phone calls. Thank you for patiently fielding questions about telephones, copiers, computers (especially questions from this computer-challenged senior pastor), and anything electronic. Thank for working with and encouraging the Spalding County Care Group. Thank you for setting up the church website and helping to bring Berachah into the twenty-first century. Thank you for taking oversight of the building committee, calling meetings, and calling us to a vision for the future. Thank you for doing the many things that you have done that I don't even know about (but God does). Thank you for walking in the truth, loving your family, and wanting to prepare yourself for even greater usefulness to God. Thank you for your infectious desire to glorify God in all that we do at Berachah. Your Berachah family will miss you, Leslie, and Micah (and ?). May you bless many by continuing to be the kind of servant-leader that you have been at Berachah.

Mockingbirds (June 5, 2002)

A bird deceived me the other day. I heard what I thought was a hawk. But the sound came from a tree not far from the ground. Hawks don't hang out in places like that. It was a mockingbird, famous for its ability to imitate the sounds of other birds. There are people like that. They forge their identity by merely imitating other people. In trying to be like those who impress them, they live shallow and empty lives. This is not the way God wants us to conduct our lives (Gal. 1:10). There is a better way. It is God's way. We are to be what God has designed us to be, imitators of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). When our identity is Christlikeness, we are real (Gal. 2:20). When you hear the songs of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control sing them yourself. So, if you want to imitate other people, just make sure they are imitating Christ.

The Invisible Fence (June 12, 2002)

There are two dogs that would love to come out into the street after me when I run by their yard. They bark and charge toward me in a canine quest for running prey. But they stop and run parallel to the road watching me disappear from their sight. They don't want to endure the pain that the invisible fence will inflict upon them. We need our own invisible fence to keep us from danger. A biblically informed, Holy Spirit sensitized conscience can protect us from much spiritual harm, if we will work at building one. God has given each of us the ability to judge ourselves as to whether our behavior conforms to His precepts (Rom. 2:14-15). But a good conscience has to be developed. It doesn't just happen. First, there must be the cleansing of the conscience through the forgiveness of sin found in faith in Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:14). Sin must be confronted and confessed immediately and consistently (1 Jn. 1:9). The Word of God, accurately understood, must be stored in the heart in vast quantities and consistently obeyed. As God is loved more and more with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength a clear, clean, and convicting conscience will be the best invisible fence you could ever have (1 Cor. 11:31; 2 Cor. 1:12).

God's Symphony in G Major (June 13, 2002)

The orchestration of musical instruments has brought enjoyment to millions of people. The violins, flutes, oboes, clarinets, horns, trumpets, trombones, percussion, cellos, basses, and violas following their musical score can create a kaleidoscope of emotional responses. God has created the principle of unity in diversity for His glory and the enjoyment of His creatures. There is no better place to see this happen than in the local church where God orchestrates the variety of gifts He has distributed among His people. I hear certain melodies in this symphony. One thing I hear is that the church is not a spectator experience. Everyone must be involved. No believer has been exempt from participation in the life of the church. What is your spiritual gift? How are you involved in ministry of Berachah? Do you come and merely observe what others are doing? God has gifted his children so that His church may be built up in the faith. We need more builders and fewer bystanders. There is no gift of audience. Another melody of truth is that there is a difference between spiritual gifts and spirituality. It is possible to be a good teacher and seriously deficient in love, patience, and self-control. May God deliver us from the plague of giftedness without godliness. One who administers while being kind to people is a teaspoon of honey. It sweetens the life of the church. Then there is the melody of gift development. God has distributed spiritual gifts, but the believer is responsible for fanning his or her gift into a flame. That is the counsel that Paul gave to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6). It takes time, trials, practice, and the graces of the Spirit to increase one's gift effectiveness. Spiritual gifts playing in harmony with one another is a final melody in the orchestration of body life. Teachers should be appreciative of helpers. Exhorters must learn to work with mercy givers. We must resist the temptation to create uniformity at the expense of creativity and innovation in the exercise of our gifts. God has packaged us each differently. We think differently. We have different personalities. We have different ways of doing things. But truth and love for God bind us together as we participate in God's symphony in G Major.

But let's take some time to apply what we know about spiritual gifts in the life of the church. Staff, elders, and deacons with their variety of giftedness must work in harmony. We need teams who will assist the staff and elders in administrating and guiding our Sunday School and the various children's ministries. Teachers are needed for different age levels in the Sunday School. Our new associate pastor of worship and Christian education will be encouraged as teachers, exhorters, evangelists, administrators, mercy-givers, and helpers stand with him. His job description is daunting. He cannot do everything by himself. This is no time to melt into the crowd and let a so-called "professional" do all the work. That is not the way body life is to function. It takes everyone fulfilling his and her responsibility. Delightful are those friendships that are forged while serving the Lord, each functioning interdependently for the sake of the gospel. Come band of brothers and sisters and let's see what can be done for the glory of God before this world passes away.

Insensitive and Intolerant? (June 18, 2002)

It was recently reported that a former SBC president described Mohammed, the founder of Islam, as a "demon-possessed pedophile." This immediately brought on a firestorm of protest and angry responses. One criticism said, "It is hard to find a drop of love or charity in such language." However, one respondent proclaimed, "Hooray...and shame on all those who feel he was out of line in what he said." What are we to make of all this? What we say publicly may be accurate but best reserved for appropriate settings. Are false religions demonically inspired? Yes (1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Tim. 4:1). Did Mohammed "marry" a nine-year old girl? Yes, it seems that he did. Did not Jesus tell some religious leaders of His day that the devil was their father (Jn. 8:44)? But making a public announcement for the world press to pick up and broadcast to totalitarian Muslim states does not bode well for Christian missionaries in those countries. It is already very difficult to do church planting in the Muslim world. There are times when discretion is the better part of valor. However, at the present time in our pluralistic, antichristian, tolerance-promoting culture, truth declarations by Christians will not be tolerated. So, if you want to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness, then find it where Jesus experienced it. He said He was the Son of God (Jn. 10:36). He was Israel's Messiah. There is no other way to heaven other than through Jesus Christ. The way is not Islam. It is not Buddhism. It is not Hinduism. It is not Judaism. The only way to enter heaven is through the narrow gate and that gate is Christ (Jn. 14:6; Matt. 7:13-14). Just say that. There is no need to burn Mohammed in effigy. Simply declare the supremacy of Jesus Christ and see what happens. The mask of tolerance will be ripped off and underneath will emerge the angry, God-rejecting, Christ-despising face of unbelief. The message of the Christian gospel is the only hope for a lost humanity.

Thank you, Jim Dykes (June 26, 2002)

Jim, our hearts are filled with gratitude for the faithful work you have done for twenty-eight years at Berachah. You have given countless hours in preparation for our worship in song. You have brought together our voices in choral presentations. You have selected and arranged Christmas and Easter cantatas. You helped us to work together to do things they we didn't think we could do with our small numbers. You have written songs that were just right for the occasion. You have worked with us as we have changed the way we do worship in our Sunday services. You have taken your work seriously and have emphasized the importance of quality.

You have helped to draw our young people into the ministry of music by giving them opportunities to sing or play an instrument for the glory of God. You have blessed us with solos and duets with Toni. You have enriched our worship life and we are thankful.

The Turtle in the Road (June 26, 2002)

How does a turtle get from one side of the road to the other? Very slowly. On a recent run I came upon a turtle making his way through the grass. I ran on. But as I came back to where I had seen my little friend, I noticed that he had ambled to the middle of the road (Corinth mind you, with its unending flow of high-speed traffic). Somehow, he had almost managed to make it to the other side of the road. I watched helplessly as cars barely missed the small lumbering creature oblivious to the danger surrounding him.

Jesus tells us that not one sparrow falls to the ground that the Father does not know about (Matt. 10:29). His is not simply that God keeps records on fallen birds and roadkill. If our heavenly Father takes account of the plight of little birds, He treasures us far more. We do not need to fear. God is aware of our problems. We don't need to be afraid of traffic or terrorists. No one can harm us without God's permission. He will provide (a.k.a. the providence of God) what is necessary for us to triumph over anything life may throw at us. With all the announced threats of terrorists, it is possible to live less than joyfully. Don't let it happen. God is in control. Let this truth be evident in the way you live. And, oh yes, I ran out into the road and rescued the turtle by hand delivering him to his destination (?).

Under God (July 2, 2002)

Who could have imagined that a federal judge would rule the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America as unconstitutional because of the words "under God?" But after momentary shock, it was not so surprising after all. There has been a concerted effort for some time now to scrub out all references to God and acknowledgement of God and Christianity from the domain of federal, state, and local government. Why is this? We are told that the State should not sponsor religion. The separation of church and state should be strictly maintained. And so the arguments go. But is it really that simple? I do not think so. Our nation has historically committed itself to the acknowledgement of God as the one from whom we have derived our rights ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights..."). Now it seems that some want to disavow our original commitment as is reflected in the debate over the words "under God." This is national suicide. We will continue to pay a heavy price for our declaration of independence from God. King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon was taught a lesson he never forgot when he became intoxicated with his pride and independence from God (Dan. 4:30). There is a principle here. The nations (the U.S.A. included) are not exempt from God's moral rule. There are moral laws that govern the rise and fall of men and women whether they are Christians or not. There is coming a day of reckoning for all who have offended God by their unrepentant rebellion against Him (Phil. 3:9-11). God is the sovereign Lord of the nations. If our nation wants to repudiate this truth because it offends people, then, like Nebuchadnezzar, we must get ready to eat dirt.

Running the Race (July 10, 2002)

It was my twenty-ninth trip from Lenox to downtown Atlanta by foot. Bill Thorn and I ran the annual Peachtree Road Race together (he has run in all thirty-three of them) this past July 4 and enjoyed it. Runners are an interesting lot. They come in all sizes, shapes and degrees of ability. Of course, there are the front-runners, like the Kenyans. Their work regimen, physical assets, and desire to win combine to put them in a class by themselves. Then there are many very good runners of various ages who have trained hard and run excellent times. But running, like anything else in life, can become an obsession or to put it in theological terms, an idol. I have known of marriages that were sacrificed on the altar of the achievement of faster times and personal records. Life can end up revolving around road races and the quest for the coveted Grand Prix award (points are accumulated according to scoring based on races run and place of finish).

There is pleasure in being able to make the human body fly around a track or cover distances on the roads through the self-discipline of training. It yields the dividends of cardio-vascular fitness, physical stamina, and sound sleep. However, we runners must never forget that though “bodily training is of some value godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). The pleasure of knowing God, walking with Him, and experiencing transformation of heart and life through Jesus Christ is the race whose finish line is heaven and whose rewards are eternal.

Welcome Justin, Brook, and Cali Culbertson (July 15, 2002)

Justin Culbertson, our new Associate Pastor of Worship and Christian Education, begins his ministry with us this week. It is a delight to have Justin and Brook as a part of our church family. I think it would be helpful if we all have an overview of Justin’s job description. This will assist in understanding how his workload will be distributed. He will have oversight of our Sunday worship. This will entail meeting with the Senior Pastor to plan and develop the worship services. He will have oversight of all Christian education in the church. This will include Sunday School, Awana, Vacation Bible School, children’s ministries, and other Bible education ministries of the church. He will fill the pulpit when called upon and be available to teach in Sunday School, Care Groups, or any other teaching opportunities. He will assist the Senior Pastor in the various staff administrative responsibilities (e.g., church newsletter, concerts of prayer, etc.). This is a huge load, and it will have to be shaped and adapted to Justin’s gifts as his ministry progresses with us. Let us pray for and encourage Justin and Brook as they labor alongside of us to proclaim the excellencies of God.

The Dow Heads South (July 24, 2002)

Stock portfolios are shrinking like a cheap tee shirt after its first wash. For many the dreams of early retirement are turning to nightmares. We are being given another reminder that we are not “to fix our hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). The best investment is not in temporal things but in eternal things. With many Christians there is a glaring disconnect between money and trust in God. How easy it is to say that we are trusting God but at the same time not prove it by the way we use our time and

money. Money can't get you to heaven but it can be sent on to heaven (1 Tim. 6:19). How? By being rich in good works. Improve the management of your personal finances in order to create a greater surplus for giving. Practice consistently the grace of giving to your local church. Establish a "fellowship fund" for special needs that come to your attention (e.g., world missions, emergency relief, a young person trying to get through college). Use your skills to help others (e.g., mechanic, carpentry, teaching). Write generosity into your Will. As hope filled Christians we should not live gloomily lamenting what we don't have or what we use to have. Joyfully go about the work of creating a "stock portfolio" by investing in the business of God's kingdom where thieves do not break in or steal.

When Food is Folly (July 31, 2002)

Americans have a problem with food. The problem is not the lack of food, but too much of it. Self-indulgence, poor eating habits, and obesity characterize far too many in our society. Christians should distinguish themselves by the way they relate to food. There is something more important than food (Rom. 14:17). Hunger for God is to take precedence over the pleasure of titillating one's taste buds. God sent feast and famine in order to humble Israel and teach dependence on Him. Living by the promises of God is better than having a full stomach (Deut. 8:1-4). How does God want His people to think about food? Christ taught that foods are not moral or immoral in themselves (Mk. 7:18-19). It is what happens in the heart that determines whether one is rightly related to God or not (Matt. 15:1-20). In relation to diet, wisdom and love are to guide us. We need to make wise (biblically informed) decisions in the choice of foods we eat. If I love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, I will think in terms of care of the body (the temple of the Holy Spirit). Love provides the motivation for the relinquishment of my rights to certain foods for the sake of the kingdom of God (Rom. 14:1ff; 1 Cor. 8-10).

Does your love for God override your desire to eat whatever or whenever you want to? Are you managing your body for Christ's sake? Is your hunger for God greater than your hunger for food? Food can become a god that will mock us with every bite we take.

The Price of Addictions (August 7, 2002)

One salient feature of addictions is their ability to sap one's spiritual strength and appetite. When a Christian girl becomes consumed with the desire to draw the attention of others, she will begin to spend excessive time on personal appearance. Hair, clothes, weight control, and jewelry become a controlling factor in her life. She may adopt flirtatious ways to gain the excitement of being noticed. There is a heavy price to pay for this. Her spiritual appetite for God shrinks. Her ability to think and live in a truly God-exalting way is severely diminished.

When a Christian man becomes obsessed with success in his work and with his golf game, there will be a corresponding drain on his spiritual energy for God. God becomes a jilted lover. The mistress of personal triumph and achievement can make a man forget the God for whom he was made. When a professing believer moves away from the fountains of God's grace (i.e., Christian fellowship, prayer, the Scriptures), look for some pleasure other than the pleasure of knowing God that has seduced them.

Addictions come to us well dressed with a portfolio of promises of happiness. What is not immediately seen is the controlling power of sin. One sin leads to another and before long the cords of enslavement are tightly bound. Self-indulgence and self-promotion leave one spiritually malnourished and susceptible to a hundred other sins (Rom. 8:2). Christian, pray that God will make you love Him more. When you hunger for God, you will find strength and energy for the life God has called you to live.

A Trip to Alaska (September 4, 2002)

It was a trip of a lifetime. I was invited to accompany Cecil Gilreath and J.K. Pell, their sons, Luke and Josh, and a naval academy classmate of J.K. on a rafting, camping, hunting and fishing trip to Alaska. The Mulchatna River was our road through the wilderness. Moose, beaver, caribou, ospreys, and bald eagles were on the banks and in the air to cheer us along. The water was glacially cold, clear, and fast moving. Our campsites offered us good fishing holes. Oatmeal, MREs, and fish (with some generous amounts of trail mix thrown in) gave us the calories needed for rowing, setting up and breaking down camp, and expeditions through bear infested woods. But one special experience stands out. Teamwork. Some collected firewood. Another started the fire (no easy task with wet wood and rain). One man prepared breakfast every morning. Tarps, tents, ropes, and special knots were quickly attended to by all working in concert. A supper of potatoes, onions, and fish was handed out to six hungry men cooked by a chef of the woods. Rafts were loaded. Equipment was covered and tied down by each doing his own part. Navigation was supervised by a skilled GPS operator and careful map readers. All this made it possible to enjoy a sixty mile raft trip, set up five camps in eight days, reach the pick-up point safely at exactly the right time, and enjoy it all.

God has designed the church to accomplish its mission by Spirit enabled, Scripturally equipped, and Christ centered teamwork. As we exercise our individual gifts, God builds up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). We live in a big world where there are millions who have yet to hear the good news about Jesus Christ. It takes all of us in the church working together in concert. May God help us to labor together as a God-pursuing team, journeying toward our rendezvous with Jesus Christ.

Grow Up! (September 11, 2002)

Did you ever hear your parents say that when you were a child? Depending on how well your conscience was developed and how much you wanted to please your elders, the words “grow up” could really sting. The rebuke was not a call to get bigger physically. You didn’t have much control over that. The appeal was to act more maturely. That is exactly what the writer of Hebrews wanted from his readers when he said, “But solid food is for the mature...press on to maturity” (Heb. 5:14-6:1). What does it take to grow up? It takes the balanced diet of Scripture, repentance, forgiveness, prayer, obedience, trials, pain and suffering, and time. The failure to mature in the Christian life leaves one open to self-deception and the inability to know the difference between good and evil. For example, spiritual babyhood can be quite content with desires that are contrary to loving God, fantasies that are infested with lust incitement, and pleasures drawn from the mud holes of this world. What are we to do? Pray. Ask God to make

you love Him more and fill you with the knowledge of His will. Are you desperate to understand and know God? If you are hungry for God, you will be filled and experience growth in Christ.

The Disconnect (September 17, 2002)

A recent experience has reminded me of how Christians can be hearers of the Word and not doers of the Word. In preparation for my trip to Alaska I attended a hunter safety class. I sat in class for two evenings, took notes, listened to lectures, watched videos, and passed the test. For this I received my “certified safe hunter” patch and certificate. When I arrived in Anchorage, I was educated in how to field dress a Moose. (In case you are interested it is a lot of work.) I listened to hunters talk and watched the Outdoor Life channel on television. However, with all this acquired knowledge it did not make me a hunter. You have to apply what you think you know. I did not. I enjoyed the information, but never set my gun sights on one meal on legs.

It is this kind of thing that happens all too often to professing Christians. We can hear countless sermons, listen to conversations about how to live the Christian life, and even get a degree in theology. But none of this ensures the application of truth to life. This ought to haunt us. How easy it is to acquire Bible knowledge, but not have the personal experience of obeying God. That is not the way it is supposed to be. If I can sit and listen to a Bible message on the danger of idols of the heart, and then continue to engage in compulsive spending, something is wrong. If I can log hours of sermons on how to trust God and continue to complain, grumble, and grouse about my disappointments, a major disconnect has taken place. May God deliver us from a life that goes untouched by the biblical truth that we hear.

A Bible Church (September 24, 2002)

Why are we called Berachah “Bible” Church? Does this mean that we don’t think other churches revere and honor God’s Word? No, it does not mean that. What are we trying to communicate? We want people to know that the Bible supplies us with the blood of truth that is to flow in our spiritual veins. It is our desire to create a life-in-the-Word atmosphere at Berachah. This will yield a treasure of personal benefits, establish a defensive perimeter against the enemies of the soul, promote a soul cleansing experience, encourage thoughtful reflection upon God’s wise counsel, help to make the sorrows of life bearable, keep us from going down dangerous roads, instruct us in how to stay off dead-in streets, assist in putting the right words in our mouth, and create a desperate desire to be unailing in our witness for the truth. Biblical truth must inform, guide, and energize us if we are to fulfill our purpose as a church.

But someone might say that this is bibliolotry? It is possible to love to study the Bible but not love God. We certainly don’t advocate that. But how can you love God and not love His Word? God wants us to understand and know Him (Jer. 9:24), to delight in Him, and obey Him. If God is to be known in a personal, intimate way, we have to know the Scriptures (Jn. 5:39). So why is Berachah a Bible Church? Because God has spoken and we must listen.

In the Beginning God (October 1, 2002)

One would think in listening to devotees to Darwinism that the theory of evolution is scientific fact. They are convinced that evolution holds real science together. They tell us that it is not possible to educate young people in the skill of critical thinking without protecting them from classroom criticism of evolutionary theory (Is there an inconsistency here?). One thing that stands out in the conflict between creationism (or intelligent design) and the theory of evolution is the arrogance, anger, and dogmatism that characterize the defenders of Darwinian dogma. They wrap themselves in the robes of pseudo-scientific piety (call it the religion of scientism) as they assert that creationism involves faith whereas evolution is science based. We keep waiting for the proof evolutionary theory. Instead, we are told that change in organisms is evolution (which it is not) and that the missing links will be found (there are none). The real “detour around science” is the unwillingness to allow open and frank discussion that invites critique and consideration of other models of the origin of life. Even when credentialed scientists challenge the theory of evolution and its exclusionary teaching in the classroom, they are brushed aside with ad hominem arguments (that’s Latin for “if you can’t answer your critics’ arguments attack your critic). Those who would dare question the validity of chance through time are condescendingly lectured in the proper use of the word “theory.” We are warned that creationist influence will discourage all scientific inquiry.

The evolutionists are circling their wagons. Their monopolistic domain is being credibly challenged while they hide behind their lame arguments of separation of church and state, scientific excellence and inquiry. The truly open mind is the one that acknowledges the Creator while exploring His vast and complex universe. The only adequate education is one where science is taught within a worldview context of belief in a transcendent and personal God. The church and the Christian home must do their work. The failure to see the hand of the omnipotent and infinitely wise God throughout His creation is a failure in worship.

The shrill voices of naturalism have caused some Christians to invent highly elastic methods of interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2. But theistic evolution or appeals to vast amounts of time will not satisfy the demands of those who have banished God from His creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” These words should pull our eyes upward in humble adoration as we see the heavens tell of the glory of God.

Redeem the Time (October 8, 2002)

West Lesser Sunda Islands, Bali, Somalia, Kazakhstan, Oman, Fayette County Georgia. What do these places have in common? People, non-Christian people. How many Bible believing churches exist in each of these places? What do they not have in common? They do not share the same language, culture, and opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lesser Sunda Islands are a part of Indonesia with a population of over three million. There are two small struggling churches with a total of about 100 believers. Think of metropolitan Atlanta having only two little churches? Fayette County alone has scores of churches for a population of almost 95,000.

Why do we have an annual world missions’ conference? Because places like Kazakhstan and Indonesia have millions of people who have yet to hear the good news that Jesus Christ has died,

was buried, was resurrected, and seen by witnesses. In Christ alone can condemned sinners receive the gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. One of my abiding concerns for Berachah Bible Church is that we do not turn in on ourselves, get comfortable, enjoy our church family and forget about lost people across the street and across the seas. One purpose of our missions' conference is to call us out of our little world of south metropolitan Atlanta and make us think about our responsibility to the millions of spiritually blind, hell bound people on this planet. Our schedules, work, school, recreation, and family must not be allowed to push the good work of world evangelization to the end of the line.

Will you ask God to renew your sense of obligation to those who don't know Jesus Christ in a saving way? Will you listen to what will be said about reaching non-Christians with the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ? Will you reexamine your financial role in world missions? Will you consider how you can invest your time, money, and attention more bountifully in redeeming the time for the glory of God?

Musings for a World Missions Conference (October 16, 2002)

My days are full of a variety of reading experiences. They give me windows through which I may look at the world, how it thinks, what are its struggles, and what changes are taking place. I thought I might visit some of these in connection with our world missions conference.

Jerry Falwell is catching grief for his statements regarding Islam. He announced that Muhammad was "a terrorist." This has sent shock waves around the planet. Christian fundamentalists have been tarred and feathered by the usual adversaries in the American press. Muslims rioted in India. Falwell apologized. One misinformed writer claimed that Muslims don't slander Jesus this way. But the fact is, they do. The intolerance is found among those who make Jesus a liar by denying His claims of deity and saviorhood.

I have been reading "John Adams" by David McCullough. The worldview of John and Abigail Adams stands in stark contrast to that of many in America today. Upon Abigail's death John Adams, our second president, said, "I believe in God and in his wisdom and benevolence, and I cannot conceive that such a being could make such a species as the human merely to live and die on this earth. If I did not believe in a future state, I should believe in no God. This universe, this all...would appear with its swelling pomp, a boyish firework." Compare Adam's interpretation of reality with that of the secular humanist who wants us all to be imprisoned with the bleak prospect of life as a cosmic accident and death as nothing more than road kill.

Newsweek's, October 7 edition, lead story was on "Teen Depression." I was depressed after reading the article. The contradictions are glaring. Depression is spoken of as a "disease" with hope to be found in antidepressant medication and therapy. Yet this "disease" as it is called is more likely to occur among teens growing up in an abusive home or witnessing violence. The truth is that depression, which has been called "a room in hell," is another symptom of human fallenness. Drugs and talk that ignore heart issues and eternal truth are band-aids on cancer. When there is no God, there is no hope.

But hope is found in the magnificence of God's love. D. A. Carson's excellent book, "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God," has been a fresh breeze of truth. Chapters "On distorting

the love of God, “God’s love and God’s sovereignty,” and “God’s love and God’s wrath” challenge the “trivialities and clichés” that infect both the thinking of Christians and non-Christians. There is no quest that excels that of seeking to understand and know the love of God. God loves Muslims. He loves teenagers struggling with the “howling tempest in the brain.” But the Christian worldview that offers the only hope for the sin weary is fast fading from the prominent place it once occupied. Ours is the kind of time spoken of by the apostle Paul when he says, “the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). There is only one thing to do in view of these circumstances. Redeem the time. As children of God we must buy up every opportunity to carry the light of the gospel into every dark corner of this world. This is no time to waste precious thought, energy, and money. We ought rather to fill our time with things that matter for all eternity like taking the soul-satisfying, sin-forgiving good news about Jesus Christ to a world that is running out of time.

The Light of God (October 22, 2002)

Don’t believe everything you hear. In the words of the apostle Paul, “examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). The word, “examine,” means to approve as a result of testing. Not everything under the label of truth is truth. Christians must not be gullible and accept whatever is communicated in the name of God. I am alarmed at the ways in which Christians are being carried off by patently unbiblical teachings. One such example has recently come to my attention. It concerns me because believers who are struggling with problems are being given injurious counsel.

Training seminars in Theophostic Ministry are attracting counselors, pastors, and other helping professionals. At the core of its theory and practice is the teaching that present problems are due to past (usually early-life) events and the way these are interpreted. “Lies” and accompanying emotions attach themselves to these early-life experiences. In order to find deliverance from “lie-based thinking” it must be identified and replaced with truth. This truth encounter comes in the form of a visual communication with God. The “light of God” (the words, theos, God, and phos, light) through a visual representation of the person of Christ, identifies the “lie” (e.g., “It’s my fault.”) and replaces it with God’s truth. Sin is understood to be willful words and deeds that are less than God’s ideal for our lives. When lie-based thinking is replaced with truth, the Christian can “walk in effortless victory in this area of lie, which is maintenance free.”

Admittedly, this is a limited description, but when one examines the teachings of “Theophostic” doctrinal errors abound. It presents a seriously flawed view of the role of responsibility in the Christian life. It is defective in its understanding of sin (sin encompasses not only actions and attitudes, but our moral nature as well). It is in error in its teaching regarding the nature of man (artificial distinctions are made between the human soul and spirit). Theophostic basically fabricates a system of Christian sanctification that is foreign to the Scriptures.

When you pray for our missionaries and fellow church members, pray that our “love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,” so that we may all approve the things that are excellent. We are to be light bearers of the true light that has come into the world.

How to Vote (October 30, 2002)

Federal and State governments are spending great amounts of money to develop a better voting system, one that can be easily understood and provide accurate vote tabulation. But there is something that is far more serious in its consequences, namely, the inability of the voter to think in an informed and responsible way. One has to be concerned when a voter, undecided as to whom to vote for, is waiting for the most persuasive television campaign ad. Voting is a freedom we enjoy because God “shed His grace” on this nation. We have the opportunity to cast our ballot for the political office seeker that we consider to be the best qualified. That’s the easy part. The more difficult aspect of voting is the wisdom needed in determining which one has the right moral and political values. Qualifications such as experience, integrity, and a proven record are essential. We should acquaint ourselves with the candidates seeking our vote. This will take some work, but we must do it.

However, there are other important factors that should accompany us into the polling booth. The worldview (i.e., how he or she interprets reality) of a prospective office holder must be carefully examined. This is not easy because politicians will often hide their beliefs and values behind a façade of rhetoric and slogans (e.g., “I am for motherhood and freedom”). The following are some questions that demand answers rooted in truth. What is the role of government? Is it the key to solving all our problems or is it a divinely ordained institution for punishing wrongdoers and commending right doers (Rom. 13:3)? Does ultimate moral authority reside in man or God? Talk of rights and freedoms presupposes a moral authority. Who gave us these rights and how is freedom to be used? Is the value of a developing human life in the womb inferior to the so-called right to destroy that life? Is justice giving to people what they want or is it doing what is right in compliance with truth-based law? We can begin with these questions that will require some thought and research. Some of us do more reading and investigating than others. If you know some who are biblically wise and politically informed, then talk to them. Ask them questions and discuss the issues. Too many Christians either don’t vote or they are ignorant of the fundamental issues involved in voting for the right candidate. This Tuesday is Election Day. Do the right thing.

A Reflection on the Election Returns (November 6, 2002)

Republicans are gleeful. Democrats are gloomy. There were many surprises in the election returns this past week. It would appear that the balance of power in Washington has tipped slightly in favor of the President and the Republican Party. Some conservatives won. Some liberals won. In our own State a pro-life Senator has been elected. The Georgia State government has been shaken up by the presence of new faces in the State Legislature. How are we to assess the new political scene locally and nationally? In the first place, there ought to be humility. Elected officials serve because of the sovereign purposes of God (Prov. 8:15; Dan. 4:17). All human authority, be it political or otherwise, is delegated by God. Government policies and laws are to be in harmony with God’s righteous moral standards. The President, senators, legislators, and governors are given a stewardship of privilege. God holds elected officials, judges, bureaucrats, and the voting public accountable to Him. God requires justice, moral integrity, and compassion.

National strength is gauged not by the presence of political conservatives in key positions, but by the moral caliber of its people (Prov. 14:28, 34). The moral fabric of our nation continues to come unraveled. Words and symbols cannot substitute for actions. If the divine institutions of the home and the church are attacked by the state, it is committing social suicide. A nation that kills its future population through abortion is well on its way to disintegration.

The salvation of our nation will not come through political parties. God-fearing, truth-revering, justice-pursuing public officials can make a difference and may even temporarily hold back the tide of national degeneration. But as long as the running sores of a biblically anemic and spiritually weak church go untreated, there will be further national decline. What is really needed at this time in our history is a reformation within the church. It must return to Bible exposition, the total sufficiency of God's Word, mercy ministries, the demand for justice, mobilization for world missions, energetic evangelism, and God exalting worship. We would rejoice if God sent revival to a reformed church. There would be untold blessings that would flow throughout our society. This is not to say that the church exists to uphold the State. The church exists to exalt the supremacy of God in all things and glorify Him by taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. This must be the ambition of Christ's church whether Republicans or Democrats are in power. The church proclaims the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is this world's only hope.

Woof, Woof, Woof (November 14, 2002)

Yes, I did it. I confess. I sat with 80,000 people dressed in red and barked like a dog. I know. It's silly. But I just couldn't help myself. On one side of the stadium the crowd shouted "Georgia!" Then our side of the stadium shouted back, "Bulldogs!" This was followed by an increasing roar until the ball was kicked and then thousands of adults barked like a dog. Why? It was all designed to rally the beloved "Dawgs," of course, and to intimidate the opposition. How would you feel with a pack of dogs barking at you? Human beings are wired for celebration and acclamation. We cheer our favorite teams, applaud when someone performs well, and give standing ovations to those we appreciate.

There is nothing wrong with cheering. The problem is that the One who should be receiving our shouts of approval doesn't receive it the way He should. God made us to delight in Him, to celebrate Him, to applaud Him, to worship Him. Look in the book of Revelation. The twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, the angels, and the redeemed of all the ages offer their verbal ovations to the Lamb of God who has been slain. He alone is worthy to receive our praises of tribute.

One particularly dramatic scene in the Bible is Israel's worship at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. After the victory at Ai the entire nation gathered on these two summits facing each other (I visited this sight on an overcast day in January of 1981). An altar was set up on Mount Ebal where burnt offerings and peace offerings were sacrificed. The ark of the covenant was positioned in the midst of the people. The law was written on stones in front of the people and all the words of the law were read. It was like a stadium. Instead of football players on the field below there were vivid reminders of the redemptive plan of God. The thousands on one side shouted the blessings. The thousands opposite them announced the curses. Thanksgiving was being offered to God for giving victory in battle. It was one grand outdoor spectacle of worship.

Israel was repudiating Canaanite idolatry (an “in your face” to pagan idols). It was also a reminder of the covenant of God with Israel and a rehearsal of the ways of God.

Cheer for your favorite team. But don't ever forget that it is the Lord God who should be the supreme object of our shouts of acclamation. It is King Jesus who through His cross and resurrection paved the way for eternal fellowship with God. We were made to worship the God who created us and bought us through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ. Now that is something to cheer about. We who are Christ's people just can't help ourselves.

Sorghum Syrup (November 26, 2002)

There is a way you can have a little bit of dessert with your meal. It works this way. Take your corn bread (or any bread available) and slice it open. Take some sorghum syrup and pour it on the buttered piece of corn bread. Umm! Now that's good. For breakfast mix some sorghum with butter. Stir it well. Then put it on a nice warm biscuit. You don't know what you have been missing. I watched my father-in-law do this many years ago. The only problem is, you have to find the right kind of sorghum. Sorghum syrup comes from sorghum cane grown especially for the special syrup it produces. You want the kind made from stripped cane. The sorghum cane is put through a grinding process. This produces a juice that is then run through a sieve to remove the impurities. The juice is cooked slowly and condensed to a sweet, thick, dark syrup. The result is worth the work.

When Jesus spoke to the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), He called attention to their tribulation. They had suffered much for the sake of Christ. Interestingly, the name Smyrna comes from the word “myrrh” which means bitter. Myrrh must be crushed for its fragrance to be recognized. Jesus, the Sufferer, speaks to a suffering church to give it hope. The crushing process of adversity is designed by God to produce sweetness and purity of life, one that bears a striking resemblance to Jesus Christ.

God permits crushing deathblows to fall upon His children. It may be a bullet sent hurling through the head of a missionary in Lebanon. It may be a knife driven into the heart of a believer in Nigeria. It may be the news of an inoperable brain tumor. It may be a necessary move to an assisted living facility with the accompanying loss of independent living. It may be the helplessness felt by a parent as their child struggles with unrelenting pain. God has not promised us a life of ease and comfort. He wisely and tenderly rules over our pain. Christ says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). There is a distilled sweetness in the life of a child of God who entrusts his soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Pet. 4:19). How is it that we may triumph in suffering and death? It is because Jesus Christ was crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). The punishing blows of God's wrath fell upon the perfect Son of God so that sin and death could be rendered powerless over us. Have you tasted the sweetness of God's forgiveness of your sin and the incomparable joy of eternal fellowship with Jesus Christ?

Should Infants be Baptized? (December 4, 2002)

Some of us have family members and friends who believe in infant baptism. This creates some real tensions, given the sentimental effect of a sweet little baby being given spiritual attention in

the church, and good reasons to question its validity. Those who practice infant baptism base their belief on four arguments: the rite of circumcision in the Old Testament, early church practice, household baptism in the book of Acts, and the blessing of the children by Jesus (Matt. 10:14-16). But upon close examination these arguments don't carry the theological freight assigned to them. Circumcision initiated people into a theocracy made up of believers and unbelievers, not the body of Christ. Paedobaptists (belief in the practice of baptizing infants) speak about the entrance of babies into a "covenant community." But what kind of covenant community do they mean? The New Testament terminology for the community of believers is the church. How does one enter the church? It is through the new birth (faith in Christ). An infant cannot exercise faith in Christ. The household baptisms described in the book of Acts prescribe hearing the gospel and believing in Christ (Acts 16:31-33). Household baptism is a picture of whole families converted and baptized.

Examples from the early church of infant baptism are only as good as they are consistent with what the Scriptures teach. The early church was not exempt from unbiblical beliefs and practices. For example, some of the early church theologians taught baptismal regeneration, a view hardly consistent with the teaching of the Bible.

The fact that Jesus blessed the children does not include any water. The truth exemplified by Jesus was love for children. They need to hear the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ and the gift of Christ Himself, which brings us to some important conclusions. The meaning of baptism is found in its symbolism of the believer's identification with Jesus Christ and entrance into the body of Christ. By no theological stretch can baptism be made to symbolize the hope for or probable future regeneration.

If you have a family member or friend who believes in infant baptism, be charitable toward them and work toward a mutual agreement that baptism saves no one. Salvation comes by the free grace of God and is not attached to any required ritual. Pray for the children in your family circle with the understanding that infant baptism cannot guarantee conversion. A baby can be sprinkled, grow up in the church, reject Christ, die, and spend an eternity in hell. And, finally, keep in mind this common denominator truth: We must seek to win children to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Am I praying for the children I know, and am I seeking opportunities to present the gospel to them?

A Fresh Start (January 5, 2003)

When I woke up on Wednesday morning, I could not help but feel like I was at the threshold of a new beginning. I don't ordinarily look at the middle of the week that way, but it was the first day of 2003. We have yet to write the pages in this chapter of our life. One thing I want to personally avoid is an experience with mediocrity. I do not want the sweet prospects of a God-exalting, Christ-centered, and Holy Spirit empowered life to be spoiled by personal satisfaction with the ordinary. Our word mediocrity comes from the Latin, *mediocris*, which means roughly, halfway up a mountain. May God spare us from the kind of life that remains content with merely taking care of our physical needs. Will we settle for living a life that is just ordinary, taking no risks for the kingdom's sake, simply going from one meal to the next, little delight in God and His Word, no bold witness for Christ, and just living our Christianity as grim duty.

I would like to propose some resolutions that, if by setting our minds on these things, we can avoid an insipid, spiritual laziness. Firstly, let us determine to renounce a pale and lifeless “worship” experience on Sunday. Authentic worship is glorifying God by joyful obedience to His infinite worth. Let us refuse to come and sit in church and not meaningfully participate in song, prayer, and instruction from God’s Word. Secondly, let us show no mercy to our spiritual laziness. Laziness is the opposite of loving, energetic obedience to God. Because of laziness we continue to overeat, watch too much television, give little of our income to the work of God, and fail to get up early and meet with the living God of the universe. Thirdly, our lack of spiritual self-awareness must not be allowed to follow us to the grave. Pray that God will open our eyes to paths we have chosen to walk that are taking us away from unbridled love for God and our neighbor. How easily we deceive ourselves and remain oblivious to what we are not doing for Christ’s sake. Fourthly, our avoidance of body-life interdependence should not be excused. Interdependence is a call to encouraging one another, praying for one another, talking to one another, eating with one another, loving one another, listening to one another, worshipping with one another, reproving one another, and caring for one another. Fifthly, our susceptibility to the world’s value judgments must be recognized and counteracted. Our culture is telling us to live at the highest possible material level, to seek our comfort above all else, and to live for self-fulfillment. We must repent of such non-sense wherever we find it infecting our thinking. Finally, our marriages must not be allowed to fade into a discolored representation of eternal truths. In order for the drama of redemption to be portrayed between a husband and wife, sacrifice is necessary. A marriage that is growing in oneness is created by two people who are pursuing the exaltation of God in all things, who have a low tolerance for independent, self-centered decision making, who determine to explore the depths of biblical love and who refuse to live stalled in mutual self-interest and resentment.

Come with me and let us not live halfway up the mountain. Let’s go to the top and see things which eye has not seen, things that God has prepared for those who love Him.

The Story That Ought to Be (January 21, 2003)

The State flag controversy, Trent Lott’s racially charged comments, President Bush’s criticism of affirmative action, and the Martin Luther King holiday all converge to remind us of the ever-present racial struggles in our society.

It was in the years 1969 and 1970 that I encountered, in a very personal way, the ugly face of racial prejudice. It occurred in a place where there should have been a God exalting example of unity among black and white Christians. The church that I had attended from childhood, where I had been taught the Scriptures and led to salvation in Christ, and where I was ordained into the Christian ministry made some decisions that altered the course of my personal history. The Christian school associated with the church refused to enroll a black applicant. She was the daughter of one of my teacher colleagues at Carver Bible College, whose parents wanted her kindergarten year to be the beginning of a quality Christian education. Less than a year later one of my students at Carver presented himself to my home church for membership. It was denied to him. The reason given was that my black brother in Christ, training for Christian work, would be able to worship and serve more effectively in a church “of his own people.” The church where I had been nurtured in the faith left me with no choice. Beth and I could no longer be members where our black brothers and sisters in Christ were not welcome. The decision to exclude a

believer based on his skin color violated the very heart of the gospel. Jesus Christ laid down His life to make possible our reconciliation with God. Sinful man was in a declared state of war against God. But Christ, through a voluntary act of substitution, “made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:20). He signed the peace treaty with His own blood, so that the enemies of God could have peace with God through faith in His Son.

The reconciliation of man to God through the cross of Christ has staggering racial implications. Gentile, Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, Asian, African, and Caucasian can find oneness in Christ. How can one member of the body of Christ say to another, “I have no need of you,” “You don’t belong with us”? This denies the gospel that we preach (Eph. 2:11-22). But thank God. The evil of racial prejudice doesn’t have to have the last word. The sin against little Lydia and my friend Tony Evans did not defeat them. They found those who would love, support, and encourage them. They did not become bitter. Instead, they have brought untold blessing to the body of Christ, black and white.

If the church of Jesus Christ would live out the gospel of reconciliation, flags, segregation, and racial discrimination would not be the major stories of our day. The big story would be the prejudice-rejecting, racial-reconciling, Christ-exalting love that God’s people have for one another.

Why We Are Going to Guyana... (January 26, 2003)

On Saturday, February 1, Beth and I will leave for Guyana, South America. This will be my fourth trip to the only English-speaking country in South America. Guyana is a small country nestled between Venezuela, Brazil, and Surinam, on the northeast coast of the South American continent. It has a population of slightly less than one million in an area about the size of Idaho. About half of the people are of East Indian descent, brought from India in the 1800s to work the sugar plantations. Africans and Eurafricans make up the other half of a nation rife with racial and political tensions. Guyana is a secular state comprised of Hindus, Muslims, Animists, Christians, and the non-religious. Since the late 1980s the Unevangelized Fields Mission has had an effective ministry in the coastal area around the Berbice and Courantyne Rivers. Churches have been planted and a Bible Institute has been established to train national workers.

Why are we going to Guyana (An Amerindian word meaning “Land of Waters”)? We go because we were invited to come and help train Guyanese believers at the Berbice Bible Institute. I will be teaching the Gospel of Matthew, and Beth will be ministering to the wives of the missionaries and the women in the churches. There will also be some peacemaking work to be done. The Association of Bible Churches has recently experienced some severe testing in internal conflict and division. Much work has gone into reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships. Beth and I hope to be a part of helping the churches achieve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We will also be available for counseling. Guyana is not an easy place to live, and there are some special stresses on the missionaries and their children. On our last visit we were able to meet with some young Guyanese pastors and their wives to discuss life in the pastorate, spiritual disciplines, and husband and wife relationships. We are asking God to use us to encourage His people in the faith.

We will fly to Miami where we will change planes and hopefully be in Georgetown on Saturday evening and stay with the Glovers and the Lehmans at the Georgetown Bible College. How thankful we are for these dear people. They will meet us at the airport and provide us with lodging under a mosquito net before we set out the next morning on an eighty-mile ride to Berbice, which on our last visit took over five hours. It's an adventure. While in the Nigg settlement we will stay with Scott and Maura Fisher and their three children. They are a dear couple, who refresh God's servants with "warm" hospitality. They have been hosting guests since January 3. But Maura has written assuring us, "Don't worry about you and Howard—I'm not looking at you guys so much as guests coming but as reinforcements for us emotionally and spiritually! I know my kids will really enjoy having you here." There are some inconveniences involved in a trip like this, but the joy of seeing what God is doing in other lives is a reward. Having the opportunity to leave the American comfort bubble helps to remind us of what it means to love God without the aid of the amenities of life in our home in Fayetteville.

Thank you Berachah for allowing us this time away and the comfort of knowing that we are a band of brothers and sisters in the Lord who long to see Christ exalted in every place in this world, yes, even in the villages of Guyana, South America.

The Priceless Jewel of Peace (February 2, 2003)

In my preparation this past week for our trip to Guyana, I read the Guyana Mediation Team Report. In eleven pages it detailed the mediation process that was necessary due to some serious division among the churches on the Guyana field. Having been to Guyana three times, I have come to know rather well the missionaries, national workers, and pastors in the Association of Bible Churches. Beth and I are grieved over the extent to which disharmony has developed in what has been an effective church planting work. There is no need to go into all the details. But we have been in prayer for wisdom, as we will live among the bruised saints for the next two weeks. There will be abundant opportunities to talk to some of my students and the missionaries who labor there. We go reminded that peacemakers are blessed. We want to work for shalom (Hebrew for peace) among God's people. Strife and discord must not be allowed to rule. Such conduct presents an ugliness that repels unbelievers and dishonors the God of peace.

The truth of the gospel that we lay down our lives to proclaim to all peoples everywhere is to reveal itself in lives transformed by God's Spirit. Our doctrine should be preached throughout relationships. That is why Paul called upon the believers in Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1-3). Christian people are to live up to what they are in Christ. But what does this kind of life look like? The graces of humility, meekness, patience, and forbearance are proof that love is governing our conduct. If we are humble, then we will take our place as servants, as helpers to others (to my fellow teammates on the basketball team, that means that an assist is as satisfying as a basket). We don't need to be the center of attention. We should be known for our meekness. Meek people are strong. They are careful with their power, using it not to harm or control people, but to protect and build up others in the faith. Patience ought to describe the way in which we relate to people. We will give others the room to grow spiritually without trying to pressure and force them. And while we are conducting our lives in this manner, we will show forbearance by being dependable in our commitment of love. We will be those who can be counted on through thick and thin.

Preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace takes effort. Unity will be realized as peace prevails. Peace prevails when sin is confronted and confessed. I am thankful for the peace we have at Berachah. But at the same time, I know that peace is a fragile thing. Sin is ever hiding in the tall grass of my heart ready to pounce and do its damage. Satan is cunning and looks for the opportunity to take advantage of angry people (Eph. 4:27). You can be sure that anger is a fuel that drives strife and division. Watch your own heart. Is there some offense, a jealousy, a cause you are willing to push at the expense of another, or a disappointment that is festering within? How quickly harmony can be lost and the name of God discredited in the eyes of a watching world. Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom He may devour, ready to exploit a situation to his own advantage. Let's not accommodate him. Peace is a priceless jewel. Much can be done for the kingdom's sake, if we will cherish above all else the God who is peace.

The Tender Ways of God (February 9, 2003)

I am sitting at the dining room table with the fan whirring away sending its needed air currents my way. A scrawny black cow just walked down the street, stopping along the way to munch on some grass. The "restaurant" (I use this word very loosely) across the road is playing some music with an incessant loud beat. A rooster is crowing. Goats are looking for food wherever they can find it. The palm trees are gently blowing in the breeze. The mosquitoes are looking for fresh blood. Mangy dogs sit listlessly in the shade. Beth has just gone out for a walk with Maura Fisher, our hostess, and the searing tropical sun is about to release us for the day.

On Tuesday morning I spoke to the annual meeting of the Association of Bible Churches. They have been through a very difficult year. There has been conflict that has required much time and attention. They are weary but are attempting to "rebuild the walls" of the work of God in this place. Eight different churches were represented. They each gave a report and stated their goals for the coming year. Hope and fervor for the gospel of Jesus Christ filled the air. Beth and I drew encouragement from the joyful singing and the presence of many that we knew from our visit here last January. I feel a deep and abiding kinship with the UFM work here in Guyana, having been a part of the training of many of the pastors and workers in the churches. In my message, I drew attention to how God responds to His servants who are enduring tests and temptations, dealing with disappointment, working through grief, and sorting out a range of conflicting attitudes. Moses struggled with self-doubts about his ability to confront Pharaoh. The task of leading Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land was daunting. God, even though angry with Moses for his whining, accommodated Himself to Moses' weakness (Ex. 4:14). God used His servant in spite of himself. Joshua fell into absolute despair after Israel's defeat at Ai (Josh. 7). He did not know that flagrant disobedience had sabotaged the nation. The Lord graciously explained to Joshua Israel's sin and what to do. There are times when confusion will roll in like a thick fog and we will not have any idea what God may be doing. Our great concern at such a time should be, like Joshua, the reputation of God. Elijah found himself tired, discouraged, and emotionally drained after confronting the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The wicked queen Jezebel had managed to intimidate God's servant. He ran away to the desert and turned in his resignation. He wanted to die. The Tender Shepherd of Israel cared for Elijah's physical exhaustion, then gave him a needed reminder of His ways (1 Kgs. 19:12-14). God not only speaks in the spectacular, the fire of immediate judgment. He also speaks in the silence. The gentle blowing wind was God's email to a disappointed prophet. Things are never quite as bad as

they seem. The Lord God works in the “still small voice” of the Holy Spirit changing hearts and lives.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ in Guyana need the reenergizing perspective of God’s Word as they faithfully labor to win their neighbors to Christ, build strong churches, and train their future leaders.

Thank you Berachah for your part in this ministry.

Creation’s Song (February 15, 2003)

A tropical sunrise is a beautiful sight. The light of the sun is not subtle near the equator. It streaks across the sky illuminating everything in its path. Palm trees with clusters of coconuts dance in the breeze as they are bathed in the first light of day. The clouds conspire to soften the intensity of the sun, but they become immediately brilliant, even on the distant horizon, as they are kissed by the dawn’s first light.

Creation is God’s masterpiece. The first message we are given in the Bible is that all nature came into existence by the word of God. He spoke and there were solar systems, galaxies, moons, planets and our own earth (Gen. 1 & 2). It was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who hung our world in space (Jn. 1:1-4; Col. 1:16). One design that God had for His six-day work week was to offer a pattern for man’s calendar (Ex. 20:11). As each day in our seven-day week unfolds, God calls our attention to His original performance. In the infinite wisdom of God, man, who was God’s own handiwork, was permitted to blight creation through an act of disobedience. Because of sin, creation was cursed. Bacteria, viruses, poison ivy, drought, storms, chiggers, rattlesnakes, earthquakes, gnats, and mosquitoes became part of the misery of human existence. The creation is groaning, longing for the day when it will be redeemed and can once again sing in the major key (Gen. 3; Rom. 8:22). But nature did not slip from God’s grasp. It serves Him even though it is broken. God reveals His faithfulness to us by the constancy of the cycles of nature. A sunrise, a sunset, the ocean tides, and seasonal changes all give witness to a God who can be counted upon (Psa. 119:90-91). The sky is not going to fall, at least not until God pulls the plug (2 Pet. 3:10). On special occasions the God of creation makes nature do extraordinary things. He can cause the sun to stand still (Josh. 10:12), axe heads to float (2 Kgs. 6:1-7) and great storms to stop in their tracks (Mk. 4:39). And speaking of storms, God loves to use them to announce His presence and awe His creatures by His might (Psa. 29; Hab. 3:3-15). God said the word and a great wind altered Jonah’s vacation plans (Jon. 1:4). Paul was given an opportunity to witness to God’s fame when a mighty Mediterranean northeaster sank his ship (Acts 27). There are times when God causes the ravaging forces of nature to chasten and judge a sin-pursuing nation (Deut. 28:24; Zech. 14:18). There are spiritual lessons to be learned in times of drought, floods, and hailstorms. When creation turns against man, it is a bold reminder of a patient God who is gathering the clouds of judgment that loom on the horizon (Amos 5:8; Matt. 24:7; Rev. 6:12).

Man being the fallen creature that he is insists on worshiping the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:23). This is an insult to the Lord of the universe. He has purposely initiated natural disasters in order to awaken idolaters to the folly of their nature worship (Ex. 7-12; Isa. 45:7). There is no mother nature. The truth is that the Lord of the church upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3; Psa. 148:8). A wise and loving God has left His fingerprints on every

square inch of the universe in order to proclaim His majesty and glory (Psa. 19:1; Isa. 48:18-19). Those who propose blind chance as the god of all things are intoxicated by their own self-deception. The evolutionists can continue to suppress the truth about God. They can attempt to explain away the obvious. But He who sits in the heavens laughs (Psa. 2:4). The sun, moon, stars, the highest heavens, snow, whales, and clouds all continue to sing the praises of God (Psa. 148).

Steeple, Mosques, & Hindu Temples (February 23, 2003)

After a seemingly endless series of security checks in Georgetown, Guyana, and Miami, we landed at the Atlanta airport. Justin was there to pick us up and drove us immediately to our church. There to meet us was the new steeple drawing our eyes upward to the cross. We rejoiced with those who had gathered to meet us. It was a moving moment for Beth and me. We were returning from a country where Islam, Hinduism, an assortment of cults, and rum are vying for the allegiance of the population of 800,000. Each day we listened as the Muslim call to prayer went out to the surrounding village. We passed the homes of Hindu patrons with their god houses sitting prominently in the front yard. The cross, etched against the late winter sky, set our minds upon the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that goes out from Berachah. We live in a world that is dancing to the tune of hopelessness. Corrupt governments, brutal dictators, international terrorism, an AIDS epidemic, grinding third world poverty, drug trafficking, and the threat of war reflect the reality of a fallen human race in rebellion against God. But the most tragic news of all is that there are millions of sin weary and heavy-laden people who need the salvation rest that is found in Christ alone. It is a painful sight to see those who have been made in the image of God, but yet absolutely spiritually bankrupt, laboring in the quest to find happiness and meaning. Only the sovereign Spirit of God can penetrate the dense spiritual darkness of humanity's war against God.

But thank God there are faithful servants of Jesus Christ who are witnessing to the hope of eternal life in the gospel. Michael Williams, an Amerindian, is faithfully shepherding his flock at the Canji Bible Church, training elders and deacons, and is doing it all in the midst of the conspicuous presence of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques. Steve and Jill Puett labor tirelessly in the Tain Bible Church and the surrounding community. Suresh, age 23, Ricky, age 17, Vick, age 19, and Vishal, age 14 gather with Steve at a midweek church service to pray fervently to the living and true God. Scott and Maura Fisher refresh the hearts of the saints as they open their home to a variety of guests. Maura prepares meals everyday not only for her family of five, but for visiting pastors, teachers, and Christian workers as well. The Fishers' love stands as a witness to God's everlasting love across the street from a bar that serves a steady stream of rum drinkers. John and Joanna Colby, their three sons and a daughter, work with John Persaud, a Guyanese national, to establish a church in the Edinburgh village on the banks of the Berbice River. This little flock of Christian believers meets each Sunday and Wednesday in a bottom house across the street from the sugar cane fields. Poverty abounds in the community, but the power of the gospel echoes through the village streets in the lives of loving people transformed by God's grace.

A cross-tipped steeple is a bold reminder that the only hope for lost humanity is the all-sufficient, sin-pardoning, life-giving atonement of Jesus Christ. It was He who said, "And I, if I be lifted up

from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). Come Berachah. Let’s go forward carrying the sweet name of Jesus into our neighborhoods, communities, and everywhere we go.

Removing the Fangs of Fear (March 2, 2003)

I recently talked with a lady who was making plans for a vacation to California. I asked her if she was going to go by plane. She immediately said, no, “I don’t fly in airplanes.” She and her husband were going to ride Amtrak across the country. It would be a two-day trip. There is much to be said for traveling by train. But fear was keeping her out of airplanes. Fear is a terrible tyrant. It can keep people from eating in public, from meeting people, from riding on elevators, and a myriad of other things. I read about a lady who stayed in her home from the time she was 31 until age 61 because she was afraid to go out. That is an extreme example but fear can and does significantly alter the lives of millions of people. It is estimated that one in nine adults harbors some kind of phobia (a persistent, uncontrolled fear). It would seem that Americans are facing an epidemic induced by the threat of terrorism. Particularly interesting is the way the media handles and reports this new wave. *Newsweek* magazine chose to pursue their discussion on the current crisis under the heading of “health,” explaining the human experience of fear as “a biological adaptation, designed to promote survival in the environments where it evolved.” But it is much more than just an “evolved” physiological response to real or supposed danger. The human race is infected because there is something to fear, namely, death itself (Heb. 2:15). It is the result of the entrance of sin into the world. Adam and Eve became afraid of God because they had rebelled against Him and faced the sentence of death. Awareness of God’s displeasure and its resulting judgment introduced fear into the human experience with its Pandora’s box of freedom-suffocating consequences. It puts us in bondage in as many ways as human beings attempt to avoid the dread of death, the king of terrors. Hundreds of humanly crafted religions and philosophies exist as a means of denying the meaning of death.

But there is good news. The bondage of fear has been broken by the death of death in the death of Jesus Christ. The atoning, substitutionary death of Jesus disarmed the devil, who had the power of death. Death is the penalty of sin. Christ bore the penalty of sin. The fear-producing cause has been removed for those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. The fangs of fear have been removed. Those who have appropriated the benefits of Christ’s death are released from the bondage of dread regarding death. This freedom opens up a new world. Pain need not be an enemy for it is the opportunity to understand and know God in deeper ways. The thought of separation from what we know and separation from the ones we love is replaced by the promise that at death the believer goes into the presence of Christ and is reunited with loved ones who have placed their faith in Christ (Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:8; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). The threat of everlasting punishment loses its grip because there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The story of the Bible is to bring men from fear into assurance of salvation. Escape from Satan’s clutches can only occur when the grip of sin has been broken. Everything hangs on this. But that is exactly what Jesus Christ offers to a fear-dominated world. Liberation from the fear of death comes in liberation from the guilt of sin (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

Terrorism feeds on its ability to control people by their fears. But there is something that is the worst of all possible horrors. To die without God’s forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ, and to face the eternal wrath of a holy God is a frightening thought.

The Christian Education of Our Children (March 9, 2003)

There is no greater imperative for Christian parents than the preparation of their children for a God exalting adult life. But this has to be done in God's way. Whether children are home schooled, attend a Christian school, or the public school, a Christian education must take place. As at any time in history, there are opportunities and challenges that present themselves. We live in a day when access to information has never been better. Book stores, libraries, computers, the internet, television, videos, and all that modern technology offers provide parents a vast array of educational resources. The freedoms that we enjoy in America allow for parents to home school their children. In many cases this is the best option for those who are committed and equipped to do it. The Christian school movement is strong and offers unprecedented opportunities. With all its problems, the public school system can provide an excellent education, depending on the quality of the local school system. But no matter what educational process a Christian parent chooses, there are certain fundamental issues that must be considered.

Christian parents must know God. Everything is based on this. By knowing God, I do not mean a mere awareness that God exists. In our day there is an appalling ignorance of the biblically revealed nature and character of God. The only place that gives us an accurate understanding of what God is like is the Bible. This ought to be transparent, but sadly, it is not. God exists. He has revealed Himself and may be known. The Scriptures tell us that knowing God is a matter of grace (Gal. 4:9). God Himself has made it possible to have a personal relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Any parent who wants his or her child to receive the best Christian education must be on intimate terms with the living and true God. This comes through a personal faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3). Christian parents must know themselves. A true estimate of oneself can come only from what God has revealed in His Word. Such questions as, "Am I a Christian?", "What are my responsibilities before God?", "What does it mean to be a sinner?", and "How am I to grow as a Christian?" have to be thought through in the light of biblical teaching. Christian parents must know their children. Every child bears the image of God marred by sin (Gen. 1:27; Psa. 51:5). Children are a composite of God's design, genetic inheritance, and a sinful heart (Psa. 139:14-15). Husbands and wives should carefully observe their children in action. What is the temperament of the child? How do they relate to other children? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Parents ought to be keenly aware of the kind of training each child needs. Christian parents must know the world in which their children live. If you do not want your child to love this world, then you will need to know the ungodly enticements that are pulling on them (1 Jn. 2:15-17). If they are not to be conformed to this world, they will need discernment. They must be taught how to think in the patterns of biblical truth. They will need the courage to make decisions that are contrary to the self-indulgence and pragmatism that characterize the value system of our culture.

The Christian education of our children is more than their development academically, recreationally, and socially. It requires parents who provide an environment that stimulates the quest for knowledge, self-mastery, character development, and a life-long hunger for God.

You Could Be in Serious Trouble (March 16, 2003)

When I was in the seventh grade one day after lunch in the school cafeteria, I decided, along with two classmates, to return to class by taking the out-of-doors way. This proved to be a mistake. The approved return route was through the designated halls in the building. Later that day we, the guilty, received a summons to see Mrs. Dent, the school principal. You did not want to encounter her wrath. She ruled our school with a rod of iron. She could communicate a withering look of disapproval. And to make matters more difficult she had the full support of all the parents. The help of a lawyer was not even a thought. Looking back on it, it was not that great of an offense compared to some of the mischief that goes on in our schools today, but we did violate a rule, even though ignorant of it, and were guilty.

There is an infinitely far more serious crime of which we are all guilty and for which we are under God's condemnation. If anyone has not trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life, he can never enter God's heaven. Sin has consequences, and the greatest sin imaginable is to not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God (Jn. 3:18). We have chosen to go our own way. We have already committed the crime. We may not feel like it. We may even be ignorant of the fact, but that does not take away the guilt. Self-deception comes so easy to us. We can compare ourselves with other people and grade our moral condition on the curve. Certainly, we reason, our behavior is a lot better than a Saddam Hussein or some other really bad person. We attempt to justify ourselves by concluding that because we haven't murdered anyone, or haven't embezzled millions of dollars from a corporation, we don't deserve to go to hell.

The truth is that we are all under God's judgment. This is true whether we feel like it or not. Jesus made this very clear. All men are under the sentence of eternal separation from God for not having believed "in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (Jn. 3:18). What did He mean? His name means, "the Lord saves" (Matt. 1:21). The reason Jesus came to this world was to deliver condemned sinners from the wrath of God and give to them eternal life. So then, to believe in His name is to ask God for forgiveness of the sin of unbelief. The precious gift of everlasting fellowship with God is available in Christ alone. There is no other way to escape the judgment of God. It is not an easy thing to admit guilt. We will do anything to avoid facing the fact that we are in rebellion against God and need His pardon. We can violate man-made rules and laws, incur guilt, and may even suffer minimal consequences. But to continue to live, having committed the greatest crime of all, is a terrible reality. Those who have been born-again by God's free grace no longer have the dark cloud of God's wrath hanging over their heads. But if you have not been acquitted of the felony of failure to believe in Christ, you are in serious trouble. However, there is an answer to this problem. God's wrath was poured out on Christ on the cross for our sin. The Son of God was judged in our place in an act of sacrifice that we did not deserve. In this lies the only hope for condemned sinners. "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

The Nobility of Faithfulness (March 14, 2003)

Transitions are an inevitable part of this earthly life. They remind us that life is but "a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away" (Jas. 4:14). Our children grow up, leave home, go away to college, join the military, and get married. A friend moves away. A comfortable and

predictable routine is altered. A house and a home for many years is sold to strangers. A neighbor of many years is transferred out of state by his employer. Many are the changes that make up our life's story.

On Wednesday, December 18, Frank and Betty Clark, longtime friends and charter members of Berachah Bible Church, left their home in McDonough to move to Birmingham, Alabama. Their daughter, Pam, son-in-law, Arkie, and some from our church family assisted in the move. Frank's health has been deteriorating for some months now and both are in their early eighties. Maintaining a house and the special care required for Frank necessitated the new living arrangements. They will be staying with Pam and Arkie.

My relationship with the Clarks goes back a long way. It was in their living room when I was a teenager that God whetted my appetite for the Scriptures in the meetings of the Miracle Book Club. When Berachah began a home Bible study in 1970, Frank and Betty began attending. Frank Clark has been my landlord, next-door neighbor, deacon, and church treasurer. He is known for his quick wit, Scottish kilt, frugality, and insistence upon doing things in the church in an orderly, business-like way. Frank was for many years the terminal manager for Baggett Transportation Company. He could be depended on to be faithful to the worship services and fulfilling his responsibilities as a church officer. How I do appreciate Frank's loyalty through good times and hard times. Betty, his wife of over sixty years, has been such an encouragement through her love for God and His Word. There have been many times when she would approach me after a sermon and thank me for teaching God's Word. Her words were weighty to me. Betty cut her spiritual teeth on the teaching of Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, a man known for his biblically powerful preaching. She has been a student of the Scriptures, a Bible teacher, and one whose life has been radiantly beautiful for Christ's sake.

The memory of Frank being driven to his new home in Birmingham on that cold, gray day in December, and Betty driving their car, west on I-20, away from a lifetime of faithful service at Berachah saddens me. But even though I grieve in this time of transition, I am not without joy. I rejoice in the sweet memories of my two dear friends who have served our Lord in thousands of ways and have blessed us for over 32 years at Berachah.

About the War (March 30, 2003)

I am living through the fifth major war waged by the United States in my lifetime. I was born four months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The Korean War came into our living room in the early days of television. The soul of our nation was torn in the late sixties and early seventies by the Vietnam War. The first Iraqi war, Desert Storm, was seemingly on and off with the tidiness of a two-hour war movie. Now we are locked in a second Iraqi War. Interesting, isn't it, that the wars of human history began and have circled back to the Middle East. War inevitably provokes soul-searching questions. The public debate over our current war is revealing some serious fault lines in our society.

Is there any justification for one nation to wage war against another nation? I think there is. History has proven it. Moral law confirms it, and the Bible teaches it. In the history of man, it has been necessary for nations to go to war to defend themselves against predator nations wanting to conquer them. North Korea attempted to overrun South Korea and had to be

repulsed. In the name of justice, the barbarity and butchery of the Axis powers, Japan, Germany, and Italy, had to be resisted. The Holy Scriptures lay out certain principles that guide the church and a nation in determining when it is right to wage war. A just war may be pursued (Rom. 13:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). It is the divinely delegated right of the state to punish evildoers and protect its citizens.

What is the cause of war? War is a consequence of and an effect of sin (Jas. 4:1). This fact is an embarrassment to modern man's self-deception regarding human nature. War is manifest evil, a megaphone of sin, declaring that something is terribly wrong with the human heart. The very first interpersonal war was Cain's murder of Abel (Gen. 4:1). God judged the pre-flood world for its rampant wickedness and violence (Gen. 6:5, 11). Our world is broken and groaning under the curse of sin (Matt. 15:18-20; Rom. 1:18-23). Mankind tries to explain wars only in terms of symptoms (poverty, wealth, power, security), not in terms of its real cause, lustful, corrupted human nature.

Is there any guarantee or hope that mankind can create a world without war? No. The irony is that attempts to eliminate the risk of war, while at the same time rebelling against God and His revelation in Christ, actually make the world more likely to experience war. Some form of utopianism appears in every generation. Why is this? Satan is a liar and is the god of this unbelieving world. Spiritually blinded human beings follow willfully his life-destroying deceptions (Jn. 8:44). In the last thirty-five centuries of recorded history, only one year out of fifteen has been without war. Wars will continue to be a part of man's story until the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, returns to earth to establish His kingdom (Eccle. 3:8; Matt. 24:6; Zech. 9:10).

Why does God permit war? He permits it so that lost human beings will turn to Him. God is our only hope. We should think of it this way, in the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The question that needs to be asked is not, 'Why does God allow war?' but rather, 'Why does God not allow the world to destroy itself entirely in its iniquity and its sin? Why does He in His restraining grace set a limit to evil and to sin, and a bound beyond which they cannot pass?' Oh, the amazing patience of God with this sinful world! How wondrous is His love! He has sent the Son of His love to our world to die for us and to save us..." War is a call to repentance. We all deserve to perish (Lk. 13:5). Sin is bound up in our hearts. This world needs God's forgiveness in His Son, Jesus Christ. This is our only hope.

The Chicken and the Egg (April 7, 2003)

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? This biological conundrum forces a discussion on the development of life in a fertilized egg. It is one of the wonders of God's marvelous creation. But there is also a theological truth that has produced a great deal of debate. Which comes first, regeneration or faith? Regeneration means to be born again (Titus 3:5). This is the supernatural work of God in giving new life to the spiritually dead (Jn. 3:3). There are those who teach that because of our spiritual condition ("dead in trespasses and sins" Eph. 2:1), God must first regenerate the unbeliever before he can exercise saving faith. Others counter this argument by saying that such a teaching makes faith mechanical and eliminates human responsibility. Faith, they say, precedes regeneration. If not, then the gospel message is contradicted, for the sinner is told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to receive eternal life (Jn. 3:15).

How are we to understand the relationship of regeneration and faith? In answering this question, it is important to keep certain biblical teachings in mind. First, salvation is the work of God. Sinful man is not able to cooperate with God in order to affect the new life in Christ he needs (Jn. 3:3-8; Jn. 1:13). There will be no one in heaven glorying in what he did to get there. God alone receives the praise for His amazing grace to helpless and hopeless sinners. Secondly, the unsaved are told that they must exercise faith in Christ in order to receive forgiveness of sins (Eph.2:8). This is a responsibility for lost human beings. Trust in Christ is necessary if one is to pass from death to life. If the non-Christian does not believe, he has been judged already (Jn. 3:18). It is not faith that saves the sinner, but it is through faith as the channel that God removes the guilt of sin and grants eternal life.

Faith and regeneration occur so close together as to be regarded as simultaneous. God speaks powerfully to the spiritually dead through the word of truth (Jas. 1:18). The human response to God's provision is faith, which is a "personal approving commitment to the truth" of the gospel. It is through faith that justification comes to man. It excludes all human merit. "Saving faith" is man's act performed under the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:8). Passing from death to life is like the firing of a double-barrel shotgun. God squeezes the trigger. He makes it possible to believe by opening the sinner's heart (Acts 16:14). The other barrel explodes as God imparts eternal life (Jn. 1:12). While no analogy can explain all the theological nuances of the miracle of the new birth, this is an attempt to understand the miraculous and paradoxical relation of regeneration and faith.

You can test your theology to see if it properly interprets all the biblical teaching regarding divine initiative and human response. Do you hesitate to tell the unconverted that they must put their trust in Christ? Does your theology require that one be a Christian in order to become a Christian? If so, it needs to be reexamined. Do you view conversion as a cooperative effort between God and man? Do you think that salvation is made possible by merely a human decision? If so, there is a misunderstanding of what it means to become a new creature in Christ. There are mysteries involved in Christian conversion. But Jesus Christ has made it very clear that, "He who believes in the Son of God has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him" (Jn. 3:36).

High Hopes (April 13, 2003)

American Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles rolled into central Baghdad. Iraqis spilled out into the streets. A new day in Iraq has dawned. But it won't be easy. There will be other battles, firefights, snipers, and assassinations. In the midst of it all a new regime will emerge. Hopefully, a freedom hitherto unknown in Iraq will replace the tyrannical rule of a self-styled Arab Hitler. This is not a novel experience in the history of nations. Empires have risen to great heights of power and prestige only to be read about in history books and explored by archaeologists. In our own lifetime we have seen the breakup of the Soviet Union and the disassembling of a godless communism. One cannot help but rejoice at the toppling of evil empires and cruel dictators. Arrogant nations strut across the stage of history only to go down in ignominy. In the words of Solomon, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The high hopes of a new regime, a new ruler, a new government, yet "even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind" (Eccle. 4:16). A new national leadership

goes off on its own journey for better days only to be infected by political corruption and disregard for human rights. A fickle population turns angry and seeks another leader.

Two thousand years ago the clouds of the approaching death of Jesus Christ hung over the city of Jerusalem. The crucifixion of Israel's Messiah was imminent. But on the Sunday before the Friday of His death, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. It was a contrast between appearance and reality. Jesus was coming to the moment when He would lay down His life for His sheep. But first He presents Himself to Israel as her Messiah and King (Mk. 11:1-10). The joyful crowds had high hopes. They desperately wanted a deliverer, a regime change, and freedom from Roman rule. Jesus was indeed the prophesied Messiah, but hardly anyone seemed to know this. The meaning of the moment of triumphal entry was not really grasped by the throngs. They were actually applauding the Suffering Servant and didn't realize it. They didn't know who He was. Their King had come in humility, as God's Servant, to bear our sins in His body on the tree (I Pet. 2:24). Zechariah 9:9, Psalm 118 (which they had been quoting), and Isaiah 53 were not discernable to the jubilant crowd. The thousands of Jewish pilgrims were caught up in the excitement of the moment. They were aware of the miracles and reputation of Jesus. Some probably had a measure of understanding of the claims He made about His identity. But after all was said and done, they were theologically clueless. The multitudes wanted the Davidic kingdom, the ultimate regime change, but not a crucified Messiah. They were acclaiming the kingdom but not the King. Their thinking was mired in political schemes and dreams (Jn. 6:5). In a few days they would turn on Jesus with a hateful vengeance. It was a revolution they wanted, not the payment of a ransom for their sins. That's the way sinful humans are. We don't want the real remedy to our problems. The truth about God and our lost condition is not valued, not really. The triumphal entry of Jesus on that first Palm Sunday supplies us with a missing message in today's world. The answer to the human problem is the defeat of sin and death, not political triumphalism. Our only hope is not a political one. It is not the United Nations. It is not globalism. It is not any coalition of great nations. It is the salvation that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the only reason for high hopes.

The Domino Factor (April 20, 2003)

The Vietnam War was fought in part because some government leaders believed that if South Vietnam fell to the Communists all Southeast Asia would fall to Communism. This was referred to as the "domino theory." Many have had second thoughts about the necessity of the Vietnam War, but that does not negate the validity of the fact that a neighborhood of nations can be corrupted by the ideology of one nation.

Human history provides many reminders of spiritual realities. There is a domino factor in the realm of biblical truth. Theologically it is possible to hold two beliefs with one being absolutely contrary to the other. For example, one may say that he believes in the authority of the Bible but yet deny its inerrancy (i.e., that it is without error). Another may say he believes in a sovereign, omnipotent God who created all things, but deny immediate creation and opt for "theistic evolution." Some say they believe in the sufficiency of the Scriptures but deny it by accepting a humanistic model for dealing with the problems of life. A doctrinal contradiction (attempting to hold to a truth and an error at the same time) becomes more than just theological inconsistency. It leads to wrong behavior and influences others adversely. Even though only a few may hold to

a particular doctrinal error, it can gradually influence a wider group of Christians. Therefore, it must be checked, or it will spread and do great damage to the work of God. False teaching has a domino effect if it is allowed to go unchallenged.

The denial of a physical, bodily resurrection is a classic example of the infectious nature of unbelief. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church to confront a theological virus, that if allowed to spread would undermine everything that God had revealed in Christ. They were guilty of living with a doctrinal contradiction. They believed in Christ's resurrection, but yet denied the bodily resurrection of believers. Underlying this was the influence of the Sadducees with their denial of a resurrection and Greek philosophy that rejected the idea of a resurrected body as disgusting and unacceptable. For this, Paul gave the Corinthian believers a doctrinal spanking. To deny the resurrection of the body is to deny the resurrection of Christ because His resurrection was a bodily resurrection. The doctrinal dominos fall. If there is not resurrection of Christ, there is no gospel (1 Cor. 15:12-14). If there is no resurrection of Christ, the apostles were liars (15:15-16). If there is no resurrection of Christ, our faith is worthless (15:17). If there is no resurrection of Christ, there is no hope (15:18). If there is no resurrection of Christ, the world is right and we Christians are wrong (15:19). These what-ifs could leave us somewhat unnerved. Have we been duped? No, because Paul makes it abundantly clear in his epistles that there is good news. The gospel rests solidly on the two historical theological realities of the cross and resurrection of Christ. We have a message of truth. The apostles were not liars, nor are we. We are to be bold witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:12-21). We can be free from sin's demands (Rom. 3:23). Our faith is not worthless. Because of Christ, believers are no longer under the condemnation of God (Rom. 8:1). If I am in Christ, God the Father is satisfied with me. We can have the hope of seeing Christ. To die as a Christian is to be present with Christ (2 Cor. 5:8). The world is not right. God is right. The world is wrong in its assessment of the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead is not merely the occasion to dress up, go to church, eat some ham and potatoes, and hunt for Easter eggs. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the pledge of a final judgment upon all who reject the gospel.

The Puzzles of Life (April 27, 2003)

I believe that God is in control of everything that happens to us. I do not think that He is surprised by any event, not matter how awful it may be. I believe that God works all things together for good those who love Him. It seems very plain to me that both good and evil are within the scope of God's decreed plan. Yes, there is divine mystery involved in this, but the Scriptures announce at every turn the truth of God's sovereignty over all things. The winds obey His command (Psa. 148:8). God makes sure that the birds are fed. (My birdfeeder is a part of His plan.) A lottery winner (though this is not the way God wants us to earn an income) is not a chance event (Prov. 16:32). God determined the time of the fall of the Iraqi regime (Job 12:23; Psa. 22:28). The number of birthdays we will have in this life has already been written in God's book (Psa. 139:16). There is a rightful comfort in all this. God encourages His people with the wonderful truth that every detail of life is guided by His wise and omnipotent hand. God is good. He is righteous. Whatever He does is right, and it is right because He does it (Psa. 119:137; Neh. 9:33).

But all this presents us with some difficulties. An infant dies in its crib. A twenty-eight-year employee with his company loses his job two years before retirement. A college student is

diagnosed with cancer. She has to drop out of school and begin an exhausting round of chemotherapy treatment. The cancer appears to go into remission but returns, and she dies a month before her planned graduation. How does one explain these seemingly senseless reversals in life? Is there any way we can put the puzzling parts of God's plan together to yield a meaningful picture? There is a psalm in the Old Testament that can help us with this question. Israel was experiencing defeats that they did not understand. There was no apparent national sin causing these severe losses. Psalm 44 is an expression of national lament. It was written on behalf of a bewildered people. The suffering of God's covenant people was not due to guilt and punishment (which had happened in the past).

At the very beginning the truth emerges that struggle with the puzzles of life must begin with reflection on the faithfulness of God in the past (44:1-3). The nation was never to forget that it was God's free choice when He acted on their behalf, not on any merit of their own. Israel is reminded that struggle with the puzzles of life must be met with trust in God in the present (44:4-8). Confidence must not be placed in resources and abilities. We are not to live by the demand for explanations but by an unshakeable confidence in God. After the trumpeting call to trust in God alone, the psalmist lays out a list of "charges" against God. The question of the sufferer is, "Why is God doing this to me?" Struggle with the puzzles of life is best handled by expressing it to God (44:9-16). There are times in our lives when our losses leave us utterly confused and disheartened. Talk to God about it. Draw near to Him. He listens because He loves us. Then some reflective personal heart searching can take place. Struggle with the puzzles of life does not necessarily mean that one's heart is not right with God (44:17-22). Suffering is not always because of some personal sin. Our losses can come because we are refusing to conform to this world. It is as one writer says, "A reverse as well as a victory may be a sign of fellowship with God, not of alienation." Finally, the desire for God's immediate attention expresses itself. Questions arise ("Why dost Thou hide Thy face?"). Is God asleep? Of course, He is not. These are questions of faith not doubt. Struggle with the puzzles of life demands dependency on God's lovingkindness. The outcome of the whole psalm is not a resolution to the purpose of suffering for the people of God. We must hold on to this one thing as stated by Job, "Though He slay me, yet I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15). The reality behind the apparent sleep of God is His loyal love. No loss or sorrow, no matter how painful can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:36-39). Let the sweetness of that promise settle into your soul as you experience the puzzles of life.

Guarding Against Greed (May 4, 2003)

My thoughts regarding greed were provoked by an editorial that recently appeared in the Atlanta newspaper. The premise of the writer was that the president's proposed tax cut "is a crass appeal to greed." But if that is true, I guess you could say that any offer of a discount or special bargain could be called "an appeal to greed." By that logic any money that is saved (from that which one has earned) would be a lust for more than what one ought to have. This all becomes a very tricky thing. I remember how it was a popular idea in the media to describe the 1980s as a decade of greed. It seems that the charge of money-lust became a convenient moral missile to attack the political opposition. Part of the problem is rooted in how one determines what is right and wrong. To those who define morality as doing what is in one's interests ("ethical egoism"), then greed may not even exist at all. It is a vice of which others are guilty, but not oneself. The only way that we can have any moral clarity and certainty is by having a final moral authority ("supreme moral principle"). I propose that the Bible does just that because it is the expression of

God's thoughts. Jesus, God in human flesh, was asked to settle a domestic dispute over an inheritance. A man wanted what he thought was rightfully his. Jesus threw some theological ice water in the plaintiff's face by giving a stern warning against greed (Lk. 12:15-34). He used a parable to do this. A certain rich man couldn't be content with what he had. All he could think about was acquiring more wealth and sitting on what he had. It didn't cross his mind that his wealth could be used for the benefit of others. He was thankless, presumptuous, and utterly selfish. He died. It turned out that all the property he needed was, "Six feet from his head to his heels."

What is greed? It is an insatiable appetite for anything that takes the place of God. This is why it is called idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). It substitutes things, people, position, recognition, or pleasure for God. Greed is deceitful. It is like a mirage that promises what it cannot provide (Eccle. 4:8). Like a thirst that can never be quenched is the pursuit of something God does not intend for to us have. What is the source of greed? It lies coiled in our sinful heart ready to spread its venom upon the consent of our will (Mk. 7:22). None of us is immune to the life-devouring potential of covetousness. No generation is exempt from its intoxicating effect. But it can dominate some societies more than others (Rom. 1:29; Mic. 2:2; Amos 2:6-7). Craven materialism, manipulative advertising, and the politics of envy can spawn an epidemic of money-hungry people.

Is there any protection against greed? There is hope. It is overcome by the sin-cleansing, life-changing, soul-satisfying power of God (1 Cor. 6:10-11; Col. 3:1-5). The new birth gives us a new heart with new desires. Those who have experienced the resurrection power of Christ have a new agenda for living. In the words of Thomas Chalmers, "The expulsive power of a new affection" is a potent force against the gravitational pull of greed. A God given contentment does extraordinary things in the battle against greed (Heb. 13:5; Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 6:6-10; Matt. 6:25-34). The more we experience satisfaction with who God is and what He has given us, the greater will be our advantage in the fight with lust, greed, and envy. Complaint, debt, bitterness, stinginess, ungratefulness, and worry are telltale signs of a lack of contentment in God. Greed is rendered mortal blows when gratitude, trust, and generosity overflow in our lives. Be thankful for what God has provided. Trust Him to meet your daily needs. Give generously to the work of God. The best way to guard against greed is to have an insatiable hunger and thirst for God and His righteousness.

The Liberated Woman (May 11, 2003)

What is a liberated woman? Mother's Day is a good time to pause and sort out truth from fiction. Could it be possible that a Jewish Rabbi who lived over two thousand years ago has the definitive answer to our questions regarding womanhood and motherhood? Jesus Christ was that Rabbi. Listen to what he said about freedom. "If therefore the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). He also said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Jesus was talking to people who thought they were free, but they were not. They were slaves politically. But even more seriously than that, they were slaves spiritually. These religious people thought they were free because of who they were. They had the right biological connection, the right pedigree, or so they thought. But genuine freedom is determined by who one is in relation to God. Feminists declare that women should not allow themselves to be

defined by men. I would agree. Women and men must look to God, their Creator, to explain who they are and what they are to be.

The book of Proverbs was written to reveal the nature of true wisdom and how life is to be lived God's way. Proverbs has a good deal to say about women. In order for the witness nation, Israel, to fulfill its responsibility as a spiritual light among the nations, her women were to reflect the glory of God. Women and mothers must trustfully submit to God's authority. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Prov. 31:30). The fear of the Lord is the appropriate response to the character of God: His majesty, integrity, and glory. The liberated woman is awed by God. She thinks and conducts her life in the presence of God whom she worships and serves out of deep reverential love. The fear of the Lord produces submission to authority, an abhorrence of sin, and high ethical standards (Prov. 8:13). Is that you ladies? Are you fighting and rebelling against God? Are you trying to live your life by your own plans, rules, and desires? Or have you come to God and experienced His forgiveness in Christ, the freedom giver? Submission to God is the place of freedom. It is a joy to be around liberated women. They have taught me much about God's compassion. They have sacrificed so that their children could be embraced by God's kindness. They have set an example of patient endurance and joyful service through difficult circumstances.

A liberated woman, as a mother, brings blessing to her home. "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down" (Prov. 14:1). Many of you live in homes led by wise mothers. You show respect when you speak kind words to her, (no name calling, yelling, and back talk). You show respect when you help with work around the house. You demonstrate respect through expressions of love (sacrifice, appreciation, truthfulness, etc.). A mother rejoices in a wise child (Prov. 23:24, 25).

The best thing you can do for your mother is to love God and love her. Gain wisdom, self-mastery, and understanding. This is the life that pleases God and brings joy to a mother. You can take her out to dinner, buy her presents, and stay in touch with her, but the best thing you can do is to walk in the truth ("I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth." III Jn. 1:4). Women of truth, we honor you. By your steady commitment to God in His word, you are liberating many within your sphere of influence.

Is Anything Bothering You? (May 18, 2003)

The world without the gift of the Holy Spirit would be an intolerable place to live. When Adam plunged his progeny into spiritual darkness, how could there be any hope of survival beyond one generation? How can unregenerate human beings speak truth, do good to others, lead outwardly virtuous lives, and know anything about God? Helpless, hopeless, sinful man needs God's grace. And God has given it. The influence of the Holy Spirit upon the world keeps sin from overflowing its banks and sweeping us all away. God's purposes can and do move steadily onward to the accomplishment of His plan. The Holy Spirit also makes it possible for sin-blinded children of unbelief to understand the way of salvation. How else could the spiritually dead have any grasp whatsoever of the seriousness of their condition? God provides unbelievers with an exposure to the gospel of God through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. How does this happen? He influences the unsaved toward redemption but does not secure it in His work of conviction. The Spirit exposes the unbeliever's guilt before God with

regard to the awful sin of unbelief, the righteousness which Christ gives, and the judgment that is to come on all who do not put their trust in Christ (Jn. 16:7-11). Of course, this presupposes that the unsaved have heard the gospel. The Spirit of God takes the truth of the gospel, and like a prosecuting attorney, makes the case of the sinner's guilt before a holy God. This does not guarantee conversion, but it does impress upon the mind the proof of one's spiritual condition. B. F. Wescott has put it succinctly, "Whatever the final issue may be, he who 'convicts' another places the truth of the case in dispute in a clear light before him, so that it must be seen and acknowledged as truth. He who then rejects the conclusion which the exposition involves, rejects it with his eyes wide open and at his peril. Truth seen as truth carries with it condemnation to all who refuse to welcome it."

There are other ways that God renders unbelievers fully responsible for their lost condition. The light of creation is everywhere bearing witness to the truth (Rom. 1:18). The sun in the sky and crop-producing rain declare the goodness of God (Matt. 5:45; Rom. 2:4, 14-15). The human conscience, producing guilt when violated, witnesses to the existence of the moral law of God (Rom. 2:14-15). The Holy Spirit working in the life of a believer gives family members an advantage for gospel awareness they otherwise would not have (1 Cor. 7:14; 1 Pet. 3:1-6).

It is a dangerous thing to be made aware of one's sinful condition, to see the significance of the righteousness that Jesus Christ provides, and to know that the rejection of God's pardon in Christ means certain and eternal condemnation. It is possible to understand God's way of salvation and yet reject it. We have all seen people who have been convicted of some crime, stand before a judge, and receive their sentence. In the face of overwhelming evidence, they assert their innocence while being led away to their punishment. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit can make an unbeliever feel edgy, angry, fearful, and increasingly hard, the longer the truth is resisted (Acts 7:51). The heart can become so callous that eventually the issues of the gospel don't matter anymore. What troubled you at one time is something that can easily be put off until tomorrow. But tomorrow you will care even less about your eternal destiny. Now that should bother you (Jn. 3:18).

Half a World Away! (June 8, 2003)

Where is it? It is about 1 1/3 times as large as the United States. It lies in Asia in the eastern part of the state of Russia. It is famous for its long, cold winters (Temperatures fall lower than at the North Pole.). It is known as the place to send exiles and criminals. If you said Siberia, you are right. In the southern part of the Central Siberian Plateau is the city of Novosibirsk, the largest city in Siberia. It has been called "The Chicago of Siberia." Most of the people in the cities live in small apartments. It is in one of those apartments where Frank, Carolyn, Jaclyn, Rachel, Luke, and Fran Pass live from August through May of each year. Frank teaches at the Novosibirsk Seminary where young men are being trained for the work of the ministry in the Siberian church. It was my privilege to teach these students for the week of May 26 to 30. These men are already involved in churches in the area as pastors, youth workers, and a variety of other responsibilities. They were a great encouragement to me. I am always amazed at how God's sovereign grace reaches into places all over this earth to call out His sheep. No matter where I am, when I meet another believer in Jesus Christ, I find that we sing the same song of God's grace. We enjoy family fellowship that transcends nation, race, language, and culture. We may speak a different language, but we communicate in the language of truth in Christ.

Our classes began at 8:30 a.m. and finished at 4:30 p.m. each day. My course was, “How to Help People Experience Biblical Change.” Anna sat at my right hand and faithfully translated my southern English into Russian. When I would use an English idiom (e.g., “from the frying pan into the fire”), I would wait for her to give me a quizzical look. Translating from one language into another is not as easy as it may seem. I teased Anna about her being my “interrupter.” She had a good sense of humor and was easy to work with. She and the students had a much more difficult time than I did. Anna was saved in a Christian camp several years ago but has developed rapidly in her Christian life through her work of translating. Taking biblical concepts day after day from one language to another requires a good grasp of a truth’s meaning. On Monday of this past week Anna set out on a thirty-two-hour train ride to eastern Russia to visit her family. They are not Christians.

Meeting new people is one of the joys of travel. There was Andrew who met me at the Moscow airport and drove me to the Pekin hotel in downtown Moscow. He plays the clarinet in the Moscow Symphony Orchestra. Andrew spoke little English, but enough for me to know that he was a brother in Christ. Leila purchased my plane ticket for my flight to Novosibirsk, reserved my hotel room, and arranged for my ride back to the airport. These kinds of things mean so much to a stranger in a foreign land. Alexey met me at the Novosibirsk airport, along with Frank, and drove us to the Passes apartment in Berdsk. He and his daughters sang beautifully together in our Sunday morning worship service. Alexadra Petrova, a grandmother (babushka) and physical therapist, went out of her way to thank me for coming to Siberia (“We are thankful when pastors come” were her words.). Jeff Williams came to Siberia with his family from the Midwest in the United States to do church planting. He has a congregation of about sixty. At lunch one day, Oksana the school librarian, sat across from me. She could not speak English very well, but sweetly and quietly asked about my church and family. She asked me to tell my wife hello. Constantine works with the deaf in his church. There are many deaf people in Siberia with no Christian ministry among them. He wanted me to ask others to come and help him. Doug and Sherrie Petrovich, a young American couple, hosted us for supper one evening. Doug is Frank’s teaching colleague at the seminary. The children of both families romped and played through the rooms of the eighth-floor apartment.

These are a few of my favorite things. Seeing God’s hand at work in so many different lives and places keeps me reminded of where our life’s journey is taking us. We are pilgrims proclaiming the excellencies of God who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. How thankful I am that God has given me the opportunity to have a small part in training God’s servants half a world away in Siberia.

Longing for Our Father (June 15, 2003)

Father’s Day presents some of us with an interesting mix of thoughts and feelings. I begin with my own father. He was born on July 20, 1919. Like many in his generation he grew up during the Great Depression and had to fight a war before settling down to raising a family. I don’t recall any memories of him during the war years. When he came home in 1945, he was a tortured man. Alcohol, nightmares, and depression had a firm grip upon him. The search for a good job kept us moving from Georgia to Ohio, to Georgia, to Florida, and finally back to Georgia. In 1952 he was hired by Delta Air Lines and worked there for thirty years, retiring as a foreman in

the hydraulics department. My father provided for us. He worked whether he felt like it or not. He took us on vacations. Each summer we would go camping in the Smokey Mountains. Those were some of the best of times. He chose not to drink any alcohol during those two weeks. That was the father I enjoyed. I longed for more closeness to my father. He seemed to stay at a distance. And I think I probably did as well. He loved me but seemed to have a difficult time expressing it. I can remember his exuberance on one golden fall afternoon in Gainesville. I received the kick-off and was going down the left sideline as fast as I could, right in front of the visitors' stands. My dad came running up to the edge of the field to cheer me on. His "go son" was a thrill I will never forget. In his retirement years we had several good conversations. I remember the times and the places. I last saw my father alive on April 25, 1996. He was in the hospital recovering from an intestinal operation. His last words to me were that he had failed as a father. The next Tuesday at 1:30 a.m. my mother called from the hospital. She was sobbing and telling me that my father was dying. He died before Beth and I could get to the hospital.

I confess to my struggles regarding my father. His life and death have left me with longings for one good conversation with him. What were his thoughts? What was it like in the war? Why was he unhappy? Yes, just one time to bare our souls, a father and son talk with perfect freedom to talk about the things of God. But here I am. He is not here. How did God want me to handle my own fatherhood? My relationship with my daughter and son has been the one I wanted with my father. I rejoice in that mercy from God. Have I been a perfect father? No. And you don't need to ask my children either. But I can tell you this. Here is the way it ought to be. An effective father seeks to know God as his heavenly Father (Deut. 6:2; Matt. 6:9). Our supreme calling in life is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might. Trying to be the father I ought to be without knowing God is like taking a stone-age tribesman from the jungles of New Guinea and putting him down without explanation in the middle of Lenox Square. An effective father introduces his children to God's moral standards by the example he sets (Deut. 6:3-9; Tit. 2:7). Example puts the abstract into concrete. It creates memories of God-pleasing attitudes and behavior. It encourages imitation. It provides our sons and daughters with clear moral choices. The effective father assumes the responsibility of rearing his children in biblical discipline and instruction (Eph. 6:4). The priceless treasure of self-mastery and wise counsel are an inheritance to be enjoyed for time and eternity. But there is a warning in the midst of all this. Fathers, we are not to arouse our children to anger. We must not embitter them. God has delegated authority to us, and it must be exercised in love. We are to care for our families as our heavenly Father cares for His. An effective father gives his children the gift of loyal love to their mother. When fathers cherish and serve their wives, they are providing the best pre-marital counseling possible for their sons and daughters.

Father's Day is a day for remembrance, reflection, recognition, and some repentance. Fathers, resolve to live so that the day of your funeral will not be a time of what-might-have-been. Life is short, memories are long, eternity is forever, and God is the Father we all long for.

The Lord of the Storm (June 22, 2003)

Rainstorms. Windstorms. Snowstorms. Ice storms. Hailstorms. Thunderstorms. I am fascinated by storms. This past week Beth and I were driving home after an evening with our son, Eric, and his family. Our attention was absorbed by the amazing lightning strikes off in the distance as they competed with one another for our attention. However, what had seemed to be a long way

off was getting closer by the minute. Then our mood suddenly changed. What had been entertainment turned into a desire for survival. The lightning flashes were now all around us. The rain was coming down in sheets driven by fierce winds. Some people had stopped alongside the road to wait out the storm. We crept along unable at times to even see the road in front of us. We wanted to get home in one piece. Storms have a way of putting the fear of God into us. I remember being caught in a scary thunderstorm while running, one that was accompanied by tornado warnings. I began talking to God in a very intimate way about the situation. I was pleading with the Lord to get me home safely and promised I would give Him the thanks.

One entire psalm (Psalm 29) is devoted to the worship experience of the psalmist invoked by a violent thunderstorm. It is even written with a kind of echo effect, verbally simulating rolling thunder and advancing wind. David was so impressed by the thunderous explosion of the power of God in nature that he called on the angels to join him in a song of praise to God for His majesty and might. God's sovereignty, omnipotence, and judgment were impressed upon David. He was exhilarated by the evidence of the strength of God, and awed, not by nature, but by the Lord of the storm. The Canaanites credited storms to their gods, much like modern secularists who speak of nature as if it were a person (Mother Nature?). David concluded that God's awesome power and peace are available to benefit those who trust Him.

Jonah met God in a storm. While he was on a cruise to the western Mediterranean, in defiance of God's call to go on a mission's trip to Nineveh, God sent a "great wind on the sea." Jonah willingly let himself be thrown overboard by the pagan crewmembers. Immediately the sea became calm. Jonah had a heart-to-heart talk with God inside the great fish that swallowed him. The Lord gave Jonah an experience in His mercy and released him to do his evangelistic work in Nineveh. It is futile to attempt to run from the Lord of the storm.

What would it have been like to be with Jesus, the Lord of the storm, in a storm? His disciples could tell you. One thing they learned was that storms will come even when one is with Jesus (Mk. 4:37). The Sea of Galilee turned into a raging, churning mass of wind and waves. Storms are life threatening. The havoc they create may seem to contradict our theology. They may cause us to panic, ask questions, and forget what Jesus has said (Mk. 4:38). But storms are never greater than the power of Jesus (Mk. 4:39). He is the Lord of all creation. This doesn't mean that those who belong to Christ will not die in storms, but it does mean that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39). We can take our place along with the disciples and learn that storms are designed to teach us who Jesus really is (Mk. 4:40-41). Storms expose our fears and lack of faith (Psa. 107:23-31), but Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. We may fall into despair but must, with the disciples, recognize that the storm is not the problem. Our response to the storm is the problem. There is no situation over which Jesus is not in control. He is the Lord of the storm.

The Summer Season (June 29, 2003)

The good old summertime. I have a lot of good memories of summers past. One of the best things about the summer was that there was no school. We had three months of creative leisure with a little yard work thrown in. This was before they had figured out a way to smuggle the school year into June and August. Of course, the weather in the summer was hot. We didn't have air conditioning or television. So, we stayed out of doors as much as we could. We built huts,

placed baseball, and made “racers” out of ironing boards, 2 x 4s, wagon wheels, and a bushel basket. It was not exactly a body by Fisher, but it took us down the hill by our house at an exciting speed. In the evenings we chased lightning bugs, played fox and hounds, and may-I. One summer my grandmother entered my brother and me in a library-reading club. If we read so many books, we got a certificate to take back to school in the fall. I got hooked on books. I would sit out on the front porch in the fading light of the day and get lost in adventure stories and biographies. On special days my mother would make us a major picnic lunch. She would take my dad to work so we could have a car and we headed off to Spring Lake. I loved to dive down in the bottom of the lake a feel the cold spring fed water. On the way home we would stop and pick wild plumbs and blackberries.

Summers are different now. What at one time seemed like a boring way to live, namely staying in the house and studying (which my grandfather, who was a pastor, did a lot of), has now become my enjoyment as an adult. But some things are the same. I love to sit on my back porch and read. As soon as I get up in the morning, I spend some time in “Gospel Worship” by Jeremiah Burroughs. He was a puritan pastor in London in the early 1600s. It is not easy reading, but its richness of teaching is well worth the effort. “The Puritans” by Martin Lloyd-Jones has been a delightful reading experience. It is a collection of addresses delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959-1978. His chapter, “Summing-up: Knowing and Doing,” said some things I especially needed to be reminded of. The Puritans were insistent upon “application” as a vital part of preaching. With this in mind, Lloyd-Jones asks the question, “Does our understanding of Bible doctrines lead us to a great compassion for the lost?” Another book I have just begun is, “The Long Walk” by Slavomir Rawicz. It is the story of a twenty-six-year-old Polish lieutenant who in 1941 escaped from a Soviet labor camp in Siberia and journeyed through the desolate Siberian tundra, the Gobi desert and the Himalayas to freedom. But there are other things that make the summertime profitable besides good books. It is a time conducive to relaxation and recharging our batteries for the months ahead, if you plan it right. We can take a lesson from the ant. “The ants are not a strong folk, but they prepare their food in the summer” (Prov. 30:25). At some point we all need to replenish our weary selves. Jesus told His disciples to, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while” (Mk. 6:31). He knew that they needed a break from a tiring ministry. So do we. The summer months give us a opportunity to renew our spirits with a good book that inspires us to a greater hunger for God, special time with the children and grandchildren, a short trip to somewhere we haven’t been before, a walk on the beach in the early morning, an evening watching the sun set over the mountains, time alone with God to prepare us for the seasons of life into which we will journey. Enjoy the summer. It is a gift from God. There will not be another one like it.

The Christian Agenda in a Time of Moral Decline (July 13, 2003)

“Is Gay Marriage Next?” “Getting Rid of the Sex Police.” “Scalia Constitution is Scary.” “Sodomy Ruling Shows Court Playing Moses.” These are only a few of the headlines and editorials that have captured our attention in the last several weeks. The Supreme Court in a 6-3 ruling struck down Texas’ anti-sodomy law, claiming that it violated the constitutional privacy right. Some are saying that Justice Kennedy’s ruling in the Lawrence case “may be one of the two most import opinions of the last 100 years.” It is being called “a sea change” and “bigger than Roe v. Wade” in terms of the magnitude of its social impact. A number of questions present themselves. What will be the social consequences of this newfound sexual liberty?

What is the legal and moral basis for this constitutional right? Are sodomy laws “part of the dark tradition in this nation?” Will “gay marriages” now be legalized?

A careful and right response requires the remembrance of some fundamental moral truths. Those who reject these do so to their own peril and the society in which they live. Human sexuality is a gift from God, designed by the Creator to express love in marriage and as the means of procreation. Male and female were created for one another (Gen. 2:18-24; 1 Cor. 11:11, 12). Human sexuality was corrupted by man’s rebellion against God (Gen. 3:1-24). It is now subject to futility (the effects of sin upon it). Man became an idolater. Sex became something to be pursued for the sake of self-indulgence. Homosexuality is an expression of the fallen condition of the human race and its rebellion against God (Gen. 18, 19; Lev. 18:22, 24, 30; 20:13; Deut. 22:5; 23:17-18; 1 Kgs. 14:24; Rom. 1:24-32; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:9-10). It is a violation of God’s moral law. However, God can forgive the homosexual because of the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Through the washing of regeneration, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and the justifying work of God, it is possible to become an entirely new kind of person in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17-21). Change is possible through repentance and massive amounts of God’s grace (Rom. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 2:8, 9). This change is both a call to the pursuit of the glory of God and to sexual purity.

Are not certain people born constitutionally homosexual? The answer is no. There is “no evidence at present to substantiate a biologic theory.” We sin, not because our bodies make us sin, but because of our sinful hearts (Matt. 15:19). Is there a difference between having homosexual desires and practicing homosexual behavior? Homosexual acts and homosexual desire are sinful. We are not to sexually desire anyone other than the person of the opposite sex to whom we are married. Is homosexual marriage morally permissible? It is not. It may take place, but it is flagrant attack upon the God ordained institution of marriage. Homosexual “marriage” is contrary to natural law, violates God’s moral law, and is socially suicidal. To condone and legalize homosexual unions is a fist of rebellion in God’s face (Psa. 2:3). Robertson McQuilkin is surely right when he says, “The entire fabric of society is changed when such moral aberrations are officially recognized as morally neutral.”

What are Christians to do in view of the shifting moral condition of our society? We must stand firm in the Bible’s unambiguous teaching regarding homosexuality. It is an acute form of evil for which there is a divine remedy. The homosexual must be offered the hope-filled gospel of Jesus Christ. Homosexuals should be treated with love and compassion. Christian love has no place for ridicule, hatred, or unkindness. The only hope for sinful human beings is the pardon and freedom offered in Jesus Christ. This is the substance of the Christian’s agenda in a time of moral decay.

How to Fit In (July 20, 2003)

Every now and then someone will say to me that they are no longer going to attend our church because they don’t fit in. By this they mean they no longer feel a part of the life of the church. Some may even continue to come to church thinking this way. I have given this some thought and, hopefully, a better understanding of this problem can emerge. One of my first responses is a personal sense of failure and disappointment. As a shepherd of God’s flock, I feel responsibility for all those who have been placed in my care (1 Pet. 5:1-4). I cannot just write

off wandering sheep the way one would a worn-out shoe. There is a sense in which those who leave the life of the church are friends who have said good-bye. Have I been faithful in serving and encouraging them in the faith? While there is more involved than this, anytime we suffer a loss there are lessons that God wants to teach us. It is a form of suffering when members of the congregation decide to go elsewhere. So, I have to go before God and ask for wisdom. How can I exercise better spiritual care of my fellow believers (1 Tim. 3:5)? This is where we must always begin when we experience a reversal in life. We must examine ourselves and allow God to teach us and comfort us. Out of this can come more fruit bearing (Jn. 15:1-6).

But is there anything else involved in the “I-don’t-fit-in-and-I-am-leaving” attitude? I think there is. Those who get to this point in their lives are more often than not experiencing the consequences of decisions they have already made. I am speaking here out of over thirty-seven years of pastoral experience. When church attendance and involvement in the life of the congregation drops off, there will be a sense of disconnection and isolation from the church family. This is a natural human response. Relationships and oneness with fellow believers take time and work. This must be recognized and addressed. If you stay away from ministry and fellowship opportunities, there must be some compensating action taken to remedy this. To go away and try to find another church is merely running away from a problem that has been self-inflicted.

Then there is the problem of the home. When a husband does not provide the necessary spiritual leadership, the wife can easily become frustrated. She may try to take matters into her own hands. She may start following some new teaching or teacher that she hears and abandon the instructional authority of her own local church. She then begins to feel disaffected from her church. In some cases, it may be that one’s spouse is an unbeliever and a lack of commitment to one’s own church can settle in. It is also possible that resentment over a perceived offense can jaundice one’s thoughts about their church. Sometimes “empty-nesters” may begin to celebrate their newfound freedom from child rearing and disappear from church life. And there are undoubtedly other reasons why local church estrangement may take place.

What can be done to prevent this kind of thing from happening? Certainly, there ought to be faithful, loving flock care. The elders and every member of the church family ought to assume the responsibility of serving one another with the mind of Christ. Each of us must regularly examine ourselves to see if we are drifting in our loyalty and commitment to the local church. How can one speak of loving Christ and at the same time not love His church? We ought to have a personal prayer ministry that includes our fellow church members. How we are fitting into the body life of our church tells us some important things about ourselves. After all, if we belong to Christ we are bound together for all eternity. That is how we fit together.

The Road to Perfection (July 27, 2003)

Is it possible to be a Christian and not sin? Those who know their Bible and themselves would respond by saying that there will always be a struggle with indwelling sin. However, sinful patterns can be overcome. It is the aspiration of the child of God to increasingly experience complete freedom from sin. But there is some tension here. On the one hand we know that sin cannot be eradicated (Rom. 7:15-25; 1 Jn. 1:8). It is ever present in the life of every Christian. But at the same time, by the sufficiency of God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit sin can

be dealt severe, killing blows (Rom. 8:13). It is to be as Jesus said to the woman accused of adultery, “From now on sin no more” (Jn. 8:11). So then, what is the biblical understanding of sin and the Christian? One, the new birth brings forgiveness of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1; Eph. 1:7). Secondly, the ruling power of sin has been broken. The believer in Christ does not have to lie, lust, cheat, steal, or envy any longer. Thirdly, there will be a struggle with sin. It will always be in contention for the Christian’s affection and service. Fourthly, one day the believer will be completely free from the very presence of sin itself (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

Throughout the history of the church, there have been those who have taught some form of perfectionism. Various kinds of it are present today. Perfectionism teaches that in one way or another it is possible for the Christian to live a life of sinless perfection. There is a biblical perfection that says the believer can experience increasing maturity by being conformed to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Unbiblical perfectionism attempts to make its case by redefining sin. Sin is understood to be “conscious transgression of a known law of God.” With this limited concept of sin, it then becomes possible through a work of grace to live without practicing sin. This idea has produced other forms of perfectionistic theology. It can be detected in the teaching that through an act of faith one can have immediate freedom from the rule of self, a besetting demon, a wounded memory, a poverty-conditioned lifestyle, a life lived in “the energy of the flesh.” Sanctification (the process of Christian growth) is viewed through the lens of the necessity of a “second work of grace” or a moment of instantaneous deliverance from a sinful pattern.

But there is yet another kind of perfectionistic belief, that can be quite subtle. It can be found among some of those who say that if Jesus is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all. Certainly, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of every believer’s life in the positional reality of being a new creature in Christ. But that does not rule out genuine struggle with sin in the Christian experience. Sins of commission (e.g., when I tell a lie) are spotlighted by the Word of God as it lays bare the thoughts and intents of the heart. There are also sins of omission (e.g., withholding love from a fellow believer) that over time are exposed by biblical truth. We can become caught in a trespass. This is not the way it is supposed to be, but it happens. And it must be added also that not every believer matures at the same rate. It is matters like this that should give us pause before we dogmatically say that a certain person who claims to be a Christian is not. Why, the very person making such a judgment can be guilty of self-righteousness and a judgmental spirit. So, we have to be careful, discerning, and compassionate. We are all called to the high road of biblical perfection of Christlikeness. Beware of those who would confuse this with the lower road of a perfection that is self-deception.

What Happens to Infants When They Die? (August 3, 2003)

The tombstone reads, 1876-1877. This was the life span of an infant whose death brought grief to bereaved parents. My daily routine gives me frequent occasions to pass a small family cemetery. What stories it tells and questions it presents. Abortions, miscarriages, infanticide, sudden infant death (SIDs), and mental retardation bring us to an important question. What happens to those who die before they are old enough to understand and believe the gospel?

In order to come to some biblical conclusions regarding infant salvation, the following truths must be kept in mind. Infants, as a part of fallen humanity, begin life (at conception) with both a corrupted nature and guilt (Psa. 51:5; Rom. 5:12). Adam's first sin was imputed (charged to) to every person. Adam as our representative in his act of disobedience has brought us condemnation. His one sin is put to every man's account and so we die. Infants and children are in a state of sin and can only be saved through Christ (Jn. 3:6; Rom. 5:13-14; Eph. 2:3; Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). Why do babies die? It is not because of personal sins but because of their identification with Adam. Jesus loved babies and confirmed the fact that they need Him (Matt. 19:14, "coming to Christ" is always the coming of a sinner to Him who is the sacrifice for sin.). In summary, we can say that infants are conceived in sin. They have sinful natures and are guilty because of their relationship to Adam. The only way they can get into heaven is through Christ who loves them and gave His life for them. Secondly, the atonement of Christ has provisional capacity for infants for the forgiveness of sin (Isa. 53:6; Jn. 3:16; Heb. 2:9; 1 Tim. 4:10; Tit. 2:11). There is a sense in which the atonement is sufficient for all, though His death is effective for the elect alone. God's love for the world includes all infants. Thirdly, infants are incapable of responding to Christ's all-sufficient atonement by believing. The condition for personal salvation is belief. Infants are incapable of fulfilling this condition. There are two classes of people, the lost and the saved, and only by trust in Christ's redemptive work makes it effective in our lives. Finally, infants who die before they are capable of exercising belief in Christ for the forgiveness of sin are redeemed through Christ's righteousness and redeeming work. The imputation of Christ's saving work requires belief. Infants and the mentally impaired (incapable of informed volitional activity) are unable to exercise saving faith. No one enters God's presence and is accepted into His heaven who is unregenerate. Therefore, I believe that it is a valid biblical inference that those who are incapable of responding to God's provision of salvation (unlike those who have never heard the gospel but are without excuse because of God's revelation in creation, Rom. 1:18, 19) become the recipients of God's grace when they die (not because of their innocence) and enter into heaven.

Upon the death of a baby, we must find refuge in an all-wise, merciful, and just God. Like king David ("I shall go to him, but he will not return to me," 2 Sam. 12:23), upon the death of his infant child, if our hope is in God, we can see that child again in heaven. What kind of presence will those who die in infancy have in heaven? They will be transformed into regenerated adults and will receive their resurrection body at the time the rest of the saved receive theirs (1 Cor. 15:35-50). My wife has had two miscarriages and it is our belief that we will meet those infants as adults in heaven. If you have lost a baby, ask God what He wants you to learn from this. Don't become bitter and angry with God. Leave the child in His just and merciful hands. What about you? Are you prepared for eternity?

Oil, Perfume, and Iron (August 10, 2003)

"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel" (Prov. 27:9). "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). The school year was over. Our family was making preparations to move to Georgia, which meant leaving friends and neighbors. One of those friends was Billy Olson. His parents were from Norway and he spoke with a distinct Norwegian accent. We had become good friends. I had to run an errand on my bike for my parents. Billy went with me. We talked of things that interest two ten-year old boys and then we said our good-byes. For some reason that moment sticks in

my mind. Life had been a little better in that poor area of central Florida because of our times together. That was in 1952. I have not seen Billy Olson since then. The young people are going back to school. Old friendships will be renewed. New ones will be made. The right kind of friend can be a great value in life. God uses friendships to cheer us and challenge us. We were not created to hide from people, but to relate to people in a meaningful way. Our friendships, or lack of them, can be important index to our spiritual health. The inability to relate to people and develop close friendships is a symptom of relational dysfunction. Having friends brings risks such as rejection, betrayal, embarrassment, hurt feelings, but love is willing to take those risks.

God has given us principles in His Word to help us have meaningful, faith-building friendships. In the first place, we must remember that friendships are forged by people who try. The biblical command to love is not an option (Jn. 13:34; 1 Pet. 4:8). Love is work. It takes effort to maintain a friendship. What are we allowing to interfere with the establishment of good relationships? Friendships don't happen without some cost, but the dividends are well worth it. Friendship is marked by loyalty (Prov. 17:17; 18:24; 27:10). This involves love demonstrated in trust. Disappointments, spiritual wilderness experiences, career setbacks, annoyances, time, and distance do not destroy a true friendship. If you want a good study in loyal friends read the story of David and Jonathan. Oneness of spirit and unselfish devotion bound these two men together (1 Sam. 18:1-5; 19:1; 20:15-17, 33). The qualities of character that Jonathan saw in David drew from him love and admiration. The best friendships are those based on love, truth, and God-honoring values (Prov. 27:6; 26:18, 19; 17:9). Husband and wife friendships are to be partnerships in the grace of eternal life (1 Pet. 3:7). Aquila and Priscilla were a beautiful team serving God and other people. Is your marriage developing into a friendship?

But we must beware of the wrong kind of friends. There are certain people who are a danger to your spiritual health. They carry morally contagious infections. Gossips (Prov. 20:19), the quick-tempered (22:24-25), the self-indulgent (Prov. 28:7), and those living in immorality (Prov. 29:3) can be dangerous companions. As my grandmother use to say, "If you lie down with dogs, you will get fleas." We must beware of the threats to a friendship. Possessiveness and manipulation have sabotaged many a would-be friendship (Prov. 25:17; 14:20; 19:6). True and lasting friendships cannot be based on what the other person can do for you (e.g., "They meet my needs."). Smothering and controlling behavior is a form of relational homicide. The right kind of friends is a gift from God. Their advice can be of inestimable value. God can use them to shape and sharpen us to be effective instruments in His hands. Oil, perfume, and iron - that's what a friend can be.

Get a Life (August 17, 2003)

When we encounter someone who is obsessed with some minor thing in life, something that doesn't really matter, or some self-indulgent practice, we may say that they need to "get a life." Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry talked a lot about life. In John 3:16 Jesus gives us a sharply focused statement about real life. Someone has said that this verse is an ocean of thought in a drop of language. Its fame is known to many by its appearance at strategic places at baseball games waiting for the roving eye of the television camera.

The word "for" must be our starting place. There is an important context for John 3:16. It follows the statement regarding the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. God made a lifesaving

provision for the people of Israel. Those who had been bitten by a poisonous snake were to look at a bronze serpent made by Moses. Their lives would be saved if they would only believe and do what God had said in response to His provision (Num. 21:9). Jesus used this historical incident to reveal the meaning of His provision of eternal life through His death on the cross. Let's look and see what God has provided for sin bitten human beings.

For God so loved the world. God's love for the world is unsurpassed in quantity and quality. His love flows from the infinite source of his own heart. It is His nature to love, for He is love (1 Jn. 4:7-10). His love is great and beyond measure (Eph. 2:4, 5). It flows to the world of sinful humanity. It knows no bounds. The serpent was placed upon the pole for all sick and dying to see and believe. God's love was shown to the helpless.

That he gave His only begotten Son. God has given to sinful humanity the greatest gift of all. This gift was a costly sacrifice and in it we find the very nature of love. Love is giving. It is an act of sacrifice. He gave His Son on the cross, His only begotten Son. The Father's love is demonstrated by the uniqueness of the gift. God has given Himself. This gift paid a debt that we owed. God made His Son who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). The degree of our guilt is determined by the degree of our crime. We have a sin debt that we cannot pay because we have sinned against an infinitely just and holy God.

That whoever believes in Him. God has provided the way to receive the gift of His Son. The gift of eternal life is received by an act of trust. Trusting is accepting something to be true, not doing something. To the snake bitten Israelite who was dying from the poisonous venom the only hope was accepting as true that God had provided a substitute. It was by looking to that substitute that deliverance from death would come. It is this kind of trust that is to be placed in Christ alone. It is not merely believing that what He says is true but trusting Him as a person. Faith receives the remedy.

Should not perish but have eternal life. God has made it possible for us to flee eternal death and to walk through the door to eternal life. The greatest of all tragedies is to be excluded forever from fellowship with God. To perish is to experience in death the loss of all hope of ever being with God and receiving His forgiveness. It is to experience utter failure, futility, and the loss of all that makes existence worthwhile. It is eternal punishment, separation from God with no hope of recovery. There is much personal depression in our day. One should be depressed if they are lost and are in danger of perishing for all eternity. That is a depressing thought. But the final note struck in John 3:16 is that the greatest of all possibilities is the enjoyment of God forever. This is called eternal life. In giving us eternal life God fulfills the passion for His own glory. God has given you an engraved invitation to come to Him for salvation. What will you do with it? You must RSVP. Please answer and get a life.

Don't Forget Nothin' (August 24, 2003)

Roger's Rangers, who fought with the British and American armies during the French and Indian Wars of the 1750's, followed a list of common-sense rules. First on the list was, "Don't forget nothin'." Every year at this time our college young people return to campus life. There are certain things they must not forget. College can be a very important step in preparation for the rest of

one's life. New educational horizons present themselves. Friendships will be formed that may last a lifetime. But it can also be a dangerous place. I have vivid memories of driving away from the University of Georgia campus leaving our daughter, Miriam, in an environment filled with tests and temptations. How can a student set his or her moral compass to navigate safely through the treacherous waters of college life?

In the first place, students must not leave home without God. This could be a misleading statement. God is everywhere present, and He cannot be escaped. For the Christian, the presence of God is very personal and secure (Jn. 10:28, 29; Matt. 28:20). But at the same time, it is possible to neglect one's salvation and commit spiritual adultery (Heb. 2:3; Jas. 4:4). The world (a.k.a. a college campus) is a seductress bent on drawing the unwary believer away from a growing, intimate walk with God. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (Jas. 4:8). Resist the temptation to let your spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer disappear from your life. Closely connected with this is becoming a church dropout. Sleeping in on Sunday morning or blaming worship absenteeism on the lack of a good church is a recipe for spiritual decline. Thirdly, carry your Christianity boldly but humbly into the classroom. There are times when you will need to speak out against attacks upon Christian truth and times when it is best to remain silent (Prov. 26:4, 5). Arguing with a teacher in front of your classmates may not be the best witness for Christ.

Fourthly, don't forget who got you into college. Your parents have done more than you may realize to prepare you and provide you with the opportunity for a college education. Stay in touch with them. Fifthly (with no designed pun), be careful what you drink, it may bite you. A college campus can draw you into bad habits that can be life dominating. Alcohol plus peer pressure can promise excitement, escape, and acceptance. It would be better to view it not as a friend but as a serpent ready to sink its fangs into the unsuspecting. Many an alcoholic got his start in college. Sixthly, stay off the low road of mediocrity. Do your best in school. Don't let laziness, television, and a full social life pull you away from using your mind for the glory of God. Loving God with all your mind means studying to the best of your ability (Matt. 22:37). Seventhly, find friends that will help you and not hurt you (Prov. 13:20). Pray that God will guide you to those classmates who will challenge you to play a better game, strive for excellence, and inspire you to follow hard after God. Eighthly, beware of the virus of secularism. Classes where God is noticeably absent, conversations that rarely touch on spiritual realities, and entertainment that mocks divine truth can have a numbing effect upon the most ardent follower of Christ. Don't let yourself become content with a world without the beauty of God. We live in a culture that "assigns sociological, psychological, and economic reasons for everything." Pray that God will give you a strong spiritual immune system. Ninthly, look for opportunities to share with others the hope that you have in Jesus Christ. Don't be ashamed of your Savior (1 Pet. 3:15). Finally, remember your Creator (Eccle. 12:1). Make your youth count for God. Get your priorities on target early in life. Wasting one's life is a tragedy. You only get one.

The Ten Commandments – An Unmovable Monument (August 31, 2003)

The lines are drawn and the battle heats up. When Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore moved a two-ton Ten Commandments monument into the Alabama Judicial Building in 2001, a major confrontation was in the making. It was obvious from the beginning that this kind of interior decorating would draw legal fire. But this is not a new fight. In 1980 the United States Supreme

Court ruled by a 5-4 decision in *Stone v. Graham* that the constitutional rights of school children in Kentucky were being violated by the presence of the Ten Commandments in their classroom. The secularized mind of the Supreme Court has sent a message. The Mosaic Decalogue placed on government property “is not a permissible state objective.” This is odd when you consider the role the Commandments have played in the formulation of laws in our nation’s history. Only in the last forty years has God been seen as a threat to our freedom. Secularism is on the march, hiding behind the often mentioned and misunderstood “separation of church and state.”

How are the Ten Commandments to function in our personal lives and in our society? They were given to the nation of Israel at the time of her birth as a nation (Ex. 20:12). The “Ten Words” were a summation of the entirety of Israel’s covenantal responsibilities. They provided the priest nation with a hedge (separated Israel from the nations of the world, Eph. 2:14, 15), a bridle (the means by which God ruled His people), a barrier (restrained the development of sin, Gal. 2:15; 1 Pet. 4:3), and a mirror (produced a knowledge of sin, Jas. 1:23, 25). (“Dawn of World Redemption” by Eric Sauer). Other nations had their own legal code (e.g., The Hammurabi Code of Law, c. 1790-1750 BC), such as the Babylonians. Those, however, did not possess the ethical and spiritual characteristics of the Mosaic Law.

Are the Ten Commandments to be the ethical and moral standard for modern society? No, if by this is meant their complete implementation. Israel was a theocracy (absolute rule of God). The United States is a Constitutional Republic. In the First Amendment to the Constitution it is stated that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” Israel was to worship no other God but the Lord God and to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Such law cannot and should not be legislated for the citizens of the United States. But having said that, it must be recognized that many of our laws have their roots sunk deeply in the Decalogue (e.g., murder, stealing, bearing false witness). Society benefits from the strictures of moral law. If not, why was slavery abolished and civil rights legislation implemented? The Ten Commandments are a part of our national heritage and have shaped us as a people. To remove their presence from federal and state buildings is a denial of our own history. This does not translate into the “establishment of a church by the state.” I do not believe our founding fathers thought in this way.

Why is there a legal firefight over the constitutionality of the presence of the Ten Commandments on government property? Secularism, the spiritual and doctrinal drift of the church, and the general moral decline of our culture are all co-conspirators. We think we are insuring a better society and upholding the Constitution of the United States. But look again. What we call freedom and constitutionality is a Trojan horse drawn into Troy as a gift from Athena, the goddess of wisdom. While we celebrate our liberty from God, the gates of our civilization have been opened to neo-pagans masquerading as champions of freedom.

Where is the church? It is sleeping and failing to live out the fundamental purpose of the Ten Commandments, which is to love God and our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39). When the Ten Commandments are posted in changed hearts and lives of Christians demonstrating the love of God. That will be a monument that cannot be removed.

Mountains, Glaciers, and Dinosaurs (September 14, 2003)

Jesus knew the value of removing oneself from the demands of ministry for certain intervals of time. He did this and drew the disciples along with Him (Mk. 6:31-32). We all need rest periods, breaks from our normal work patterns. Beth and I have done this in the last week. We traveled to the Canadian Rockies with Beth's brother, sister-in-law, and aunt. It was a wonderful opportunity to see new sites, learn new things, and ponder the plan of God.

The Rocky Mountains of Alberta, Canada offer some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. Boldly and beautifully their snow-capped peaks of bare jagged rock reach up to the sky. They stared down upon us as witnesses to the power and majesty of God. I love the mountains. Like giants frozen in time they speak of a world that was, that is, and that is to come. At the great flood of Noah's time God, lifted the mountains to their present heights, deepened the ocean basins, and redesigned the continents. We were fascinated by the evidence of an ocean that once covered the rocks on which we were standing at 6100 feet above sea level. Trilobites have left their trails in the sediment-hardened rocks. Rocks also revealed the etchings of waters lapping at an ancient shoreline. However, none of the markers we read mentioned anything about God's judgment of the world by a universal flood. Instead, explanations were woven together by the assumptions and presumptions of evolution and uniformitarianism (i.e., the belief "that geomorphic processes which can be observed in action at present, such as erosion, sedimentation, glaciation, volcanism, etc. can be invoked to explain the origin and formation of all the earth's geologic features."). Man through the centuries has worshiped mountains or has seen them as places to draw nearer to God. This is only another testimony to the sinful and idol worshiping heart of man. The desired effect of snow-capped peaks is to bring man to his knees before an omnipotent, Creator-Redeemer. God has left His fingerprints all over nature so that He might be worshiped.

Then there were the glaciers. We marveled at these vast, moving sheets of ice spilling over the snow-crested mountains like frozen cream. They tell a story of a post-flood ice age and a climate that is changing. Some experts claim that there will be no glaciers anywhere in the world in fifty-years. We saw evidence of retreating glaciers everywhere in the Canadian Rockies. We were reminded of a world that is "winding down," a creation floundering in futility waiting for its redemption at the hands of its Creator.

We spent one day at the Royal Tyrrell Museum near the town of Drumheller. Located in the "badlands" of central Alberta, it displays one of the best collections of dinosaur fossils I have ever seen. The fossil reconstructions of Dilophosaurus, Camarasaurus, Allosaurus, Stegosaurus, and Tyrannosaurus captivated saucer-eyed children and adults. We stood there trying to imagine a planet on which these creatures roamed. But here again evolution is the template by which every fossil is interpreted. It is presupposed that dinosaurs evolved and became extinct sixty-five million years ago until some catastrophe caused their disappearance. God and His judgment upon a rebellious world was nowhere to be found among the presentations of world-renowned paleontologists. Another message from God has been "mythtified" by great minds blind to the realities of divine revelation.

Mountains, glaciers, and dinosaurs all have their story to tell. They are God's great object lessons of creation, judgment, and what might have been. They also collaborate in a symphony of sighs anticipating a new world, one in which the redeemed will worship the God of infinite

wisdom, power, and glory.

The Bible in Court (September 21, 2003)

If the Bible were a person, it would be able to sue for slander and libel. It is misrepresented and charged with teaching things it does not teach. False reports regarding its message are especially evident in newspapers and the media. The irony is that it seems to suffer most at the hands of those who are especially responsible for upholding its authority. It is malfeasance of the worst sort when a “man of the cloth” violates public trust with regard to the Bible. It seems that whenever a moral issue comes up for public debate, a professor of theology or minister will either be quoted or will write a letter to the editor and make erroneous claims about the Scriptures. One of these journalistic disasters recently appeared in the newspaper. It occurred in a news article regarding the election of a homosexual bishop in the Episcopal Church. In defense of a vote to confirm the election of Bishop V. Gene Robinson, “an openly gay bishop,” the argument was made that “very few follow the entire Scriptures literally.” The minister being quoted went on to say, “If you are collecting interest on loans, you are in clear disobedience of Scripture.” This kind of hit and run approach to the Bible is typical of those who attempt to undermine the credibility of the Bible in support of their own moral agenda (or should I say immoral agenda). In their zeal to proclaim what, in their opinion, the Bible doesn’t teach they do the very thing they accuse their opponents of doing. Biblical passages are ripped out of their context to support their own prejudices and presuppositions.

We are told derisively that if we interpret the Bible literally, we will find ourselves in all kinds of odd, contradictory, and dangerous interpretations. Actually, the fundamental issue here is trustworthiness. Can we trust the Bible? But linked closely to the reliability of sacred Scripture is the way one goes about interpreting it. If it is going to be authoritative, then it must be understood. Attacks upon the “literalness” of the Bible are often smoke screens to sabotage the authoritative nature of holy Writ. The opinion of many is that the very idea of interpreting the Bible literally is absurd. But how else is human language to be interpreted? Whether one realizes it or not, literal interpretation is the way we interpret literature and everyday conversation. We read, write, and listen in such a way as to take words in their usual meaning. This allows for figurative language (e.g., figures of speech, allegories, metaphors, similes, etc.). The wide variety of literary forms such as poetry, prose, parables, and prophecy are also taken into account. But none of this negates a literal interpretation. It is best to think in terms of plain literal and figurative literal, but at the end of the day we are seeking the meaning of language by taking words in their customary, normal sense.

Why do we interpret the Bible literally? In the first place, it is the way one interprets any literary document. The purpose of language is to communicate in an understandable way. Secondly, this is the way the Bible interprets itself. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures in a literal way (e.g., Matt. 19:4-6; Gen. 2:24; Lk. 2:4-7; Mic. 5:2). Jesus accused the Pharisees of invalidating the Scriptures by their hermeneutical gymnastics. They, like their modern counterparts, used clever interpretive devices to avoid the plain teaching of the biblical text (e.g., Matt. 15:6; 19:7-9). Thirdly, consider the alternatives to taking the Bible in a normal, literal sense. The imagination, prejudices, and opinions of the interpreter take the place of the true meaning Scripture.

The preacher who implied that “very few follow the entire Scriptures literally” could be benefited if he would bring a literal hermeneutic to his reading of God’s laws for Israel in a theocracy (Ex. 22:25; Lv. 25:36f.; Deut. 23:19). The Bible ably defends itself in the court of life by witnessing to the importance of context in a literal interpretation.

Thumb Sucking, etc. (September 28, 2003)

When I see my three-year granddaughter sucking her thumb, I see a well-developed habit cutely exhibited as she tenderly clutches her favorite blanket. Thumb sucking is not the worst habit in the world, but it serves well in understanding human nature. Our capacity for habit formation is God-given and is important to everyday life. We put on our shoes, tie shoelaces, brush our teeth, comb our hair, walk, ride a bicycle, drive an automobile, stop at red lights, and go to bed out of habit. While some habits are simple physiological acts, others such as thoughts and attitudes are more mentally complex. If we do something long enough, it becomes a part of us. Many habits are good and quite useful in handling the demands of life. Think of what your day would be like if you had to stop and think about how to take the next step, or how to go about eating. But because we are sinners, we can learn some bad habits. If we think something benefits us, we can develop habits that are actually self-destructive, annoying to others, and displeasing to God. The habits formed around the use of tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs (not to mention the wrong use of certain prescription drugs), have taken an incalculable toll on our society.

How do we go about breaking bad habits and starting good ones? Change is not easy (Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil.”). Where does one begin in breaking a habit that is physically harmful, relationally damaging, and dishonoring to God? The use of profane and vulgar language, eating too much, rudeness, angry responses to disappointments, etc. all take their place in what we must learn to “put off.” In the first place, self-justification is a refusal to change. If your immediate response is that your case is unique and special, then you won’t make much progress in breaking a bad habit. Of course, it must be determined what the habit is you want to break. Do you have a desire to change? Habits are ultimately heart issues. If one is a believer in Jesus Christ, there will be a longing to please God and discipline oneself for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). You must consider the obstacles to change. A sinful heart is standing in the doorway to change. Sinful practices (e.g., lying to get what you want) become deeply ingrained. Therefore, find out what provisions God has given for putting off old habits and putting on new ones. The wisdom of God’s Word, the life altering effect of prayer, and the resurrection power of Holy Spirit are necessary.

You must consider what will replace your bad habit. By God’s grace, resolve to start telling the truth instead of using lies. Replace a critical, gossiping tongue with encouraging, faith-building words. Let a good book become the alternative for excessive television watching. Breaking old habits will take place in a life that is structured for biblical change. Never lose sight of the value of rearranging your environment, finding new friends, adjusting your schedule, and selecting new activities. The writer of Hebrews tells us that going on to maturity in Christ involves, laying aside “every encumbrance” (i.e., those things that will slow us down, Heb. 12:1). If you are not getting up early enough for your appointment with God, then change your evening schedule. That thirty minutes extra you need in the morning may be spent watching a

rerun of Seinfeld.

But after all is said and done with regard to habit formation, the greatest thing of all is knowing what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The compelling power of a new affection provides the resolve, energy, and discipline for God-honoring habit building. My granddaughter, when sucking her thumb, took it out of her mouth when I approached her and told me in that sweet little voice that she loved me. Love for God will go a long way in getting that “thumb” out of your mouth.

Living and Dying by Vows (October 5, 2003)

On Thursday, September 25, I received the following message by email from Dr. Robertson McQuilkin. “Dear extended family and special friends, Just a note to let you know that my Precious has finally reached Home, restored, free, fulfilled; united with Jesus whom she trusted so and loved passionately. And reunited with her son, Bob, and a myriad of family and friends who reached Home before she. Muriel Webendorfer McQuilkin quietly slipped away at 8:00 o’clock this morning, slipped away from our home of 13 years, where she has laid abed for the past decade. I was holding her in my arms.”

On Friday, October 4, 1983, at 8:45 in the evening, a road weary Dr. McQuilkin knocked on our front door. He had driven from Columbia, South Carolina to conduct a “Great Commission Workshop” on Saturday morning and speak twice on Sunday morning. We talked for a short while before he retired for the day. He told me some of Mrs. McQuilkin’s physical difficulties. I came to find out later that a doctor has said to him, “You may need to think about the possibility of Alzheimer’s.” The possibilities became realities. In 1990 the booklet, “Living by Vows,” was published. In it Dr. McQuilkin gives the account of his wife, Muriel’s, descent into the darkness of Alzheimer’s disease and the changes it brought to their marriage. He looked upon her condition as an opportunity to “get to” care for her, not one of “having” to care for her. He resigned his position as President of Columbia Bible College and Seminary and lovingly attended to Muriel until she died in his arms on September 20, 2003.

I cannot read “Living by Vows” without tears. It pierces my heart. I see a trail of blood in a husband’s life given for his wife. I am immediately drawn to Paul’s appeal to husbands in Ephesians 5. Christian husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church. That is sacrificial love. I made that promise thirty-nine years ago, “in sickness and in health...till death do us part.” Did this twenty-two-year-old seminary student grasp what sacrifice would mean? I had much to learn. The discoveries of love’s demands have unfolded over the years. One thing became quite evident. Less would have to be made of myself and more of the one to whom I had committed myself. There was a price to be paid if love was to grow. Decisions would have to take the wellbeing of someone else into account. The independence that I had treasured would have to give way to interdependence and oneness. Supernatural help is required if self-centeredness is to be replaced by generosity of time, attention, money, and plans. Suffering and death are not easy companions. Die for my wife? Sure, I will draw the fire of a burglar’s pistol to protect my wife, if need be. That’s a gallant thought. But there is a daily dying that typifies love. Loving devotion requires all of me all the time. Can I do that? I am laid low by such a demand. God’s power and the guiding light of the truth of His Word are essential if my vows are to be more than mere words.

How will God call Beth and me to live out the years remaining? Only an infinitely wise and loving heavenly Father can answer that question. He will do what is best. My best is to know how to die. Christ's death for me tells me everything I need to know. Like my Savior I must know how to enter into my wife's pain, sorrow, joy, hopes, upsets, injustices, and disappointments. It takes a strong man to live and die by his marriage vows. O God, make me a strong man.

What About Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel? (October 12, 2003)

Our annual World Missions Conference is almost upon us. Like Israel of old, who observed special festivals, feasts, and fasts to keep them reminded of their identity, we also recognize the value of keeping before us certain spiritual realities. In doing this we must guard ourselves against thoughtless routine. Our World Missions Conference is designed to renew our commitment to taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. It should have the effect of keeping our feet firmly planted in eternal truths. One of those truths is bound up in the question, what happens to the person who has never heard of Jesus Christ? If he dies without having heard the gospel, will he be condemned to hell? I don't know of any question that demands more immediate attention than this. I am alarmed at the trend among some evangelicals who are teaching that one "can be saved without knowing Jesus' name, but not without Jesus' provision for sin." This proposed "soteriological loophole" would have serious consequences. Everything we do in world missions hinges on how we respond to the plight of non-Christian people.

There are several factors that converge to make this issue of vital importance. In the first place it addresses a person's everlasting state. Where will the individual spend eternity and why? One's view toward this doctrine will affect the value he places on evangelism. Finally, this truth and one's response to it serves as an "index doctrine." It is a test of one's belief about God and other important areas of belief and ministry. I would like to propose seven unalterable biblical certainties regarding the eternal state of those who die without having heard the good news concerning Jesus Christ. Firstly, the Lord Jesus Christ, because of His completed atoning work on the cross is the only way to heaven. There is no other way to be saved from the condemnation of sin but through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). This is because of who Jesus is and what His death on the cross has accomplished. To offer any other way to heaven other than the all-sufficient atonement of Jesus Christ is to make Christ's death unnecessary. Secondly, adequate revelation has been given by God to hold everyone accountable to him. No one has any excuse (Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:12-16). Those without God's forgiveness are condemned not because they have heard and rejected Christ. The lost are condemned because of their rejection of the revelation God has given concerning Himself. They suppress the truth and refuse to worship God. Creation and conscience testify to the reality of God's existence and man's accountability to Him. Thirdly, because of His perfect character God will judge the world fairly. He is just (Acts 17:31). The just Judge must punish evil (2 Thess. 1:8). Fourthly, because of His great love for mankind God is prepared to bestow salvation on the lost (2 Pet. 3:9). The gospel goes to unexpected places as God draws those who belong to the Son (Jn. 17:2-3).

Fifthly, a universal distribution of people will be redeemed and present before the throne of

God in heaven (Rev. 5:9). A wide distribution of people who are redeemed indicates a wide dissemination of the gospel and reminds us that God is at work. Sixthly, God works in the hearts of those who respond to the light He has given (Acts 8:26-40; 10:34, 35; 17:27). God saves those who want more knowledge about Him as He did Cornelius. The genuine seeker of God will not be refused.

Seventhly, the person who has heard the gospel will not be asked about those who have not heard when he faces God at the judgment. The issue will not be, “what about those who have never heard the gospel?” The unbeliever will have to answer for what he personally has done with Jesus Christ.

We are obligated to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” A world missions conference is much more than a nice little church “event.” It is an opportunity to recommit ourselves to calling all people everywhere to become worshipers of God and slake their spiritual thirst with the water of joy in Christ.

Follow the Money Trail (October 19, 2003)

Investigations of graft, corruption, and crime are often keyed into the money trail. Follow the money and that will lead to the source of the crime. How much evil doing is driven by greed? A quick read of the daily newspaper identifies a wide range of pain and suffering brought on by an insatiable thirst for money. This is to be distinguished from the desire to make money for the good that it can bring. There is a difference between the great monster of greed and the profit motive. But with that said, we need to examine ourselves as Christians. Is our desire for earning money fueled by self-centered aspirations or is it the longing to create eternal wealth?

The greatest of all financial counselors, Jesus Christ, gives us a good lesson from a bad example in Luke 16:1-13. A crafty financial planner/trustee was fired for being irresponsible with his employer’s investments. But before he could be put out on the street among the ranks of the unemployed, he cleverly devised a scheme that would provide him with a golden parachute. He worked out a plan that obligated his employer’s debtors to him to help secure his financial future. By reducing the amount each of them owed to his boss, they would share a slice of the prosperity pie. He was using dishonest investment tactics for the time when he would be unemployed. He was motivated by selfishness in order to feather his financial nest. In spite of this his employer tipped his hat to his former money manager for being such a shrewd scoundrel.

What does Jesus do with this “economic survivor” story? He certainly doesn’t commend the unscrupulous methods that were used for retirement investment. Instead, He called His disciples to prepare themselves for the coming judgment by the right use of money. The sons of light can learn a lesson from the sons of this age. Material possessions should be put to eternal use, not to time-bound, self-centered use. The world is good at what it does. The investment and financial planning industry is filled with brilliant people who know how to get the best return on invested income. The question for Christians is how does our belief in a future life after death affect our priorities in this life? We who believe in the spiritual realities of heaven and hell ought to see money as a means of investing in people. One day we will give account to

our Lord for what we have done with our money (2 Cor. 5:10). Are we making an attempt to live simply so that we can create an increasing “cash margin” to finance missionaries around the world? The profit motive is not evil in itself. It is what we do with it that is the issue. What kind of welcome awaits us in heaven as the result of giving to God’s work? Let’s face it. Our attitude toward money is indicative of our spiritual condition. God loans us a certain amount of wealth in our lifetime. What are we doing with it? Financial faithfulness is using what God has given us for the greatest benefit to Him. Jesus said it very bluntly, “you cannot serve God and money.”

There is a great work to be done for God. Billions of people in this world have yet to hear the good news about Jesus Christ. How can we permit ourselves to live so comfortably in a time when there are more lost people than at any time in human history? We need to search our hearts. Have we become intoxicated with the spirit of the age, thinking that our money is entirely ours to serve us? There are eternal rewards awaiting those who make their money serve God. Our money trail is to lead to the throne of God before whom we will all give account.

The Legacy of the Reformation (October 26, 2003)

On October 31, 1517, a thirty-four year old Augustinian monk posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His immediate intention was not to start the Reformation but was to challenge and condemn the abuses of the indulgence system in the Roman Church. A man by the name of Tetzel had been going from city to city with the approval of the pope, Leo X, selling documents that granted the complete forgiveness of all sin (repentance was not necessary) “as soon as the money clinked in the chest.” Martin Luther called for a debate on the matter and insisted that the only authority on such issues as indulgences was not the pope or the Church but the Bible. That one affirmation (*sola scriptura*) was the theological shot that was heard around the world. By the time the smoke had cleared Luther had been excommunicated by the Roman Church, his books had been burned, and the Protestant Reformation was well under way. Once the Scriptures were declared to be the final authority for faith and practice, other false teachings of the Church came under assault.

We owe much to the early Reformers, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. These men blazed a trail through the thick underbrush of unbiblical and antibiblical teaching in the sixteenth century Church. The Bible is a lion that, when unleashed, cuts to the bone of our opinions, superstitions, and pretensions. When Christian people began to read and study the Bible for themselves, things happened. No longer was the Bible under the control of the Roman Church. Biblical truth flowed like life-giving water over the barren spiritual life of Medieval Europe. The gospel was proclaimed, lives were changed, and revivals occurred. Actually, the Reformation itself was a revival in the sense that “truth, or doctrine is right living, and right living is living according to the Truth.” There is a circular effect involved. Revivals are the work of God’s Spirit drawing God’s people to new heights of authentic Christian living. It was the Reformation that not only changed the course of Western civilization. It also prepared the spiritual soil of the church for what has come to be known as the modern missions movement. As Protestantism spread to Scotland and England, evangelical revivals ignited the flames of world evangelization. The Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the London Missionary Society (1795) and the China Inland Mission launched hundreds of God exalting, gospel proclaiming Christians to Africa, India, and China.

When the church of Jesus Christ takes the Bible seriously it will be a witnessing church. We are children of the Reformation and that means carrying the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ to all the peoples of the earth. There is no people group or religious system that exceeds Islam as a challenge to the church of Jesus Christ. Millions of Muslims have sworn their allegiance to Allah and are living in utter spiritual darkness that can only be removed in Christ (2 Cor. 3:14). Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," was written as Turkish (Muslim) armies under Suleiman I were attacking Vienna. This gives special thought to what was behind the words, "Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing." Today, as heirs of the Reformation, we should not cower in the face of threats of Moslem militants. The "right man (is) on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He- Lord Sabaoth His name from age to age the same, and He must win the battle." Interestingly, this verse was not sung at a national political/ecumenical gathering after the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. But this kind of thing does not daunt us. We know that the great need of the hour is to let "goods and kindred go" and tell the Moslem world and all the nations that "God's truth abideth still: His kingdom is forever." Jesus Christ is coming again to rule over His kingdom on this earth. We dare not cringe and fall back from our love-debt to those without Christ. God is our helper. Thank God for the Reformation legacy that is ours.

How Long, O Lord? (November 5, 2003)

In the Presence of My Enemies is a riveting account of Martin and Gracia Burnham's yearlong (May 7, 2001 to June 7, 2002) ordeal as captives of the Philippine terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf. Months of unrelenting hardships presented the Burnhams with the many faces of evil. Ruthless terrorists, kidnappings, forced "marriages," beheadings, lying, cheating, stealing, firefights, torture, threats and all this in the name of religion. Compounding the difficulties of daily survival was the challenge of coping with personal grief, anger, disappointment, fear, worry, and depression. But through it all faith in God expressed itself. Captors and fellow captives were given a witness to Christ's love through two of His servants. There were struggles but in the end God's adequacy was found to be more than enough.

While reading Gracia's story of a life on the run in the Philippine jungles, I was reminded of some biblical markers that are needed when journeying through the valley of the shadow of death. Bad things happen to God's people. Nowhere in Scripture are Christians guaranteed absolute safety from marauding evil. But at the same time, Satan is on a divine leash and works only within the fixed boundaries of God. Also, suffering brings us to a meeting with our own sinful hearts. I was taken by Martin's reflection on the fact that the Abu Sayyaf had made him painfully aware of the hatred, bitterness, greed, and wrongdoing all around him. He confessed that he had seen all those things in himself. Yet, another spiritual reality is that suffering opens the doors of opportunity to serve others. Offering Tylenol to a captor who was helping to make his own life miserable was an expression of grace.

We can pray for deliverance from our pain and suffering, and God may choose to allow things to grow much worse before they become better. Habakkuk's faith was tested mightily in this very way (Hab. 1:12-17). The ability of Muslim terrorists to justify their crimes against humanity in the name of holy war reveals the self-deception that accompanies legalistic religion. It was

religious leaders, duped by their false view of God, who conspired to kill Jesus. But there is one truth that sits at the head of the class. The conundrum of evil on the loose in a good God's world stops us in our tracks. How do we explain this? Does man's freedom trump God's sovereign purposes? Why doesn't God step in and stop a suicide bomber from killing innocent men, women, and children? Could God not prevent an airplane from crashing into the World Trade Center? I have no special insight in answer to this question. I have only words like those spoken by Joseph who, though a captive in a foreign land, confessed, "You (his brothers) meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). The evil that men do is not beyond the infinitely wise purposes of God. They do only what God permits them to do. This does not take us behind the curtain to God's "secret decrees" (Deut. 29:29), but it does make it possible to trust while waiting. We may cry out to God as do the martyrs in the Great Tribulation, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on earth?" One day the presence of our enemies will be replaced with the sweet presence of our Savior with whom we will dwell forever.

Books and Frozen Seas (November 9, 2003)

"A book is an axe that breaks up the frozen seas within." Have you not found that to be true? The reading of a book on the right subject at the right time can bring immeasurable joy, challenge, and change into one's life. I am convinced that one of the ugly features of our fast-paced, media-driven culture is the loss of time to read. Another complicating factor is the small percentage of men who read compared to women. It is my understanding that women purchase about eighty percent of the books in a Christian bookstore. I am told that men don't read. This is not good news. Books can have a powerful effect upon us. One method I have found useful is to resolve to read at least 30 minutes every day. This is in addition to the reading I do in sermon preparation. The following are some books I have recently read or am in the process of reading.

"The Christian's High Calling" by Maurice Roberts has been a special joy as Beth and I have been reading it together. The chapter on Psalm 142, "A Psalm from the Cave", came along at a needy time for us. Husbands and wives, if you would read a few pages together at least once a week you will be glad you did. D. A. Carson's "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God" is one of those books that will be frequently consulted. It's only eighty-four pages but is a great help in thinking through such vital doctrines as God's love and God's sovereignty and God's love and God's wrath. I found Carson's thoughts on divine election and the sufficiency of Christ's atonement to be especially helpful.

Some weeks ago I was given "After Darkness, Light." This is a series of essays in honor of R. C. Sproul, founder of Ligonier Ministries. One chapter particularly noteworthy is John MacArthur's "Solus Christus." His presenting question is, "Is it possible that some non-Christians might go to heaven when they die, or are those without Christ totally cut off from God and without hope in the world (cf. Eph. 2:12)?" This leads to a criticism of Tony Evan's belief that, "God...would not be just if He held people accountable for that which they cannot do, and for knowledge they do not possess." Some critical issues are at stake here. I am troubled by the views of my friend, Tony Evans, regarding those who have never heard the gospel.

I continue to read a few pages each day in "Gospel Worship" by Jeremiah Burroughs. This is a series of fifteen sermons preached by this Puritan pastor in London in 1650. He leaves no stone

unturned in giving his congregation instruction in how to listen to God's Word. His illustration comparing hearing the Word on Sunday to a mariner who sails out to sea is a valuable reminder of the dangers of not treasuring up the Word after the sermon has been preached. Entering the life and thought of Jonathan Edwards is always richly rewarding. Ian Murray guides the reader through Edward's personal life, writings, and pastoral ministry ("Jonathan Edwards, A New Biography"). We can benefit from the lessons of history. Christians sought direct guidance by "impressions" given by the Holy Spirit during the Great Awakening of the 1740s. This error had damaging effects as it still does in our day. How often do you hear Christians claiming to receive direct communication from God apart from His Word?

With the holiday season almost upon us, it may seem like whistling in the wind to call God's people to do some worthwhile reading in addition to everything else going on. But, if I have stirred even one to read a book of life-changing value, I will be thankful. Yes, I know that only the Spirit of God can change the human heart, but a good book can be the axe in His hand to break up that frozen sea.

The God Who Holds the Future (November 23, 2003)

The past two weeks have been filled with extraordinary exposure to Christianity past, present, and future. Living Faith 2003 was the annual conference of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. It was a spiritually rich, faith-building, and worshipful time. The conference theme, "Human Suffering and the Hope of the Gospel," was pressed upon us by the deeply moving talks of Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes. To listen to Joni's account of her three decades long experience of life as a paraplegic was a story in God's sufficiency. Being totally dependent on others for managing the basic routines of life forces upon us questions regarding the Bible's teaching on God's control over human suffering. God assures us in His inerrant Word that no matter what kind of trials we may experience, His loving, wise, and omnipotent hand "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). No matter what our personal future holds, God rules over time and eternity. We must learn from Job who said, "I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

Does God know the future? Is our comfort and hope to be found in a God who out of respect for human self-determination has left the future open? Some evangelical theologians are telling us that God has taken a risk in making the human race. This past week I attended the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held at the Hilton Hotel in Atlanta. The conference theme, "Jesus Christ Is the Same Yesterday, Today and Forever," was the topic in the various plenary sessions. But the subject that dominated much of the conversation among the attendees was open theism and the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Charges had been brought against theologians, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, contending that the recent writings of these men contained statements that violated the doctrinal statement of ETS regarding the inerrancy of the Scriptures. At a business meeting on Wednesday evening a vote was taken among the members of the Society on whether or not to expel Pinnock and Sanders from the ETS. Both men share the view that some of the prophecies of the Bible are contingent upon the choice of free human beings. Some biblical prophecies must be understood as probabilities. For example, Pinnock has written, "God, in order to be omniscient, need not know the future in complete detail." According to Sanders, "prophecies about beings with libertarian freedom are conditional and

God knows them as probabilities or expectations.” This means that a passage like 2 Timothy 3:1ff. says in part, “in the last days...men will be lovers of self, lovers of money...disobedient to parents,” etc., may not be realized if free human beings decide to act contrary to this prophesied behavior. In other words, human freedom trumps God’s sovereignty. In my judgment this kind of Bible interpretation is a denial of inerrancy (i.e., that the Scriptures are without error).

The vote on Wednesday evening failed to sustain the charges against Pinnock and Sanders. This is an alarming development. Human independence has been exalted over the doctrine of the trustworthiness of the Scriptures and adherents of such a view have been allowed to remain as members of the Evangelical Theological Society. Where is the allegiance to the admonitions of Scripture to guard the treasury of truth (2 Tim. 1:14)? It is a dangerous message that is being sent out by ETS to the body of Christ. Here are men who are teaching that God doesn’t know the future and that the Scriptures may not be teaching what we think they are teaching. This is not in line with our Christian past. It is a false teaching that has developed quite recently and will bring great harm to the church in the future if it is not exposed and rebuked. C. S. Lewis has spoken in very plain words when he said, “Everyone who believes in God at all believes that He knows what you and I are doing tomorrow.” We are to draw comfort from the fact that though we do not know what the future holds, we know Who holds the future.

The Twelve Resolutions of Christmas (November 30, 2003)

Well, here we are again, at the beginning of another Christmas season. Actually, the commercial aspect of it is already well under way. For some weeks now Christmas ads have been appearing on television. One complaint that I frequently hear at this time of year is how secularized and commercialized Christmas has become. I think that this is true. There seems to be a studied effort to eliminate God, the Christ story, and other biblical themes from the popular culture’s “holiday” celebration. After all, we don’t want to offend anyone with beliefs that others do not share. So, what is developing is a shopping, gift giving, Santa Claus centered, nostalgic, food-filled, movie watching, time off from work, no school holiday season. What should be the Christian’s response to all this? I don’t think the answer is being anti Christmas. I have known some who in the name of Christ adopt a negative, critical, and joyless attitude about it all. What I would like to do is offer some resolutions that if followed could be significant Christian counter cultural activity. These are not intended to be a kind of legalistic system that if adhered to will earn you something from God. Rather, they are an attempt at putting Christ into Christmas.

1. I resolve not to use language from which the God words have been erased. I will not allow the “holiday season” to become a substitute for the “Christmas season.” If I send cards or e-mails, I will use meaningful, biblically significant, and truth-laden words.
2. I resolve to listen to and meditate on the eternal truth of God’s Word no matter how busy I get. A sermon on tape, the Bible on tape, sermon notes to which I prayerfully respond, and daily Scripture reading can do much to keep my mind on the truth of the Christmas story.
3. I resolve not to buy anything that is unwise, unnecessary, or that will diminish my ability to give to God’s work. The presents that I give will be meaningful, useful, and well within my budgetary plans. Waste, impulsiveness, and debt will not be allowed to reside in my life.

4. I resolve to enter the month of January without the weariness and regrets of having over committed myself during the month of December. I will ask God for wisdom as I plan my days.
5. I resolve to respond to the commercialization of Christmas by displaying generosity and mercy toward those who have very real physical and material needs. I will look around to notice those who may be lonely and/or need a helping hand.
6. I resolve to pray every day through the Christmas season for the missionaries our church supports. I will make a special gift to one of our missionary families. I will look on the back of the monthly church prayer calendar to pray for the persecuted church around the world.
7. I resolve to listen to some Christ-centered, God-exalting Christmas music in my home or in my car at least ten minutes every day.
8. I resolve to read the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-38 on Christmas day with my family. I will not let presents, football, or food crowd out the wonderful words of life.
9. I resolve not to allow food or entertainment rule over me during the Christmas season. I am responsible for what I eat, how much I eat, and what I do with my mind and time. I will glorify God with my body and not abuse it.
10. I resolve to display either in my house or in my yard a reminder that Christ came to this world to save sinners. A manger scene along with an explanation of its meaning will be one of the best memories our children can have of the Christmas season.
11. I resolve to share the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ with at least one person during the Christmas season.
12. I resolve to be patient, kind, forgiving, helpful, sacrificial, and joyful during the Christmas season. I will display the Savior in my attitude and relationships knowing that all true goodness exalts the glory of God.

The Greatness of the Messiah (December 7, 2003)

There are certain advantages at having the person of Jesus Christ discussed and debated in the public arena. The movie, "The Gospel of John," seems to be well received among many Christians. I am told that the narrative is exactly the words of the Gospel of John spoken against the cinematic background of the first century. Mel Gibson's controversial, "The Passion," has brought on a firestorm of criticism. The charge brought against it is that it is anti-Semitic. Recently NBC ran a special focusing on "The Da Vinci Code," a novel that tells the story of

Jesus having had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene. This past week as I was listening to PBS a self-acknowledged “unbeliever” gave his verbal high-five to a book that spoke of the romantic relationship of Jesus with Mary Magdalene. Yes, I know you can say that this all amounts to our culture’s disinformation campaign against the biblical truth about the Son of God. But there is another way to look at it. We are being given some very useful talking points about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Let’s take up the challenge and be ready to converse about the Lord Jesus Christ of the historic Christian faith. Where do we start? I will offer Luke 1:26-35 as reliable documentation about the identity of Jesus.

Luke’s purpose in writing his Gospel was to provide assurance of the gospel (1:4). Its intent is to give us certainty and assurance about the Lord Jesus Christ, reminding us that God stands behind the message of the good news we proclaim to a lost world. Gabriel comes to Mary with a birth announcement unequalled in human history. He served as God’s press secretary with special responsibilities regarding the Messianic promise. The Virgin Mary is perhaps about 15 or 16 years of age living in Nazareth, a small village off the main trade routes of Palestine. Gabriel told Mary that the one conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit “will be great.” On the surface of it that could sound a bit trite. But the truth is that Jesus was greater than John the Baptist and greater than the rest of humanity. His greatness is founded upon who He is and what He did. Mary’s son has no equal. But not only was Jesus acclaimed to be remarkable in His person. He had a unique relationship to the Father (“will be called Son of the Most High”). Jesus possessed the nature of His Father (Elyon, Gen. 14:18, 19) and was no less a person than God in human form. Gabriel also said that Jesus was related to king David and was the heir to the throne of David (“and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.”). The Davidic covenant finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Isa. 9:7; 11:1). He will sit upon the Davidic throne as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah (“and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.” Rev. 5:5; Rev. 22:16). Isn’t this marvelous? The Christ child to be born to Mary would fulfill all the hopes and dreams of His people. Who was this child who would lie helpless in the arms of his mother? He was the King of kings and the Lord of lords. This would be no short-lived reign as in the theocracy of the Old Testament. Jesus’ relation to the kingdom will be eternal (“and His kingdom will have no end.”). It will not be like earthly kingdoms that have come and gone. The earthly millennial kingdom will merge with the eternal kingdom and the redeemed of all the ages will ever be with Christ.

I doubt that Mary fathomed all that she was told. She was not asked to understand everything but believe that “nothing will be impossible with God.” She was given a sign and she willingly submitted to God’s plan for her (“be it done to me according to your word.”). No one in human history had been told such extraordinary things. Gabriel himself must have marveled at this wonderful story. Why was the birth of the son of Joseph and Mary so important? It was because of the child’s greatness. “He poured out Himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet He Himself bore the sin of many and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). Let men write their fiction about Jesus. But we have God’s witness to the meaning of His greatness.

The Messiah, The Savior (December 14, 2003)

A soft theater seat, hot buttered popcorn, and the pleasure of watching the hero of the movie deliver the oppressed from the rule of bad people. This is the recipe for a multi-million-dollar

box office hit. What is really at work here? The human heart longs for justice and is drawn to a savior hero who can overcome evil. This leads us directly to the Christmas event. The birth of Jesus Christ is about a Savior. Who is the Christ child? He is Israel's long-awaited Messiah, the son of David, the heir to the throne of David. He is the Son of the Most High, God Himself as man, who won the right to rule as the second and last Adam. He was virgin born, absolutely unique, sinless, the one who would save His people from their sins. But having said all this there is still another emphasis in the birth account in the Gospel narratives. We find it in Luke 2:11. An angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds near Bethlehem. He brought good news. A Savior, who is Christ the Lord, had been born. History is filled with stories about would-be and want-to-be saviors. Oppressed people long for someone to deliver them from their oppressors. Legends are made of this kind of hope. Millions will flock to the movies during the Christmas season to see a king claiming his crown rights and crushing his adversaries.

But the Savior of whom the angel spoke two thousand years ago was no imaginary matinee hero. The Savior announced was God Himself. God was Israel's Savior (Psa. 17:7 "...O Savior of those who take refuge at Thy right hand from those who rise up against them."). You find the theme of God as Israel's deliverer all the way through the Old Testament. Israel seems to have always been in need of help. Her enemies were both invited and uninvited oppressors. We see God coming to Israel's rescue time and again. But the real enemy was yet to be thoroughly defeated. The Old Testament leaves us with the expectation of God who will come and deliver His people from their sin and all its consequences (Psa. 110:1). Israel's King and Messiah was coming.

When we read the New Testament, we immediately encounter this prophesied Savior. He is not merely some tribal chieftain who gives temporary and local deliverance. He is the Savior of the world (Jn. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:10; 1 Jn. 4:14). There is more. He is the only Savior the world has, and He wants His salvation to reach "all peoples" (1 Tim. 2:3,4). The apostle Paul, who had been personally rescued from unbelief by the Lord Jesus Christ, tells us that Jesus is the Savior of the Church (Eph. 5:23). Every one of us who has laid down his arms and surrendered to King Jesus has been personally "saved" from sin, death, and eternal judgment. As Savior Jesus came to give repentance, forgiveness, and redemption (Tit. 2:11-14). Ponder this. "Our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). Buddha, Mohammed, and all the gods of this world cannot do for us the most necessary thing. There is only one who can subdue our rebel hearts and pardon our guilt. "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior" (Acts 5:31).

Our Savior has ascended to heaven. We wait for His return (Phil. 3:20). In the meantime, we live in anticipation. We who have been delivered from the domain of darkness will forever praise Him who rescued us. One day He will come to deliver His people from this sin-ravaged world. He came the first time as God disguised as a man. But the next time He will come in the full splendor of His heavenly glory. Now that is an ending I don't want to miss.

From a Throne to a Hole in the Ground (December 21, 2003)

Saddam Hussein has strutted across the stage of Iraqi history fond of his comforts, conniving in his politics, and ruthless in his dictatorship. Since his ascension to presidency in 1979, Iraq's self-acclaimed modern-day Nebuchadnezzar has made life miserable for millions of people. Who

knows what global mischief was yet to be spawned by this soulless, brutal regime. On Sunday morning, December 14, the news spread like wildfire. “We got him,” intoned Paul Bremer, the American proconsul in Baghdad, hardly able to restrain a sense of triumph. Saddam had been discovered hidden away in a small underground room described by some as a spider hole. We first saw him on television looking like a beaten down homeless fugitive. Newsweek magazine’s account stated that, “Saddam has been hiding in a mud hole. Gone were the fleets of Mercedes, the battalions of secret police, the gold-encrusted palaces. Saddam did not put up a fight...He was resigned, cowering, meek and weak.” Weak he was but certainly not meek. The “Successor of Nebuchadnezzar” seems to have overlooked a telling episode in the life of Babylon’s ancient king. God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream that when interpreted by Daniel revealed a down-in-the-dirt humbling experience waiting in the proud king’s future. Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance was delivered a severe blow. He was stricken with a disease considered by some to have been lycanthropy. It was not pretty. In his dream his condition was pictured as a great tree that was cut down to a mere stump. For seven years the pompous king ate grass, grew long thick nails, shaggy hair, and behaved like an animal. God was giving Nebuchadnezzar an unforgettable lesson that “the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it, the lowliest of men” (Dan. 4:17). With what little mind he had left, Nebuchadnezzar looked up to heaven and by God’s grace acknowledged the Most High who lives forever (Dan. 4:34). We don’t know if he was converted but he certainly adopted a different understanding of himself and who God is. He confessed that God was the king of heaven.

One may wonder why such a strange story is folded into the prophetic message of the Book of Daniel. One transcendent truth emerges from Nebuchadnezzar’s humbling experience. Unbelieving rulers in the nations of this world are not exempt from God’s moral rule. We are able to see how the Sovereign God of the universe deals with human leaders filled with their own self-importance. A powerful witness to this truth is found in Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55. When told that she was to be the mother of Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, Mary broke into a song of praise. She exalts the Lord for the provision of a Savior and savors the fragrance of God’s perfections, His power, holiness, and mercy. Mary exclaims, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble” (Lk. 1:52). God’s wisdom is seen through His reversal of human values. He exalts those who put their trust in Him who has chosen foolish things of the world to shame the wise (Isa. 55:8; 1 Cor. 1:26-29). This truth echoes down the corridors of time and finds its ultimate expression in the cross of Jesus Christ. Human pride is exposed for what it is, the refusal to let God be God. Mary understood this. God has shown His mercy through the birth of her child, Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world.

Saddam Hussein, the self-described “Glorious Leader, the Lion of Babylon, the Anointed One, the Modern Saladin of Islam,” was found hiding in his little hole in the ground. He has been brought low by the mighty hand of God. But we are all infected with the same disease that afflicts this deposed tyrant. Self-exaltation inhabits every human heart. If you have not bowed in your heart before the Son of God, come off your little throne, repent of your unbelief, join with Mary and rejoice in God our Savior.

Some Year-End Reminiscences (December 28, 2003)

What have we done together in ministry at Berachah this year? I am not suggesting that we can know everything we have experienced together as a church family. There is a very real sense in which only eternity can give a more complete picture of how hearts and lives have been changed. But we can at least look back over some of the more measurable things.

We started the year studying the Book of Acts in our morning worship service and finished on July 13 with a message entitled, "The Church Aflame." It was presented as a study in Acts 29, which I think was confusing to some, since there is no Acts 29 in the canon of Scripture. The idea was to get us to think of how the continued spread of the gospel and the growth of the church beyond A.D. 70 are to be anchored to biblical church life. On Sunday evenings in January, I led us through a four part series on the physical body. In an age that worships physical beauty and sports, we needed to soak our minds in spiritual realities regarding the gift of physical life. In February Charlie Liebert was with us for a Creation Conference. We were reminded of the infinite wisdom of our Creator God. Larry Moyer of EvanTel came to us in March for a special evangelistic effort. One of my prayers for Berachah is that we will be a church that consistently seeks to reach the unsaved with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Justin preached from Colossians in February and March. How thankful I am for an associate who loves God and is committed to expository preaching. It was during March and April that we devoted four Sunday evenings to a series in "The Christian Education of our Children." With the different educational tracks available to parents (e.g., home schooling, Christian schools, and public schools), it is necessary to think through the opportunities and challenges each of these presents. In our study in the Book of Nahum in April and May we prodded ourselves with the question, "If God be against us, who can be for us?" After this series Justin led us through a faith-building time in the Book of Ruth. Do you remember the sweet truth, "Paid in Full," from Ruth 4:1-13?

It was in July and August in the morning service that we became absorbed with the Triunity of God. It was just yesterday when some Jehovah's Witnesses came by our house that I had the opportunity to point them to the only Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The study that I do and the sermons I preach are for the preacher as well as the congregation. But the sermons also go beyond Berachah. I received an email from a man in another state thanking me for the messages on physical healing in the month of August. I have recommended Justin's series on the church (in September) to a number of people. The sermon, "God's Green Thumb," was an excellent analysis of the "church growth movement." I was encouraged to hear that one of our young men has listened to Dick Corley's message in our missions conference ("Sermon on the Amount") several times. This would be a good place to thank those who give volunteer time to our tape ministry. Various people have said to me that they were making plans to send certain messages to family and friends. We are all involved in one form or another of spreading the seed of biblical truth. God uses His Word to prepare us for the days ahead. I think of Jeff Rape sitting there on Sunday evenings listening intently as we studied the biblical doctrine of death in November. Now Jeff is walking through the valley of the shadow of death with his family because of the death of his father on Sunday, December 21.

What is waiting on us in 2004? We don't know. But God does. And He is preparing us as we faithfully worship Him in the ministry of biblical exposition. Let us pray together in the coming year that we keep "holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain" (Phil. 2:16).

Mormonism, A Counterfeit Gospel (January 11, 2004)

On a recent trip to the Salt Lake City area, I took the occasion to listen to how Mormons teach their doctrines. A local cable channel supplied the viewer audience with continuous exposure to the beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormon Church found its beginning in 1830 under the leadership of Joseph Smith. Smith was born in 1805 in Sharon, Vermont and as a confused teenager wanted to know what church he should join. According to the official story of the LDS Church, “Smith was visited by God the Father and God the Son after praying about which church to join. He was told that they were ‘all wrong’ and all the Christian church’s doctrines ‘were an abomination’” (Joseph Smith – History 19, “Pearl of Great Price”). Of particular note is the way Smith interpreted James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” He interpreted this verse to mean that if he asked God which church to join, He would be given the “wisdom” for which he had asked. Based on his interpretation of James 1:5 and the supposed answer he received, Smith went on to found the Mormon Church. If you encounter a Mormon missionary, you will be told to pray for this same kind of wisdom so that you might know whether the Book of Mormon is true (The Book of Mormon, Moroni 10:4-5). At the very outset, one can see the importance of hermeneutics and how Joseph Smith violated a basic principle of Bible interpretation. He ignored the context of James 1:5. This is a trademark of all the cults. They invariably rip verses out of their biblical context in order to construct what proves to be false teaching. Satan is a master counterfeiter and knows how to deceive the unwary.

An example of the counterfeiting strategy is found in the Mormon use of familiar Bible words. I heard the word “gospel” used several times. To the unsuspecting, it could appear that Mormons hold to the same gospel that evangelical Christians believe. This is not the case. The apostle Paul warns us that there are “different gospels” (Gal. 1:6-9). We must not fall into the trap of assuming that the meaning of a word remains the same when used by other “religious” people. To Mormons the gospel is, “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be.” The belief is that “every worthy male will become a god and rule over their own planet.” Salvation, according to Mormon teaching, involves baptism by immersion, obedience to the teaching of the Mormon Church, good works, and “keeping the commandments of God (which) will cleanse away the stain of sin” (Journal of Discourses, 2:4). This is not the gospel revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Man, the sinner, through faith in Jesus Christ can receive the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. God’s redemption is found in Christ alone, by faith alone, by grace alone (Jn. 3:16; Eph. 2:8, 9).

But I heard other counterfeit teachings. A Mormon teacher developed a very sophisticated method of receiving God’s revelation. It was a Mormon version of how to know the will of God. What was particularly interesting about the presentation was its similarity to the kind of mysticism one frequently hears among some Christians, namely, how to hear God’s voice by way of inner impressions, etc. It is this kind of teaching, no matter where it is found, that opens the door for all sorts of unbiblical and antibiblical ideas. The whole Mormon system is built upon the premise that God continues to reveal truth. But when closely examined the Book of Mormon is found not to be “new revelation” but a colossal counterfeit. Christians, beware. Those who come in the name of God bearing gifts of “new revelation” are wolves in sheep’s clothing. You can be eaten alive by a counterfeit sheep.

A City Set on A Hill (January 18, 2004)

The world has always been filled with social problems. When Adam and Eve decided to go their own way, they brought the curse of sin and death crashing down on all their descendants. Crime, poverty, injustice, racism, and a host of related ills plague mankind's existence. As the presidential election-year locomotive picks up speed, there will be fierce debates among the candidates and in the editorial pages of the nation's newspapers about the best way to go about fighting the social ills in America and the rest of the world. Liberals like to think of themselves as the compassionate people and portray conservatives as keepers of the status quo (that's Latin for "the mess we are in"). In an attempt to regain the advantage in the public's perception we now hear a lot about compassionate conservatism. One can get weary with these claims and counterclaims as to how to fix our human problems, but we as Christians must not retreat and ignore the plight of suffering people. There has been a difference of opinion among Christians over the role of the church in its response to social problems. A new emphasis appeared in the late 1940s among evangelicals regarding the responsibility of the church to purely humanitarian and philanthropic enterprises. It was Carl F. H. Henry, an influential voice in late twentieth century evangelicalism, who in 1957 wrote critically of Christian fundamentalism saying, "The Gospel was often narrowed to personal and pietistic religious experience, in which...the social and cultural imperative of Christianity (was) evaded." The last fifty years have seen a growing degree of Christian involvement in a wide range of social action endeavors. Poverty, famine relief, AIDS, the environment, race relations, and abortion to name a few, have drawn many evangelical young people into ministries combating these problems. Some Christian humanitarian organizations receive financial donations much greater than many of the traditional world mission boards.

How are we to think through these issues and trends in a biblical way? The apostle Paul wrote to a church in a city filled with massive social problems. Slavery, prostitution, crime, political corruption, and poverty were open sores on metropolitan Rome. What was the church in that city to do? They were to go about creating a Christian counterculture with love for one's neighbor pulsating at the very core (Rom. 13:8). The community of saints is to seek the well-being of others. By paying out our debt of love, evil is cut at the roots. God's people are not to be ashamed of the gospel. The epistle to the Romans begins on this note (Rom. 1:16). All social evils find their source and nurture in the soil of spiritually darkened hearts. Much of human misery can be traced to character flaws that go unattended. The early church, however, did not make a frontal attack on the social infections of the Roman Empire. The power of the gospel working in transformed lives had a profound influence on Roman society, impacting its political, legal, social, and moral structure. Social reformation is the product of theological proclamation. This fact has enormous implications. Social problems are ultimately moral problems and moral problems are ultimately problems of the human heart. Today, abortion, equal rights, economic justice, homosexuality, and terrorism clamor for our attention. Human society, the United Nations, Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, conservatives and liberals do not have the real answers to the world's problems. Paradoxically, a people whose citizenship is not of this world have been given the message that offers the only hope for a hurting world. In our pilgrimage through this life with our eyes on a "better country...a heavenly one," we proclaim Christ and cast the light of a city set on a hill. The gospel message and Christ-exalting good works are to shine in all their brilliance (Heb. 11:16; Matt. 5:14-16).

My Dream for Berachah (January 25, 2004)

I am not too old to dream of what Berachah Bible Church could be. I love the church of Jesus Christ. The words of Jesus keep my eyes set upon what might be, not what was. “I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18). When I think about Berachah’s future, I long for a church that will persist in its God-pursuing, Christ-exalting ways. Can a church be anything other than this? Tragically it can happen. A church can lose its soul and become a barren, works-filled, self-affirming, social club. I pray that Berachah will not slide into that spiritual swamp. I do not want Jesus to say to us, “I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5).

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church where God’s Word is taught clearly, boldly, and thoroughly. The pulpit should always be a place that provides spiritual nourishment through the preaching of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Bible exposition feeds the arteries of ministry life, giving it needed spiritual oxygen. If our church is to maintain a truth-rich environment, the Scriptures must be read, memorized, studied, and taught faithfully.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that exalts the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The ordinances of the church have been given to hold before us the splendor and majesty of the atoning work of Christ. The waters of baptism and communion’s bread and cup preach the gospel. These wonderful symbols must never be allowed to drift to the edges of church life. When people attend the services of Berachah they ought to be able to hear that Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and the world’s Savior, has paid the penalty for sin and offers peace with God. This message is the world’s only hope.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that sends its people out into their homes and neighborhoods alive with gospel witness. We must be constantly looking for ways to penetrate our community with the sin-forgiving, joy-giving, hope-inspiring good news that is found through faith in Christ.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that gathers on the Lord’s Day to worship with authentic zeal for God. I want our assembly life to be such that when unbelievers are sitting among us they will declare that God is certainly among us (1 Cor. 14:25). A worship service where God is glorified by the overflow of the heart in glad response to His infinite worth is precious indeed.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that is filled with vibrant body life where brothers and sisters in Christ build up one another in the faith. “How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” I want our church family to delight in our shared life in Christ by “one-anothering” in the work of the gospel, in suffering, and in works of mercy.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that saturates its servant life with prayer. A church that is filled with believers who have an active prayer life and prays in all its meetings is a mighty force in spiritual warfare.

My dream for Berachah sees it as a church that carries the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:15). O that we might be a church filled with beautiful feet. Wouldn’t you

like to see a steady stream of missionaries going out from Berachah to every tribe, tongue, and nation to plant churches in the spiritually barren wasteland of a lost world?

When Worldviews Collide (February 8, 2004)

Upon returning from Frankfurt, Germany, where I taught a seminar on biblical peacemaking to Christian airline personnel, I encountered a less than peaceful public debate. A host of angry educators, science teachers, journalists, and even a former president of the United States were excoriating State School Superintendent Kathy Cox. What had she done to draw the withering fire of the educational and journalistic establishment? Cox had the temerity to suggest that the word “evolution” should be removed from the state school biology curriculum because it is “a buzzword that causes a lot of negative reaction.” You would have thought that she was calling for the end to motherhood. But on second thought, that seems to be subject to revision as well (a.k.a. “gay unions”). The usual ridicule and specious arguments were launched. The heavy artillery of personal attacks (“The only thing that needs to be deleted is Cox.”), dogmatic assertions regarding evolution (“Evolution is real, it is observable and can be documented.”), and tirades against Christian fundamentalists (“who know very little science and who are capable of arguing quite unscrupulously”) have pounded away at not only the Superintendent but all who dared challenge the sacred cow of evolution.

I find the arguments used to defend the Darwinist/evolutionist world view quite revealing. For example, one hears the assertion that when evolution is opposed this is tantamount to opposing the study of genetics or that the earth is round. This is a common tactic used by evolutionists. But it is all smoke and mirrors. The assumption is that the theory of evolution (chance through time) is in the same league as “scientific cloud chamber experiments that are observable in the present and are repeatable.” I highly recommend Jonathan Sarfati’s book, Refuting Evolution. Sarfati points out how some scientists define science in a self-serving and essentially prejudiced way (Remember the axiom that he who defines the terms wins the argument.). This is a classic example of begging the question. In other words, evolutionists take for granted the very thing being argued.

Another slight of hand frequently used, in an attempt to shame creationists and “send them running into their churches where they belong,” is the science versus faith argument. The magic trick goes something like this. Science is rational and is based on hard facts whereas creationism or intelligent design is a “belief born of faith rather than science.” To reject evolution is to become a member of the flat-earth society. An army of scientists, educators, and scientific organizations are invoked as the final authorities on the matter. This intimidating magic is often effective in cowing the “religious know-nothings.” But it is based on a deception. The evolutionist is working on the premise of naturalism, the assumption “that things made themselves, that no divine intervention has happened, and that God has not revealed to us knowledge about the past” (Sarfati, p. 16). Facts have to be interpreted. Evolution requires a faith commitment to its premises, i.e., “that common ancestors for the animal phyla once lived on the earth, even though those ancestors can’t be found.” But in spite of this Darwinists continue to argue that they don’t have faith, only creationists have faith commitments.

What is really happening in all this is a massive power play by the scientific establishment and a supportive media to remain in control of the educational system. The world view of secular humanism marches blindly on using the very methods of intolerance and censorship that it accuses the Christian world view of practicing. This is indeed a clash of world views with each having its underlying faith commitments.

“The Passion of the Christ” - Viewer Discretion Advised (February 22, 2004)

A movie about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is like trying to whistle Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Something will be missing. The message exceeds the media’s ability to capture the critical theological issues that make up the greatest story ever told. Is this to say that no one should attempt to portray Christ’s death on the cross in cinematic form? No, but viewer discretion is advised. Movies can have an enormous emotional impact and precipitate life-altering decisions. However, emotions must be driven by truth. Millions will be moved deeply as they witness a reenactment of the pathos of the most important death in human history. If we are to weep, we must do so because we understand what was really happening at Golgotha. It will not be enough to become emotionally devastated and not be driven to worship the Son of God. It is frighteningly possible to cry and grieve because of what was done to Jesus and not experience the heart and life changes that can come only through Jesus Christ (Joel 2:13; John 3:16; 14:6).

The meaning of Christ’s death is explained accurately in the Bible. This is our only trustworthy source of documentation regarding the meaning of the cross of Christ. One writer in his review of “The Passion of the Christ” refers to the Bible as being a “problematic source” and that “Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events.” There is no evidence for this assertion. It is a failure to understand the internal harmony of the Gospel accounts. Why not take the Bible’s own claims for itself? The Gospels are Scripture “inspired by God” (Lk. 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:16). The Holy Spirit of God has told us in the Bible what happened to Christ and why it happened.

Another factor to be considered when viewing any visual representation of Christ is that any picture of Jesus or movie about Him has the potential for contributing to our worship of a false Christ. The second commandment forbids the making of images of God (Ex. 20:4-6). Love expressed for God must come out of right thoughts about God. If we imagine Jesus to be someone other than who He is, we are to that same extent limiting and misunderstanding Him. We are to worship a Christ who was crucified, but who is now risen and glorified and coming again (Acts 1:11). Jesus is no longer on the cross. He is not sacrificed again for sins. Redemption is finished. We are not to imagine a Savior who is a victim but One who has provided the final and complete sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 10:12).

A writhing, suffering Christ beaten, battered, and bleeding on that splintered wooden cross tells us more than can be seen with the physical eye. It is for this reason that the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion are rather subdued in their description of the Jesus’ physical death. The details of His torture are not accentuated. Instead, our attention in the New Testament is drawn to the horror of the fact that the judgment of God fell upon Jesus as He was dying for our sins (Mk. 15:33; Isa. 53:4-6). He was enduring the abandonment of the Father in that dark night of His soul so that He might accomplish what He came into this world to do. When Jesus said, “It is

finished,” He was declaring that the full penalty for sin had been paid (Mk. 15:34-37). We cannot atone for our own sins. The Christ of the passion is the only one who was qualified to endure, as our substitute, the howling winds of God’s wrath toward sin (Rom. 3:25; 2 Cor. 5:21). He, the God-Man, opened a new and living way to God that in life and in death we might dance the dance of eternal joy of the forgiveness of sin and eternal fellowship with the Lamb who was slain.

Were You There? (March 14, 2004)

The movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” mirrors contemporary responses to the crucifixion of Christ. The Gospel writers purposely call attention to the numerous witnesses of Jesus’ death. In so doing we have a microcosm (a little world) of the totality of possible responses to the Son of God. It has been said, “Jesus crucified is the touchstone revealing what the world is.”

There were no passionless observers of the crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospel accounts of the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life tell us much about ourselves. The bewildered disciples could not accept the necessity of the cross even though they believed in Christ. There are Christians like this. They are reluctant to put sacrifice before personal peace and comfort. Self-denial is not optional for those who confess Christ (Matt. 16:24). Do we as followers of Jesus Christ understand the significance of the cross of Christ in our own life? Judas, the disillusioned betrayer of Jesus was disappointed in Him. The fading dream of an immediate earthly kingdom and the overthrow of Rome was enough to drive Judas to treachery. Today there are those who live close to the light of God’s truth but don’t know God. Are you one of those who want to use Jesus for your own selfish ambitions (e.g., attempts to make Jesus a political tool). There are those who become disillusioned with Jesus because of unbiblical expectations. The members of the Sanhedrin were envious of Jesus and poisoned by their anger. They sought to eliminate the one who claimed to be Israel’s Messiah. The Christ remains a stumbling block to the Jews and others like them who refuse to accept His claims. Those who reject the deity of Jesus Christ and declare that He was a bogus Messiah are allies with the Sanhedrin. Peter denied his Lord. His chest beating courage turned to cowardice. We who speak of our loyalty to Christ have in a moment of raw self-interest denied our relationship to Him. When we choose a course of action that is contrary to God’s Word (e.g., lying, stealing, divorce, refusal to forgive, failure to witness), we can hear the rooster crow.

The Roman soldiers treated Jesus with utter contempt and vicious brutality. To them He was just a plaything, someone to taunt and mock. One of the tragedies of unbelief is people who are calloused and totally insensitive to the true identity of Christ. There are those whose conscience has been silenced and their soul has been limited to the enjoyment of the immediate. Drugs, sensual living, alcohol, and lust have made them cynically hard toward their only hope, the Savior of the world. Pontius Pilot was a pragmatic, insecure, superstitious, morally weak soldier politician. He is a reminder that battlefield courage does not guarantee moral courage. To Pilate Jesus was considered to be innocent of any charges, but yet expendable. He has heirs in those who allow their own position, comforts, and plans to keep them from believing in Jesus. Herod Antipas was curious about Jesus. He saw the miracle worker of Galilee as having potential entertainment value. There are those who are merely amused by the passion of the Christ. Unbelief treats Jesus as inconsequential.

The weeping women of Jerusalem were sympathetic and grief stricken. They carried their memories of Jesus' miracles and teaching close to their heart. But their tears were not flowing from repentant hearts. Sentimentality and sorrow are not enough. One can sit in a movie theater and weep over the suffering of an actor playing the part of Jesus, but never experience the new birth in Christ. One criminal who was crucified with Jesus was sarcastic and verbally abusive. All he was interested in was self-preservation and relief from pain, having nothing but contempt for, in his view, the ineffective ways of Jesus. The other criminal admitted his guilt. He confessed that he deserved the terrible death by crucifixion. The fear of death and God's judgment made him realize he was unprepared to fall into the hands of the living God. To some people Jesus is useless unless He can bail them out of some immediate problem. They choose to die in their sins. To others Jesus is one in whom they place their trust. No matter how great their sin, through forgiveness they can join Jesus in the paradise of heaven.

The cosmic signs and the way Jesus conducted Himself in the face of taunts and accusations impressed the centurion. All this caused him to break out in praise and recognition of the righteousness of the Christ. The confession of the centurion was a cry that echoes down the halls of eternity that the price has been paid for the redemption of sinners by the Son of God. The centurion may very well have said more than he knew, but what he said was true. And finally, there were the crowds. They were grief stricken and conflicted. A few hours earlier they had demanded Jesus' crucifixion. He had not met their expectations for a messiah. But in the shadows of the cross they weren't so sure about their previous judgments. Had they made a mistake about the One who said He was the King of the Jews? What had they done? Perhaps many of them were present when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and were pierced to the heart. They cried, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

The words of the old spiritual come to mind. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble!" Where were you? You and I are among those who were there. Has this caused you to tremble and worship the Son of God who died on that tree?

Homosexuality, Right or Wrong? Part 1 (March 21, 2004)

In a recent interview a leading church cleric said that he did not consider homosexuality a sin. He then added that, "The Scripture never directly addresses the question of homosexuality." Combine this with courts that seem unwilling to halt "gay marriages," and you have evidence of a major shift in the culture's view toward homosexuality. Historically, homosexuality has been considered sinful and criminal. That has changed. In order to navigate through the maze of issues involved in this subject, there are certain moral realities, and their implications, that need to be understood. These can be pursued through a series of questions.

What is the source of human sexuality and what is its purpose? Human sexuality is a gift from God, designed by the Creator to express love in marriage and to serve as the means of procreation. God pronounced male and female sexuality as good (i.e., it conforms to the will and purpose of God, Gen. 1:31). Robertson McQuilkin gives a helpful summary, "God ordained exclusive, permanent, monogamous marriage as the only way to achieve the full unity of two human beings, to provide children and home, and to reflect God's own relationship to humankind." Human sexuality does not stand alone outside of marriage for the mere purpose of

self-gratification. It is designed to bring glory to God (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 11:36). Male and female were created for one another (Gen. 2:18-24; 1 Cor. 11:11, 12). No bisexual or unisexual ideal existed in God's creation of man and woman. One may, of course, reject the Christian view of human sexuality. Most likely, the paradigm of evolution would be advocated as the explanation for sexual differences. Richard Dawkins, an atheist and an evolutionist, admits that, "There are many theories of why sex exists, and none of them is knock-down convincing." I like God's word on the matter of human sexuality. "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27).

Has anything happened to adversely affect human sexuality? Yes. Human sexuality has been corrupted by man's rebellion against God (Gen. 3:1-24). Adam and Eve became alienated from God as a result of their sin. The God who had given them richly all things to enjoy suddenly became their enemy. Adam and Eve also became alienated from one another. Human sexuality became subject to futility (Rom. 8:20). The human heart became an idol factory. Sex became something to be pursued for self-indulgence. The sinful heart of man bends, twists, perverts, distorts and demeans human sexuality by immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing. Because of the fall of humanity, the desires of the human heart seek to find fulfillment in oneself rather than in the Creator.

Is homosexuality a normal expression of human sexuality? No, it is not. Homosexual desires and activity are a result of the fallen condition of the human race and its rebellion against God. All sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are condemned in Scripture (Heb. 13:4). There is no uncertainty about the immoral nature of homosexuality when the biblical texts are examined. Homosexuality was one of the moral evils that characterized the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:5, 7). Jude 7 clearly identifies the sin of Sodom. It was not merely a violation of the hospitality code of that day. While it is true that homosexual rape is directly condemned, the wider context of Scripture makes it clear that it was wrong because it was intended rape and homosexual in nature. God prohibited homosexual intercourse of every kind in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 18:22, 24, 30; 20:13). In the New Testament three major passages may be cited.

Does the silence of Jesus on the subject of homosexuality argue for His acceptance of homosexuality? No, it does not. There are many things on which Jesus did not teach directly (bestiality, prostitution, incest, rape, idolatry, racism, etc.). One cannot base a conclusion on an argument from silence. The principles that Jesus taught are to serve as the basis for all moral matters. Jesus made it absolutely clear that "permanent heterosexual monogamy was the original and continuing will of God as the only legitimate context for sexual relationships" (Robertson McQuilkin).

Is there a difference between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior? The Scriptures equally condemn homosexual desire and homosexual acts. Though certain people struggle with homosexual temptations more than others, that is not the same as saying that one must yield to such temptation (1 Cor. 6:18; Heb. 13:4). Homosexual orientation (i.e., preferences and desires) is a result of the fall of humanity into a sinful condition. Its only remedy is the redemptive, life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because one has homosexual interests and desires does not validate the pursuit of their fulfillment. We do not say that since one has a sexual

orientation toward children (or lying, stealing, or greed) that such a preference should be indulged.

Is homosexuality a sin that can be forgiven? It most certainly is. The Scriptures do not single out homosexuality for special disapproval. Forgiveness is possible. Homosexuality comes from the same heart which breeds greed, strife, disobedience to parents, and gossip (Rom. 1:29-32). It, therefore, can be forgiven because of the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Through the washing of regeneration, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and the justifying work of God we can experience freedom from the penalty and power of sin. New desires, new patterns of thought and behavior, and our acceptance by God through Christ's imputed righteousness offer hope for all sinners. Repentance and massive amounts of God's grace pave the road to change for the glory of God.

Does not the Bible condemn only the lust of a heterosexual for another of the same sex? No, it does not. Those who use this argument are attempting to unloose the authority of the Bible. Some claim that "nowhere in Scripture is there a clear condemnation of a of a loving relationship between two gay persons." The apostle Paul lived in a society filled with every kind of homosexual conduct. He was aware of the Greek "homosexual ideal of loving fidelity." All homosexual conduct is sinful and is a perversion of God's righteous, moral order. The Bible is very clear that homosexuality, not just some kinds of homosexuality, is a violation, both physically and morally, of the natural order.

The Empty Tomb, The Evidence (April 11, 2004)

Only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder. But how important is the resurrection to Christianity? Consider the following critical issues involved in the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Being an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ was an essential qualification of an apostle (Acts 1:21, 22). The main subject of apostolic preaching was the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:24ff.). The early Christians witnessed to the truth of the resurrection as a result of prayer and the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31-33). Belief in the resurrection is essential to Christian salvation (Rom. 10:9-10). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the two fundamentals in the Christian gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-4). It is a foundation stone of Christianity (1 Cor. 15:17-18).

Critics of Christianity have concocted theories in an attempt to explain away the resurrection of Christ. It has been said that "If a skeptic wished to destroy Christianity, let him prove that Christ never rose from the dead. When that is done, he has destroyed Christianity. His work is done." If the foundation is undermined, then the entire structure collapses. Then we who confess Christ are of all people the most miserable. What are some of these theories raised against the resurrection of Christ? One is called the swoon theory. This view teaches that Christ never actually died on the cross, but only swooned. He was still alive when placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, but after several hours he revived in the cool air of the tomb, arose and departed. Then there is the theft theory. The claim is made that the disciples of Jesus stole the body, hoodwinked the Roman guard and left the grave clothes to further the deception. The hallucination theory says that all of Christ's post-resurrection appearances were really only supposed appearances. What really happened was this: people had subjective visions and really didn't see the resurrected Christ. Others have proposed what is known as the wrong tomb theory. This view says that the

women, and subsequently everyone else, went to the wrong tomb (The ultimate we-took-the-wrong-turn scenario).

The apostle John's testimony is that the empty tomb is proof that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. What made John believe (Jn. 20:1-10, 30-31)? *Exhibit A* – Jesus really died (Jn. 19:30-42). The crucifixion demands it, and the burial is proof of it. *Exhibit B* – The tomb. The visit of Mary Magdalene and the removal of the stone both witness to a resurrection (“If Jesus hadn't actually been entombed in Joseph's grave, records of such a visit would not appear in the Gospel narratives.” Josh McDowell). *Exhibit C* – Peter and John's visit (Jn. 20:3-8). What did the disciples see? They saw the cloths “lying” there and the head napkin was in a place by itself. *Exhibit D* – The witness of the Old Testament (Jn. 20:9-10). Passages such as Isaiah 53:10-12 and Psalm 16:10 witness to the resurrection of Israel's Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was no chance happening. It was planned from eternity past, prophesied in the Old Testament, and prophesied by Jesus Christ (Matt. 12:39).

What have you done about the evidence of the empty tomb? John has told us how he came to personal faith in the resurrection by considering the evidence found in the tomb. Easter Sunday stands as witness to the most important story ever told. That story did not end with the death of Christ on the cross. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead calls those who are bound in their own grave clothes to come forth from their tombs to life in the Victor over death. There is no other way to enter God's heaven than through the resurrected Christ.

Homosexuality, Right or Wrong? Part 2 (April 18, 2004)

Are not certain people born constitutionally homosexual? The answer is no if by this one means that homosexuality is a genetically determined condition and does not involve any choice. The Bible holds homosexuals responsible, as it does adulterers, fornicators, idolaters, thieves, drunkards, etc., for their behavior. There is no scientific evidence that a person is born a homosexual (e.g., size of the hypothalamus gland, “Observed differences are influenced by factors not observed or tested for.” Feinberg). The inward (inversion) conditions and not simply outward actions are equally addressed in Scripture. All human beings have a depraved, fleshly nature (Rom. 7:23). It bears fruit unto death (Rom. 7:5). The desires of the flesh and of the mind can produce all kinds of moral perversions. One may as well speak of a constitutionally adulterous condition (e.g., “People may be adulterous all their lives and never choose to engage in adulterous activity”), as to insist on the validity of constitutional homosexuality. This does not deny that there are influences in the development of homosexuality. But the fact remains that it is an expression of an idolatrous heart.

Should homosexuality (sodomy laws) be restricted by law? Yes, if society can be persuaded to do so. The Christian has a responsibility to impact legislation and the political sphere with his life, judgments, and vote. Actually, most civil law seeks to legislate morals (e.g., slavery, civil rights, sexual harassment). “Because every law springs from a system of values and beliefs, every law is an instance of legislating morality. Further, because a nation's laws always exercise a pedagogical or teaching influence, law inescapably exerts a shaping effect over beliefs, character, and actions of the nation's citizens, whether for good or ill. Those who seek to separate morality from law, therefore, are in pursuit both of the impossible and the destructive.

The question before us is never whether or not to legislate morality, but which moral system ought to be made legally binding” (Michael Bauman).

Should so-called gay marriage be legalized? Absolutely not. What we are seeing take place in our day is a cultural sea change driven by the homosexual rights movement and a confused society. It is claimed that opposition to gay marriage is intolerance and discrimination. The opposite is true. Those advocating same-sex marriage are intolerant of those who refuse to approve of it. What is taking place is a clash between two different world-views each with its own moral code. The Courts are anything but neutral when they found their conclusions on “personal subjective relativism and personal autonomy” (Francis J. Beckwith), which is what is taking place. The attempt to redefine marriage is a form of social suicide opening the door for polygamy and a host of other destructive vices.

Are those who oppose homosexuality and gay marriage guilty of hate? The truth is that those who support homosexuality and gay marriage are guilty of hating God’s moral law. The Bible says, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness...” (Isa. 5:20). One of the tactics of the homosexual rights movement is to take the vocabulary of truth and twist it to support a falsehood. For example, love has been used as the defense of the right of homosexuals who wish to be married (e.g., “If two people love each other, it is wrong to deny them the rites of matrimony”). But love “does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). To love God is to hate sin and be grieved over the violence that evil does to people.

Homosexuality, Right or Wrong? Part 3 (April 25, 2004)

Is AIDS God’s judgment upon homosexuals? The acquired immune deficiency syndrome is a global epidemic. Millions have died from it and millions more have been infected. Some see AIDS as a personal curse directed by God at homosexuals (God’s punishment for homosexual behavior). However, if this is so, then what about lesbians who are under less of a risk? What about the innocent, babies, recipients of blood transfusion, wives of unfaithful husbands; are these under the personal curse of God? Others, who vehemently reject the idea that AIDS is the judgment of God, say that AIDS is simply a disease like measles or cancer and has nothing to do with morality. But even this level of thinking fails to understand that all disease is a consequence of the fall of Adam. There is no such thing as a disease that is simply a disease.

AIDS is best understood as a part of God’s judgment on society. Our society encourages behavior that leads to the spread of AIDS. There is a connection between human social and physical ills and the moral plight of man. Perversion in life is the consequence of perversion in faith (Rom. 1:18ff.). It has been said that “If God doesn’t exist everything is possible.” Sexual perversions such as homosexuality are a result of human rebellion against God’s revelation of Himself and His moral order. To put it another way, moral depravity is the result of divine judgment. God has actively turned sinners over to the things they wished to do. So then, our entire society is under judgment. This has been true since the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3). Civilization has already contracted a malignant and fatal cancer. AIDS is just one manifestation of the moral plight of man.

How should the Christian respond to homosexuals and homosexuality? At the outset we can be sure that certain attitudes are unacceptable to those who name the name of Christ. Self-righteousness (“my sin is not as bad as their sin”), pride, unkindness, and hatred contradict the Christian’s call to love and mercy. Unnecessary barriers to reaching homosexuals for Christ should not be built (e.g., cruel jokes, hostility, ridicule). As Christ’s people we must stand firm in the biblical teaching regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality. It takes its place among a host of other sins, all for which Jesus suffered on the cross. Homosexuality is an acute form of evil and is “among the greater evils that can be committed” (O. Palmer Robertson). The most loving thing that can be done for homosexuals is to offer them the hope-filled gospel of Jesus Christ that calls for repentance and faith in Christ. This must be accompanied by expressions of compassion (e.g., making comfortable those who are dying, finding a vaccine, showing hospitality through Christian hospices for AIDS victims and research for relief and cure). Families and the church must instruct their young people in Christ-centered sex education. Homosexuals should be welcomed into a love-saturated, and truth-filled community of Christians who are to never forget that they are blind beggars telling other blind beggars where they can find bread.

A Box of Chocolates (May 2, 2004)

While sitting on a bench in Savannah, Georgia, Forest Gump uttered those now famous words, a presumed bit of wisdom from his mother, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You don’t know what you are going to get.” There is a sense in which this is true. We don’t know the future and there are some surprises waiting on you. “Therefore,” said Jesus, “do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). We don’t know what we are going to get in life. But we can be sure of one thing. A significant part of life is a relatively short life span and suffering to go with it. It was this reality that prompted the psalmist to say, “Surely every man walks about as a phantom; Surely they make an uproar for nothing; He amasses riches and does not know who will gather them” (Psa. 39:6). What is the meaning of life? That is the question that lies behind the life-is-like-a-box-of-chocolates philosophy. Religious systems and humanistic philosophies abound in an attempt to explain the purpose of life. But they all fall apart on the shoals of hard questions. Where can we find the key to unlock the meaning of life? Does life have any purpose? Are we merely being tossed about by a whimsical chance?

There is a book in the Bible that explores the answers that men give and leads us to the answers God gives. In what has been called “the Bible’s Black Sheep,” the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers us a wise view of life. If we try to squeeze the meaning of life out the parts of life, then it is all “vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccle. 1:3). But Solomon has not written a manual on how to be miserable. There are four keys to unlocking the most misunderstood book of the Bible. Firstly, life is paradoxical in nature. It has its dark side and bright side (4:4; 9:1). But through it all God is in control (3:1-8). Secondly, life is a puzzle that is to be lived by faith. By faith (“the assurance and conviction that what God has said it true and that it is to be acted upon”) we know there is a purpose in life, but we can’t see it fully. Thirdly, life without God has no meaning. Happiness cannot be found by seeking happiness. And, finally, life is to be lived by fearing God and enjoying life (12:13).

The writer of Ecclesiastes guides the reader down the roads of life, looking for clues that tie everything together. We must not miss this self-conscious search for the one idea that will make

sense of everything. God alone holds the key to the meaning of life. The universe and life do make sense. We can know that, but we don't know how everything fits together. Where does this bring us? We come full circle back to God. It is faith in God by which we are to navigate our way through life "under the sun." One writer has put it succinctly, "Solomon doesn't rise to the pinnacle of faith merely at the end of the book. That faith is running all the way through Ecclesiastes. It's faith that God is wise and that He has a plan, though it's futile trying to figure it all out. It's faith that God is good" (Dr. Bruce Waltke). Though we live in a world that has been subjected to futility, we can have the assurance "that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28).

Where are you searching for happiness in life? Work, pleasure, relationships, education, success, and wealth are all dead-end streets. There are futile, hopeless, and barren worldviews, like so many shop owners in a crowded bazaar, that claim to have the answer to the riddle of life. Listen to some of them. Life is an illusion. Life is meaningless. Life is the result of chance through time. Life is suppressing one's desires. Life is seeing oneself as a god. Life is intellectual enlightenment. Life is the freedom to maximize pleasure. Life is whatever works. But God has spoken. He has told us that life is His gift to us. Life is knowing God. We are to live it His way. Listen to the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." Now that's better than a box of chocolates.

The Mothers in My Life (May 9, 2004)

Tucked away in a list of saints who played a significant role in the life of the church is an intriguing reference to an additional mother in Paul's life. In Romans 16:13 he says, "Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine." Within the family of faith God gives us fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. Jesus says this in Mark 10:30 where He tells His disciples that faithful service for His sake will be rewarded through spiritual ties with fellow believers. Paul's own mother was the mother of Rufus. By speaking of her as his mother he was confessing the blessing of having "mothers" in the faith.

Sometimes these additional mothers are one's own relatives. That's a double blessing. That was God's gift to me. My grandmother was born in 1899 and died on March 7, 1979. Her early years were filled with sorrows and struggles in the mountains of northern Alabama and northwest Georgia. Her mother died in childbirth, which necessitated living with relatives and friends of the family. I came into my grandmother's life in 1941. She and my grandfather, Howard and Elizabeth Morris (their names were a forecast of my own marriage and ministry), made a great impact on my life. Preacher Morris, as many affectionately called him, was well liked and known for his soul stirring preaching. My dear grandmother considered it part of her responsibility to keep him in the pulpit. But that was not her only commitment. It was she who gave herself consistently and sacrificially to the spiritual wellbeing of her grandsons. She took my brother, Tim, and me for walks in the woods telling us about God who created all things. She read us stories of missionaries (as well as Grimm's Fairy Tales). Out of her meager income, as a clerk at Davison's Department Store, she gave me a weekly allowance. She always stressed the importance of properly handling money and giving faithfully to the church. She encouraged us to read by bringing books home from the public library. The smile of God's providence placed my mother, my brother and me in the home of my grandparents during the war years of 1942-1945 and during our teen years in the 1950's. My grandmother's Scofield Reference Bible drew my

attention to the Bible as a book that was not only to be read but also studied. She was God's instrument of grace in bringing me to conversion in Christ in March of 1956. I will always be thankful for a godly grandmother whose love and encouragement set me out on my journey to the gates of heaven.

My Aunt Betty has been another mother in the faith. She was born in 1921, the older sister of my mother. After marrying Jimmy Abercrombie they settled down to life out in the country (at least it was in those days) on Childress Drive in Southwest Atlanta. Aunt Betty was a faithful servant of God. She taught Sunday School, played the piano, wrote poetry, and was well organized. My overnight stays in her home were unforgettable. There would be conversations about Christian things, nice big country breakfasts (thanks to the appetite of my uncle) and gathering eggs from the chicken house. She loved nature and would be delighted about my discoveries in the woods and creeks. Aunt Betty provided an atmosphere of stability, order, and devotion to God. I needed those things in a very special way.

Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, you can play a key role in the shaping of young lives. Your walk with God is a call to a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). Where would I be if I had not been given the fragrance of faith not only in the memories of these lives, but with words and deeds that live with me to this day. A mother has no higher calling than displaying the beauty of a sincere faith.

Torture in Time and Eternity (May 16, 2004)

Torture and its usefulness in a battlefield arena is an old weapon. If we define it as the use of severe pain to gain a confession, to punish the enemy, or to provide a perverted form of entertainment, then it certainly has a storied history. The recent photos from the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad have proved to be a great embarrassment to a nation trying to transplant an enlightened democracy in the Middle East. The Iraqi war and our attempt at nation building are serving as a kind of mirror of American culture. On the one hand we see our soldiers demonstrating courage and kindness, going out of their way, at times with personal risk, to avoid killing innocent civilians. But then we view images of our troops inflicting degrading and painful treatment on Arab prisoners. And we are told that even worse Kodak moments are yet to be revealed. We Americans pride ourselves in being a moral and civil society, relatively speaking of course, a model for other nations. But does this fit reality? To some extent we do offer the world a better way. We don't have violent coup d'etats. Bribery is not accepted as a way of doing things, as it is in many countries. We honor law above the tyranny of popular opinion (at least in word if not in deed). We value freedom, diversity, and integrity. We respond with compassion and aid to those nations suffering from natural disasters. Torture for the purpose of entertainment is out of place as a weapon in our arsenal against terrorism.

Israel of the Old Testament was surrounded by cruel and ruthless nations who used the shock and awe of torture to intimidate, subdue, and destroy their foes. It was the prophet Habakkuk who was stunned by God's plan to raise up the Chaldeans (ancient Iraq) to chasten His covenant people. "That fierce and impetuous people," known for their violent ways, would descend upon Jewish men, women, and children without regard for life or limb. It would be ugly. Habakkuk could not understand how God could use wicked, idolatrous Babylon to judge Israel. God assured Habakkuk the prophet that His wrath would guarantee the future doom of that evil

empire that sought to “build a city with bloodshed.” In the meantime, Habakkuk was to live by his faith (Hab. 2:4). This is a necessary reminder for all of God’s people. The future does not belong to terrorists who behead innocent people. Their judgment is coming, and it won’t be dark-haired beauties in a fictional paradise.

God in His infinite wisdom permits His children to be tortured. A life of faith does not insulate the righteous from pain and suffering. The hall of faith in Hebrews 11 makes it quite clear that those who put their trust in God can endure triumphantly in the worst of circumstances (Heb. 11:35). In the words of John Piper, “God does not always turn the hearts of torturers away from their torture of His people, though He could (e.g., Gen. 20:6, Abimelech).” God-loving, Christ-exalting believers may be called upon to endure some horrific things in the service of the King (Heb. 11:37). A weak, self-pampering church in America tries to explain away such theological realities through a “health and wealth” gospel and feel-good self-esteemism. But the history of the church shows us that God’s sovereign will may mean torture and death. James fell into the hands of Herod for beheading while Peter was released for further ministry (Acts 12:1-19). John the Baptist’s head on a platter reminds us of the cost of discipleship (Mk. 6:21-29). Martyrs for the kingdom never die a meaningless death.

Torture has a tale that is yet untold. One day Babylon (a.k.a. the present world system) will be made to drink of the wine of God’s wrath (Rev. 14:6-13). Torment and torture await those who have refused to love and worship the Lord Jesus Christ. He will return to this earth and “from His mouth comes a sharp sword so that with it He may smite the nations” (Rev. 19:15). My friend if you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, now is the time. The future is not promising for those who live and die without the eternal life God offers. An eternity of unimaginable suffering and unending separation from the goodness of God is the ultimate torture.

The Passing of a President (June 13, 2004)

A flag-draped coffin carried on a caisson has called a nation to stop and mourn the death of a president. A former president of the United States of America has died. Ronald Wilson Reagan’s death at the age of 93 has dominated the news in the last week. His political allies and enemies alike have been forced to pause in the midst of a heated presidential campaign to pay their respects. The love and admiration for the 40th president has been effusive. Those who were and continue to be his political adversaries have been pushed to the edge of the mourning crowds, some damning him by faint praise and others boasting of not shedding a tear.

When a well-known person from our era dies, it seems to gather everyone up into a strange mix of nostalgia, sentiment, and grief. The flags, bands, horses, uniformed service men and women, and the pageantry of a state funeral stir up feelings of patriotism. The longings of the populace for better times lie just beneath the surface of remembrance. But all this has happened before. We are not the first people to feel anxious and disconsolate in troubled times. Though not everyone, by any means, was supportive of President Reagan’s political agenda, his administration did create a sense of renewed hope for the fulfillment of the “American dream.”

Over twenty-seven hundred years ago, the nation of Israel lost a king who had brought stability and hope in uncertain times. King Uzziah had reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah for 52

years, having died of leprosy in 739 B. C. Uzziah's death marked the end of an era. Despite a disappointing spiritual decline in his later years, Uzziah had been a great and mighty king ("He did right in the sight of the Lord" 2 Kgs. 15:3). He took his place in the Davidic dynasty as one more shattered dream. Israel longed for a king who would bring justice, mercy, prosperity, and a glorious rule for the world to enjoy (Psa. 72). But Uzziah died as do all human kings and with him was buried another disappointment.

It was not a coincidence that in the year that King Uzziah died that Isaiah was commissioned for his prophetic ministry. Difficult times were ahead. But a vision of God inaugurated Isaiah's calling as the clouds of despair gathered over Israel's future. He "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted with the train of His robe filling the temple" (Isa. 6:1). What was the meaning of this extraordinary commission for a mere man like Isaiah? For one thing it was a necessary reminder that though Judah's king has fallen, there is a King who never falls. Judah's kings may sin and die, but there is one King who doesn't. God gave Isaiah a vision of the One who really counted. Human kings and presidents are not our final hope. They come and go, but only one King rules supreme and everlastingly. But what is it about "the Lord sitting on a throne in His heavenly temple" that is highlighted? Listen to the King's honor guard. "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). The antiphonal choir of celestial celebrants was singing of the majesty and glory of God. The regal splendor of the King of the universe causes the pomp and circumstance of man's greatest governments to pale into absolute insignificance. God's people must never forget that there is no hope apart from Him. He is not like great leaders of men and heads of state who make stirring promises, and maybe even make a modest difference for good in their time. It is the Lord of heaven alone who can put sinful human beings and their fallen world back together. Here is the answer to every dream of a better future. The rebel kingdom of man must see itself as a race of sinners ("Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). God has sent His King and He was rejected. By His death on a cross came His coronation. He defeated sin and death that He might reign forevermore.

The call of God is for man the sinner to mourn over his sin and lay down his weapons of unbelief. Man cannot build a lasting city without God. Peace, justice, and mercy are found only in the eternal Son of God. When He comes to this earth again, He will not be riding on a donkey or an elephant. The Faithful and True King of kings and Lord of lords will bring a kingdom that will not pass away.

Fatherhood Without Regrets (June 20, 2004)

I remember it well. He was a father of five boys and grandfather of ten. He was lying in a hospital bed recovering from an intestinal operation. His wife was there at his bedside. He was hoping to go home in just a few days. At the end of my visit, the seventy-seven-year-old World War II veteran lamented that he had not been a very good father. Those were some of his last words. He died a few days later.

Is it possible to come to the end of one's life and not have regrets? In one sense, I guess it is not. No father, except our heavenly Father, is perfect. But is there some way we as fathers can live our short lives without fathering regrets? Without regret that we did not spend more time with our children, that we didn't leave them the instruction and example they really needed? When

that daughter walked down the aisle to pursue her life with her new husband, did we do our best to prepare her the challenges she would face? When that son drives away to college to seek his goals in life, was he ready? When the sun sets on our few years on this earth, will our memories be filled with the sorrows of what might have been?

God wants us fathers to care for our children in such a way that it can be said, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” When God was preparing the nation of Israel for their life in the land of promise, careful instructions were given to guide their home life. Moses spoke to the heads of the homes, “so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments” (Deut. 6:2). Fatherhood without regrets calls us to seek to know God as the most fundamental pursuit of life. Loving God with all our heart defines our meaning in life. The supreme commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and might. God’s unique nature should inspire that love. “The Lord is one.” He is the only God we should love. There are no others, not really. The Canaanites had their fertility gods (Deut. 6:14). But they were counterfeits. Undoubtedly, they had their appeal. How else can you explain Israel’s fatal attraction to the lewd and immoral features of Canaanite religion? But to love other gods is to pursue nothing. They do not exist. Our sinful hearts deceive us and cause us to wrap our affections around our own self-seeking desires. Fathers, does God have rivals in your life? Is it money, sports, controls, success, or job? God’s loving initiative toward Israel was to have inspired Israel’s love for Him. His promises to us are rich with the reality of God’s perfections. Our God is unique and dependable and should receive the highest devotion. It is certainly right that, “such a unique, generous and dependable God deserves our total, not partial or divided allegiance.” The commitment to fatherhood involves love with all our heart. Our thoughts, decisions, conscience and emotions are to be set fully upon God. From the very core of our being, we should long for God (Psa. 42:1). That is soul love. With every ounce of our physical strength, we are to work at being God-pleasers.

Fathers, is it your ambition to live with absolute loyalty to God? Do your children know that you love Him with all that you are and with all that you have? If you do love God, then there will be some immediate measurable ways this can be seen. Your loving devotion to God will be shared in the home (Deut. 6:6-9). The love that we show to our wives will make a life-long impression on our sons and daughters. Fathers, are you loving your spouse in word and deed? We show love for God by the way we show love for our wives. We will be deeply concerned about our children. Their spiritual welfare will be uppermost in our goals in life. Our communities will know about our loving devotion to God. Our “doorposts and gates” will give proof that lovers of God live in the neighborhood. What a legacy to leave to your children, fathers. Every son and daughter should have memories of a father who made it unmistakably clear to his neighbors and family that he was kind, generous, helpful, friendly, and honest.

And, finally, loving devotion to God will enable us as fathers to deal with the question, “What if your father didn’t show his love for you?” God’s love for us and our love for Him will transcend any loss we may have suffered in terms of our human fathers. Let God be a Father to you so you can be a father to your children. That alone will make fathering without regrets a very real possibility.

A Potpourri (June 27, 2004)

The children in Vacation Bible School this week have been preparing a potpourri as part of their crafts. A potpourri according to the dictionary is a fragrant mixture of dried flower petals and spices. I thought that might be a good title for a collection of thoughts I have about some of the current events at Berachah. However, upon a closer look I noticed that the French potpourri is a translation of the Spanish olla podrida meaning a rotten pot. Thank God that He has taken us all from the rotten pots of sin to the fragrance of new life in Christ.

Last Sunday (June 20) the Building Committee met to discuss the plans for our much-needed additional facilities. We have almost \$500,000 in our building fund, which gives us the opportunity to do some serious building layout work. We need classroom space for the children, a larger fellowship hall, and an auditorium that is more communication friendly with some modest increase in seating capacity. This will cost more than what we currently have in the fund, but we have a good start. Our long-range planning team, which met on June 12, helped us think through where we wanted to be as a church five and ten years from now. We will be discussing these issues in a congregational meeting in the near future.

I have been working to bring together plans regarding the establishment of a Bible Institute at Berachah. Hopefully, we can start this fall, depending of course on interest shown. Some possible course offerings would be Beginning Greek I and Old Testament Studies I. But all this is preliminary. One thing is quite clear. We need to begin a Bible training center in order to move the opportunities for equipping ministry at Berachah to a new level. If you are interested in enrolling or helping with the administration of the Bible training center, contact me as soon as possible.

How is your Bible reading coming along? One of our men told me recently about the truths that God has impressed upon him through his reading of the Old Testament. A constant theme has been God's love for Israel and call for their obedience to Him. I have noticed how often God as Creator is highlighted. At the core of our worship must be the acknowledgement of the Lord God as the maker of heaven and earth. Also, closely associated with this are the warnings against idolatry. To put it bluntly, to bow down before an idol is stupid. Israel gave so much of her energy to the pursuit of idolatry and was actually "refreshed" by it all (Isa. 57:10). There is a lesson here. Commitment to sin and theological error can be deceptively satisfying.

The Bosnia Team has been on my mind a lot. We have prayed for them in a special way in our prayer time on Wednesday evenings. Ashley Rape's recent e-mail introduced us to Jasminka, her translator. "Jasminka is already like a sister to me. She is not a believer but is interested." Pray for Ashley and the rest of the Team as they bear witness to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Justin has asked us to pray for Emir, Adnan, Amar, Anel, Ibrihim, Kedim, Amin, and Kenan. These are the boys in his group ages 10-14.

While everything else has been going on the teens have been to their camps in Washington, D.C. and Jacksonville, Florida. They will be giving us a report on Sunday evening, July 11. Florida reminds me of vacations. Beth and I will be with our children and grandchildren this week in Destin, Florida. This is our one opportunity during the year for all of our family to be together for a few days. I am looking forward to some body surfing and wrestling in the water with Brennan, Connor, Lawson, and Langdon. Melanie and Meredith will be more interested in some

non-combative floating on the waves. Beth and I thank the Lord for the forty wonderful years He has given us together and the delight of being able to tell our grandchildren of God's mighty deeds on our behalf. We have no greater joy than this, to hear that our children and grandchildren are walking in the truth. This same joy overflows in our hearts for the faithful flock at Berachah Bible Church.

Do This in Remembrance of Me (July 11, 2004)

My earliest memory of the communion service in church is the table that sat at the front of the auditorium just below the pulpit. On it were the words "Do this in remembrance of Me." My first impression of a communion service was the sweet taste of the grape juice. We couldn't afford to buy bottled grape juice. I often thought how great it would be to have more grape juice than what was in that little glass. The pastor explained the significance of the bread (actually it was a saltine cracker) and the cup. I didn't fully understand what it all meant but I knew enough to know that we were remembering the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The communion table, or as it is often spoken of as the Lord's Supper, is one of two ordinances given to the church (Baptism and the Lord's Table). An ordinance is a visible rite given to the church by Jesus Christ for the purpose of demonstrating spiritual truth. Baptism is a symbol of the believer's relationship to Jesus Christ (Matt. 29:19, 20). The Lord's Supper is a symbol of the believer's fellowship with Christ (Matt. 26:26-30). The emphasis in baptism is on entrance into union with Christ. The emphasis of the Lord's Supper is on the believer's continuance in the life of Christ.

There is not unanimity on the meaning of the bread and the cup. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the word "is" in Mark 14:22, 24 ("This is My body.") means that "a singular and wondrous conversion of the total substance of bread into the body and of the total substance of wine into the blood of Christ" takes place. This is called transubstantiation. The appearance, taste, touch, and smell remain the same, but the bread and cup is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. This interpretation is a complete failure to understand the meaning of the copula, "is" ("is" is not that of identity, but of symbolic relationship, e.g., Matt. 13:38 "the field is the world."). The bread is a representation of Jesus' body, not equivalent to His body. How could it have been His body when it was He who was there in the midst of His disciples? Jesus was speaking in a literal figurative sense as when He said elsewhere, "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12).

Another tradition teaches that the individual partakes of the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the elements. The elements remain unchanged, but the prayer of consecration communicates Christ to the participants. This view is called consubstantiation. But this interpretation needlessly perpetuates confusion regarding the actual meaning of Jesus. The eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup function as symbolic reminders of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. The partaker of the bread and the fruit of the vine is reminded in a dramatic way of the benefits of redemption and salvation brought about in Christ's death.

The Lord's Supper should be viewed as a prism of truth. It is a commemoration of the Lord's death for our sins (1 Cor. 11: 23-26). It is a communion showing our participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a celebration of thanksgiving to the Lord Jesus for

His work on our behalf (1 Cor. 11:24). It is a proclamation of the essential truths of the gospel through its reenactment of the work of redemption. It is anticipation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and establishment of His kingdom on this earth (Matt. 26:29). The various colors of the rainbow of the gospel message radiate out for all to see.

Who may participate in the Lord's Supper? Only those who belong to Jesus Christ through the new birth may eat the bread and drink the cup (1 Cor. 10:16, 17). But even among believer's there are certain "table manners" that are required. Clean hands are necessary (1 Cor. 11:27-32). None dare take of the bread and cup who have not examined their hearts and confessed their sins. The courtesy of reverence and meditation must be brought to the table in order to think about Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin. Are you prepared? Worship the Lord with a heart filled with gladness for the one who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Same Sex Marriage - What Are We to Do? (July 18, 2004)

One of the most important issues of our time has been discussed on the floor of the United States Senate this past week, namely, the nature and definition of marriage. Oddly, on the day that I am writing this, I could not find one article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution offering an affirmation of the moral certainty that marriage is to be between a man and a woman. There certainly have been many editorials and quasi-news articles (cleverly written editors posing as news) trumpeting the cause of same sex marriage. But this is not surprising. A seemingly increasing number in our society think that how one defines marriage is no big deal. After all, it is reasoned, how can homosexual marriage or civil unions affect my marriage? The self-centeredness of this kind of thinking is staggering. It assumes that as something doesn't directly affect me, then why should I care? It was the way the German population reasoned in the 1930's, as Jews were being arrested and carried off to death camps.

But what are Christians to do as gay-marriage advocates attempt to hijack traditional marriage? We can begin by calling out to God, the creator of marriage, to frustrate the efforts of those who are showing contempt for His moral law. Pray for the senators, legislators, and judges who must make critical decisions affecting our future. Pray for pastors and churches to be lovingly bold and clear about what God says about marriage. Pray for a revival in the church. If Christians would take God and His Word more seriously, good things would happen. We can pray for the public school system, its teachers and administrators, that the moral relativism strangling our society would be renounced. We can pray for our own marriages that they will be an example of love and devotion.

We need to register to vote in the upcoming presidential election. We ought not to apologize for identifying those candidates who have a strong moral core and who uphold traditional marriage. Yes, there are other issues that deeply concern us, but none have more long-term implications than the protection of the institution of marriage as defined by our Creator. There is a lot of talk about values. But the fact that one has values doesn't say a whole lot. Everyone has values. The question is what values? What authority is informing us about those things we deem morally nonnegotiable? God may turn us over to those who call evil good and good evil. However, we are responsible for being involved in our political system and making our voice heard. There is no excuse for opting out of the voting process. The Apostle Paul tells us that government

officials are ministers of God for good (Rom. 13:4). Find those who come the closest to this standard and vote for them.

As God's people we are to resolve to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This would profoundly affect our own marriages. What example are we to our children? Do they see love, honesty, affection, and loyalty? Those Christians who have sought to justify divorce and have turned their heads and looked the other way while marriages are falling apart in the church are now faced with the consequences of a puny Christianity. Have we surrendered our moral authority at the altar of compromise? Are we giving proof of the authenticity of what we say we believe by God-exalting, Christ-centered, truth-rich, happy marriages and homes? When you get right down to it, the problem is the church. If Bible believing, local churches across this land were the salt and light we ought to be, then perhaps our nation could be some kind of a city upon a hill of the good kind.

What will happen if same sex marriage wins the day? We certainly seem to be moving in that direction. God will not be defeated. He never is. But there will be more evil with which we have to contend. But don't forget the church was born in an idol worshiping, pagan world. God's Word endures forever. Evil will fall by its own weight. Take hope, dear Christian. Be salt and light.

Some Myths About Marriage (July 25, 2004)

Defenders of traditional marriage (and in opposition to same sex marriage) are accused of being hypocritical. It is argued that gays and lesbians shouldn't be blamed for the breakdown of the family. For ammunition a three-year old Barna Research Group study is cited that, "born-again Christians are just as likely to get divorced as non-born-again adults." Even if that is true that doesn't legitimize the absurd notion that marriage can be redefined to support Bill marrying Tom and Alice marrying Betty. But with that said we need to visit the criticism that conservative Christians have themselves done damage to the institution of marriage. What is the condition of your own marriage? What message is it communicating to your children? None of us is perfect and we all have our struggles in working toward greater unity in marriage. One thing we can do is pause and demolish some myths about marriage. By myth I mean that which is imaginary. It is not based on fact but on fiction.

One myth is that marriage is easy. After all it is just a matter of exchanging some vows and then living together as a husband and wife. One may think that since they got along with their college roommate reasonably well that having someone you love as a roommate would even be easier. This is a total failure in understanding the difficulties that await a love-struck couple. Marriage is hard work. It takes sacrifice, change, repentance, humility, and forgiveness. Two selfish people under one roof require a lot of learning and change. Death to oneself is painful and demands a lot of God's grace (help that we don't deserve).

Another myth is that the husband is in charge and the wife just needs to do what she is told. I don't know many men who would put it that way, but that is the way some want-to-be-macho males behave. The husband's headship over the wife is all about his submission to God, denying himself and taking up his cross and following Christ (Eph. 5:25; Matt. 16:24). Many women attempt to relate to their husband by the myth that submission means silence, sort of a go-along-

to-get-along attitude. In the process they become embittered and fail to hold their husbands accountable for their behavior (Eph. 5:22).

One myth that our culture promotes heavily is that the goal of marriage is happiness. This is not a benign expectation. God's design for marriage is the display of His love, righteousness, truth, mercy, unity, and forgiveness. Happiness arrives when a man and a woman obey God and make Him look good. Many have bought into the myth that the basis of marriage is love. Hollywood sponsors this fiction. The basis of marriage is a covenant of commitment. Waking up one day and not being "in love" any longer is not an invitation to divorce, but a call to live by vows and learning how to love (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

Then there is the myth that having children will draw a husband and wife closer together. Bringing a baby into one's marriage will serve to reveal where the weaknesses are. Children bring added pressure and tend to magnify the problems that are already there. Relational arithmetic (two becoming three, etc.) is not the way to create unity. Oneness in marriage comes by subtraction, putting off the ugliness of sin and putting on Christ (Col. 3:8, 14). While we are thinking about falsehoods, let's not forget the popular myth that marriage is a 50/50 proposition. No, it isn't. It is a 100/100 proposition. Each marriage partner is 100 percent responsible for his or her attitudes, desires, and efforts. Waiting on one's marriage partner to do their part, as a condition for change, is not the way a loving relationship is forged.

Let's explode one final myth. Single people often cherish the fantasy that it's better to be married than to be single. This attitude is seriously flawed. Marriage will not solve one's problems. If you are unhappy and dissatisfied, saying "I do" is not the needed medicine. Loneliness and discontent can only be remedied by experiencing the joy of unbounded love for God. No human being, male or female, can satisfy your deepest longing for relationship and love. Only the incomparable love of Christ can fill the empty heart.

The Big We and the Little I (August 1, 2004)

Do we take the local church seriously enough? It is called the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). That should get our attention. In a context where the apostle Paul is holding up the standards for leaders in the church (elders and deacons) it is declared that the church is "the household of God." This is an intentional challenge to the pagan idea that the temple of Diana in Ephesus was a location of deity. It is the church that upholds the truth that God has revealed to men. Leaders in the church are reminded that they represent the truth in a unique way. Their lives should vouch for the fact that there is no more important institution in this world than God's temple, the church of Jesus Christ, visible through local assemblies.

There are at least three reasons, based on 1 Timothy 3:14-16, that we ought to take the church with the utmost seriousness. We are to take the church seriously because God owns it and lives there. It is the household of God, a spiritual house of believers in whose lives God lives. Why do we have standards of conduct for the leaders in the local church? It is because it is the place where the living God dwells with His people and where He communicates life and salvation to believers in Christ. The organization, ordinances, teaching, discipline, and fellowship of the life of the assembly are to reflect eternal realities. The way God's family conduct their everyday

lives is to be an advertisement for the truth about God and His redemptive plan in Jesus Christ. We must not scramble the picture.

We are to take the church seriously because it is the place where truth is put on display. It displays and protects the truth of the gospel. No other institution in this world has been given the responsibility of holding forth the word of life but the church (Phil. 2:16). The church is to defend and proclaim the gospel with all its energy and resources. We who belong to Christ have the incomparable privilege of being entrusted with hope filled, life-changing truth of the mystery of godliness.

We are to take the church seriously because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Great is the church because great is its exalted Head, Jesus Christ. Savor the following testimony concerning Jesus Christ. The gospel is about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the exaltation of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ, and the glorious ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven (1 Tim. 3:16).

I am uneasy about some of the ways we treat the church of Jesus Christ. Some Christians give little time and attention to the church. Their attendance and participation in the life of the church is limited by other priorities. A family will sell their house and move to a new area and seemingly only as an afterthought will they consider the distance to a Bible teaching church. Others will make plans regarding personal ministry and never consult with their home church. There are Christians who move around from church to church without ever putting their roots down and getting meaningfully involved. Some will attend a church and not participate in the fellowship of giving, forgetting that those who are taught the word are to share all good things with those who teach (Gal. 6:6). In recent years one disturbing trend has been “shopping cart” church life. A family will go to several different churches at the same time putting into their shopping cart what they want (e.g., youth program, music, teaching, social events) without any serious commitment to any one church. One of the contributing factors to these attitudes toward the church is the culture itself. The individual is placed above all institutions. The “me” is more important than the “we.” The autonomy of the person takes precedence over participation in the community of believers. This is just another form of worldliness. And none of us is immune to it. How is your life in the church of the living God? Is it a big “we” and a little “I”?

To My Grandson - A Time for Awakening (August 8, 2004)

One of the compensating delights of growing older is time with my grandchildren. I say compensating, not because life has become dreary, but because little by little the tent of this body is being readied for its folding up. I am on my last lap in life. My grandchildren are on their first lap. Therefore, I have things I want to say to them. They are awakening to themselves and God’s world. Their questions are many. They laugh, play, cry, and explore the life that is opening up to them. Wordsworth’s lines come to mind, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.” I have an open letter for Brennan, my grandson, as he approaches manhood and all that awaits him.

Brennan, I have enjoyed our times together this summer. It’s hard to believe that you are already twelve years old. It seems such a short time ago that we rushed to the hospital to see our first grandchild. You were one month premature and required some special time in intensive care. But

you made it. You wanted to get here as soon as possible and haven't slowed down since you arrived. I have a few words of hard-won wisdom to pass along as you enter the seventh grade.

Don't let the television and your game boy keep you from reading. There will be many things to draw you away from what is one of God's most wonderful gifts, the pleasure of discovering His wisdom through the understanding of words. Don't remain in a little world of few people. Venture out into the world of books and get to know how and why God has made us. Start with the Bible. Read it often and carefully. Memorize as much of it as you can. Store away God's Word in your heart. It will keep you from a multitude of sins' sorrows (Psa. 119:11). Pick up your Bible and listen to God speak through His Word.

Love and obey your parents (Eph. 6:1). If you do not, you will become your own worst enemy. You can love your father and mother by doing what is best for them. Speak respectfully to them. Watch your tone of voice. If you don't agree with them, appeal to them in the proper way. The refusal to obey your parents is a refusal to obey God, unless they are asking you to do something that is morally wrong. When you are told to turn off the television and do your homework, you have the opportunity to please God at that moment.

Talk to God about the rest of your life (1 Jn. 5:14). What will you do when you grow up? God knows. God has given you the abilities you need to do your life's work. You will probably get married one day. You ought to pray that you will have the wisdom to choose the right kind of life's partner. I was taught the importance of praying very early in my Christian life. God saved me when I was 14 years old. There was a lot I had to learn about praying, but one thing I did know. Praying is talking to God. It is asking Him to do the things that will honor Him.

Flee youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22). You have a war to fight. You are a fine-looking young man. That will present you with some challenges. Girls will notice you. There are many youthful desires that will threaten to ruin you if you are not careful. Your sexuality is a gift from God, but sexual temptation is not. Learn how to fight temptation early in life and avoid many of the complications created by sex outside the bounds of marriage. The first battleground is in your mind. Don't allow lustful thoughts to set up camp in your skull. You won't have many allies in this battle with sexual lusts, but you have God. He will give you all the help you need to be pure in mind, heart, and body.

Take your educational opportunities seriously. Laziness will keep you from becoming the man God wants you to be. Don't avoid the tough subjects because you might not make an A. Take the challenge of a demanding English class and give it your best effort. I know you love sports. But don't let athletics keep you from taking the high road of academic excellence. Twenty years from now you will find out what was most important.

Find ways to serve God. Help people. Be kind to your sisters. When you take on new responsibilities carry them out to the best of your ability. It is in these ways that you can let others know that you are a Christian. Don't be ashamed of Christ. Tell your friends about Him. I pray for you every day that you will love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Make these years of awakening to life a time of delight in obeying God.

Affectionately and thankfully,
Your Gaddy

Unspeakable Horrors (August 15, 2004)

We have experienced another assault on our moral sensibilities. Have we not seen every possible evil and barbarity on our television screens? We are familiar with mutilated bodies on the streets of Jerusalem and Baghdad. We know that terrible things happen in our own country, but the chilling reality of the murder of two kindly grandparents in our own community is frighteningly close. The pre-meditated, cold-blooded killing by a teenager of her own grandparents is more than the mind can comprehend.

The responses to such a horrible crime committed in our county reveal much about us. The gruesome murder scene stunned law enforcement officers. The defense attorney expectedly has begun to focus attention upon the emotional state of the accused girls with apparent interest in creating sympathy. There will be a trial and a sentence to be handed down on the case. Psychologists offer their assessments with an analysis of the accused murderers' conflicted home life, their relationships, and state of mind. However, it doesn't take a professional psychologist to recognize the all too familiar social and personal deficiencies in such young lives. The breakdown of the home, anger, depression, perverted thinking, and a corrupted conscience has made their appearance.

Any explanation that avoids the actual state of human nature is only skimming the surface. While an informed discussion regarding poor coping abilities, immaturity, impulsivity, absent parents, and limited reasoning skills is pertinent, a more fundamental fact begs attention. All human beings have heart trouble. A Hebrew prophet has it right when he says, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Who would want to challenge the wisdom of the Son of God who said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:19). Thankfully most teenage girls don't commit murder and fewer still stab their grandparents to death. But there is a potential murderer in each of us (Rom. 3:15). We have "inherited corruption" that is capable of a host of evils. We all have a predisposition to sin. When the constraints of conscience, family, society, and civil law are discarded life becomes brutish, chaotic, and unbearable. Gene Edward Veith in commenting of William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" contrasts the Romantics "idealized and idolized children" with human nature as it really is. Veith says, "Golding's vision, though rang truer. Parents recognized that children, left to themselves, can be shockingly selfish, destructive, and cruel. They do have to be civilized. And civilization - with its disciplines, laws, and limits on the untrammelled passions - is a good thing. Human nature is not innately virtuous. Rather, human nature, as its root, is something monstrous. If left to itself, like those schoolboys on the island, human nature is capable of committing unspeakable horrors."

We have all been witnesses of one of these "unspeakable horrors." What can we do? The answers are near, yet far. They are near in that we must abandon any silly notions about innate human goodness, moral relativism, and open-ended definitions of the family. Children need fathers and mothers who love them, provide for them, protect them, and show them how to live. Adults who choose to bring children into this world must assume responsibility for the demanding work of parenting. The narcissism that plagues our culture must be seen for what it is, a self-destructive love affair with oneself. But at the same time, we are all responsible for the decisions that we make, whether teenager or adult. There is no formula that guarantees the moral character of our sons and daughters. We need help from outside of ourselves. Mere moralism

(i.e., the idea that following a moral code will solve the plight of man) is not our answer. It is through Jesus Christ that we can have access to the Father. And that is our only hope. We will either choose to serve the Lord God through His Son Jesus Christ, or the gods of this age. Unspeakable horrors await the individual and society that make the wrong choice.

The Wings of Worry (August 22, 2004)

It was an exciting day in the Dial family. After seven years of moving from job to job my Dad found the one that was right for him. In 1952 my father began his thirty-year employment with Delta airlines as a mechanic. He retired in 1982, a foreman in the hydraulics department. Delta was a good employer for my father, mother, and four brothers. He liked his job and fellow workers. He always spoke highly of Mr. Woolman, president of the company. I can remember him talking about “Meatball” (an affectionate name for his foreman), Jim, and others. It seemed as if they were a big family. There were also certain perks that went with Delta employment, such as the swimming pool and fishing at Allatoona Lake, and best of all, the privilege of flying on passes. (We were known as non-revs.) We could travel to places that many of my friends could only read about. We thought we were wealthier than we really were. Through all my growing up years in the Delta family, little did I realize that God was preparing me to pastor a church where many of our members would be Delta employees.

These could be worrisome days for Delta people. I say “could be” because all the unknowns regarding Delta’s future have the potential for creating worry. I grew up during the so-called “golden years” of aviation travel. Job security was not an issue for my father. The airline industry was growing, changing, and regulated by the Federal government. Things have changed. Now there is talk of a “leaner, simplified, more productive airline.” It seems this will mean job cuts and wage adjustments. (As of this writing the “Delta Solution” is yet to be unveiled.) It’s hard to think of Delta Airlines needing to re-invent itself. But in reality, Delta is merely taking its turn in dealing with broad changes in the airline business. Many of us remember all too well the social and personal upheaval created in the wake of Eastern Airline’s demise.

How does God want His children to respond to these uncertain times? Worry could easily slip in the back door. Jesus said, “Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). But what is worry? How can it be distinguished from legitimate concern and preparation for the future (e.g., the ant, Prov. 6:6-11)? When we look closely at the warnings in Scripture against worry (Matt. 6:25, 27; Phil. 4:6) we discover some characteristics of the “malignant disease of the what-ifs.” Worry is a state of mind about circumstances over which one has no control. It is thinking that works against “seeking first God’s kingdom and His righteousness.” When I am worrying, I have abandoned wise thinking and living. I have replaced the God-honoring life with paralyzing, agitated, fearful thinking. (Worry is actually an expression of fear which is a carry-over from the fall of man, Gen. 3:10.) Someone has said that worry is like racing an automobile engine while it is in neutral. The gas and noise do not get us anywhere. If I am complaining, irritable, and angry on the job and at home, I am revealing a lack of confidence in the God who is infinitely wise. My employer and my financial future are in God’s hands (Isa. 41:10). Part of the problem of worry (some refer to it as anxiety) is that it is an attempt to play God. I am not in control of the future. God is and He knows what He is doing (Rom. 8:28).

We are to accept God's loving care for us (Matt. 6:25-32). Worry is a choice I make. It's a lack of obedience. I must learn to live by eternal values rather than temporal values (Matt. 6:24). Are you in debt with no immediate relief in sight? This may be the American way, but it is not God's way for His people. Practice living by receiving God's grace one day at a time. Don't let tomorrow's possible problems tear you apart today. Commit your needs to God in prayer (Phil. 4:6). God will give you a peace that will amaze you. Let your mind dwell on biblical solutions (Phil. 4:8). Do some wise planning (e.g., How can you use your God-given abilities in other income producing ways?).

My father's thirty-year pin with its gold wings is a treasured possession. But there are wings which surpass all others. "Let me dwell in Thy tent forever; Let me take refuge in the shelter of Thy wings" (Psa. 61:4). For all of us the best counsel is to let our worries take wings and fly away. We have One who offers the safest place of all. God calls those who will put their confidence in Him to the secure shelter of His wings. He is ready when you are.

Whistling in the Dark (August 29, 2004)

I remember it well. I was the oldest brother. So, I considered it my responsibility to enter the house first when our family came home late at night. It was dark and I was unwilling to admit that I was afraid. I thought that if I whistled as I went up the steps and entered the house any intruder or monster (Sulley?) would be fairly warned. I was trying to be courageous in a fearful situation. It must have worked because by the time we turned the lights on, everything was all right.

The human emotion of fear is of major importance in learning how to navigate through life. We all know its cold clutches. Think of the things and situations that tempt us to fear. The list is as long as life itself; heights, closed places, public places, water, snakes, a new school, a bully, spiders, the dark, talking in front of people, talking to people, airplanes (when they are in the air), a terrorist attack, and death. Our fear response can range from mild and brief bouts of uneasiness to life dominating, irrational phobias. It has been reported that a woman, out of fear of open and public places, stayed in her house from the time she was age 31 until age 61. That's an extreme case, but it reminds us where our fears can take us if they are not handled in the right way. There are people who won't ride on airplanes or eat out in public out of fear. I knew a man once who almost choked to death while eating in a restaurant. After that he wouldn't eat in public places.

The experience of fear itself can become our greatest fear. Muscle tension, headaches, sweating, pounding heart, dry mouth, and upset stomach are some of fears symptoms. Not all fear is bad however. Normal fear is a God-designed ability to help us apprehend a realistic danger (e.g., looking both ways before we cross the street). But there is fear that is traceable to the entrance of sin into the human race. It is rooted in the fear of death, the mother of all fears (Heb. 2:15). All those who have not experienced the saving power of God's forgiveness in Christ are held in the grip of fear. Many strategies have been devised in an attempt to cope with our rendezvous with death. Every religious system and individual world view (i.e., the way one interprets reality) is a maneuver to cope with our mortality. For example, it was the late Katharine Hepburn who said, "I do not fear hell. I don't look forward to heaven. I expect to go off into oblivion." This was a personally designed safety net to blunt the unknown of death and dying.

If we do not understand the cause of fear, we merely pave the road of life with hopelessness. Fear produces the very thing that we fear (Prov. 10:24). Fear can keep us from making decisions (Matt. 21:26). It limits our freedom (Jn. 7:13; 19:38; 20:19). It is ultimately a useful tool of Satan to hold fallen man in his grip. He is the author of sin and sin brings death (Jn. 8:44; Rom. 6:23). It is in this sense that Satan exercises power in the realm of death. The bondage of fear can only be broken through faith in Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-15; Rom. 8:15). Jesus' suffering on a cruel, Roman cross was necessary in order to disarm the devil and release us from spiritual bondage. Death is the penalty of sin. Christ bore the penalty of sin. Here is our only hope. The fear of death with its accompanying dread, the fear of pain, fear of separation from what we know and from those we love, the fear of the unknown, and the fear of everlasting punishment need no longer stalk us. When we appropriate the benefits of Christ's death through faith in Him, we become free people. We can face death with confidence in our Savior.

Can the Christian become paralyzed by fear? Yes, it can happen. Fear of rejection, final exams, sending one's children off to school, and job security (insecurity) may overtake the believer in Jesus Christ. Fear is to be replaced with love (1 Jn. 4:16-18). Love concentrates on laying down its life for others, being busy with today's tasks, and not worrying about tomorrow. Fear focuses on self-protection, not taking personal risks to help others, and worries about tomorrow. It comes down to this. There is one fear that is to replace all other fears. It is the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31, notice the context of dangers). Someone has said that the fear of the Lord is "that disposition of heart that sees the smile of God as our greatest reward and the frown of God our greatest displeasure" (Prov. 8:13). A love for God that is life consuming gives us a boldness that meets all fears with courage. Our fears reveal a lack of trust in God. Those who fear the Lord do not fear man or death (Prov. 29:25). Those who place their confidence in themselves, refusing to trust in Christ, are whistling in the dark.

The Gift of Work (September 5, 2004)

My father's work uniforms hanging on the clothes' line was a continual reminder of what he did for us every day. Work is necessary. It is honorable. It is a gift of God. Adam and Eve were not placed in their paradise to merely smell the flowers, play with the animals, and let God take care of them. "The Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). These words mean labor and responsibility. Work was not a result of the fall of man. It was the means of carrying his purpose on earth and bringing honor to his Creator.

Many in our day consider their work to be meaningless. This is not limited to men. Some women look upon their responsibilities in the home as without much significance. A poll taken within the last decade revealed that "only one-tenth of American workers say they are satisfied with their jobs." It seems that an increasing number of men and women confess to the conclusion of Herman Melville, "They talk of the dignity of work, bosh. The dignity is in the leisure." But is this true? Associated with the problem of meaninglessness in work is the problem of laziness. I have talked with employers, and they tell me how difficult it is to find a willingness to endure pain and hard work. There is also the problem of a lack of contentment in the workplace. According to published surveys up to 80 percent of working Americans occupy the wrong job for them. Many are apparently working in a job that is not the one they would like to have. Add to the list the problem of overwork (moonlighting). There are millions of "workaholics" who are willing to sacrifice family, friends, leisure, and church to career.

The Christian worldview speaks with clarity regarding the meaning of work. God has given work in order to reflect our likeness to Him (Gen. 1:26, 28). The psalmist says of God, “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou has ordained” (Psa. 8:3). “And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done” (Gen. 2:2). God is a worker. He brought the universe into being out of nothing in six days. Since creation week God has engaged in the work of providence (Jn. 5:17). The incarnation of Jesus Christ itself was the work of God (Jn. 4:34). Jesus worked as a youth and young man. His father, Joseph, was a carpenter. Jesus learned and practiced this trade. He sweated, developed blisters, and calloused hands, and sat down at the end of a hard day enjoying the satisfaction of work well done (Mk. 6:3).

Work has dignity and value in itself (Gen. 2:15). Our work is important, not because of sin, but because it reflects our likeness to God. “The basis for the work ethic is to be found in the very nature of what God created us to be.” (Millard Erickson). If there were a missionary map in heaven, there would be pins placed where every Christian in this world works. We have this awful idea that Christian work is sacred and that our job is secular. This is bad theology. Whatever our job, it is sacred and is to be done for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

God has given work as a means of experiencing His provision (Eph. 4:28; Matt. 6:25; Acts 20:25; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:8, 14). The Promised Land was a divine gift to Israel to provide for her physical needs (Gen. 12:1-3; Lev. 25:23). As every individual Israelite worked, the entire nation would be blessed (Deut. 28:4, 8, 12). The believer in this age is responsible to work to meet his own needs (Eph. 4:28). God has endowed each of us with the necessary abilities to provide for his or her own needs (food, shelter, and clothing). Certainly, these abilities vary from individual to individual, but nevertheless one is responsible for the development and use of these skills. Work responsibility fulfilled keeps one self-sufficient and is the means of creating surplus that enables us to help others materially.

God has given work as a way of serving Him. The desk, computer, shop, classroom, factory, job site, kitchen, and office all give the Christian the opportunity to bear the fruit of the Spirit. We can learn how to do our work joyfully when others are grumpy and complain. We can experience peace when there is dissension and strife between the union and management. We can practice patience when those for whom we are responsible irritate us and make mistakes. We can treat our fellow workers with kindness rather than give them a dose of their own medicine.

At the end of the day when we are weary from a hard day’s work, we can thank God for His provision. We can draw satisfaction from having offered up our work as a sacrifice to Him. Have others seen our Creator’s love for work in our work?

The Eye of the Storm (September 19, 2004)

Hurricane Ivan roared into the Florida panhandle with a vengeance. It appears that Gulf Shores, Alabama may have borne the brunt of the eye. Winds of 130 mph, deadly tornadoes, and high water from the storm surge overwhelmed houses, highways, and a host of other structures.

Hundreds of thousands of people evacuated entire cities. Power outages have left many in the dark to cope with assessment of damage and clean-up. Many of us have fond memories of the Gulf Shores area. Sugar white sand, gentle waves, beautiful beach houses, sea food restaurants, warm breezes, walks on the beach, and splendid sunsets now must give way to destruction and debris. What is left? Hopefully the storm will have spared some of our favorite places, but the prospects are not good.

Storms carry messages. A storm is a vivid reminder that we live in a world that is broken. It is groaning under the weight of futility (Rom. 8:20, 22). All of creation is one great symphony of sighs, longing for its redemption. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and drought tell us that things are not as they should be. Nature's wild rampages of destruction and death leave us yearning for something better. Listen to people describe their experiences in terrible storms, and you will hear confessions of mortality. Howling wind and demolished homes are frightful. Survivors are left to deal with nightmares and anxiety when the calm of a new day dawns.

Try to visualize twelve wet and shivering men in a boat in a fierce storm in the middle of the night. The disciples of Jesus were experienced fishermen. They knew what the Sea of Galilee was capable of becoming. But they were terrified by the wind and the waves. How Jesus could have slept in the midst of gale force winds in a small boat is amazing. The disciples expected to drown (Mk. 4:38). Not to worry. Jesus rebuked the winds. The storm fell silent. All was still. It was as if there hadn't been a hurricane. After all, He was the One who called the wind and water into existence at creation. The forces of nature were subdued with just a word, a sovereign word. Storms can evoke praise and worship of God. David was awed by the power of God revealed in a violent thunderstorm (Psa. 29). The thunder was like God's voice. The God who created by His word controls nature by His word (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14, 20; Psa. 29:4). The psalmist took delight in seeing the majesty of God wonderfully displayed in nature's performance. The Canaanites credited their gods with the storms that swept the land. David would have none of this. Baal was a fiction (like our "mother nature"). It is the God of the universe who rules over nature and all its forces.

The judgment of God rides on the wings of the wind. In what has been described as "the greatest picture of the appearance of God in the Bible," the prophet Habakkuk was given an extensive and elaborate vision of God as He comes in judgment (Hab. 3:3-15). His coming is pictured as a storm rolling up from the south and breaking upon the land of Israel and its neighbors. God was going to move against Israel in the coming invasion of the Babylonian army. The message to Habakkuk was that suffering would come upon the righteous as well as the unrighteous. The effect of all this was to leave the prophet trembling. He was awed by God's omnipotent, righteous judgment. Habakkuk was moved to renewed trust in God. He resolved to rest in God's perfect wisdom and will. And so should we. The eye of the storm is the place of calm. God's judgment is coming upon all those who refuse to believe in His Son. The only safe place is to be in Christ. He is the eye of the storm.

At Home Alone (September 26, 2004)

Wayne was not looking forward to the weekend by himself. Joyce and the children were going to be away at her mother's for a birthday celebration. In what was a house usually filled with the sounds of children at play, trips to the store, ball games, and other family activities, Wayne was

at home alone. There were a few projects that needed to be done, cleaning the garage, reseeding the lawn, and even a surprise carpet cleaning for Joyce, done by Wayne himself. Sitting down at the computer to catch up on a back log of email was not the way he wanted to spend a Friday evening. But he would be much relieved to have it taken care of before the family returned. After an hour of creating and sending messages, Wayne happened to think about an article in the newspaper regarding internet pornography and how relatively easy it was to explore the world of cyber-sex. One click of his mouse and his internet search engine would do the rest. He could get a potential 180 million hits. Suddenly Wayne had an adrenalin rush. He felt alert, excited, and flushed with the visual possibilities that awaited him, all in the privacy of his own home. That was the beginning of a tragic story of enslavement to pornography that eventually led to a divorce, alienation from his children, and chronic depression.

Pornography is a multi-billion-dollar business in America. It preys upon men, women, and children. It has been reported that we as a society “went from 1,000 adult movie theaters in less than ten years to 80 million adult movie theaters.” How did this happen? A computer is now found in at least 70-80 million households. Never before has the availability of sexually explicit material been so widespread and accessible. But this is only part of the pornography epidemic sweeping our nation. Adult videotapes and DVDs in video stores, cable television (in 2002 Comcast took in \$50 million from adult programming), adult films on in-room pay-per-view television systems, phone sex, and other lust pandering offerings are everywhere.

What is to be the Christian response to the pervasive influence of pornography? There is no real hope possible for personal deliverance from the bonds of sexual addiction (I use the word “addiction” not because I subscribe to the assumptions of the medical and biological paradigm often associated with it) apart from the washing, sanctification, and justification that is found through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:11). Can a non-Christian break free from enslavement to pornography? Yes, but he or she will never be free to serve the God for whom they were created unless there is deliverance from the domain of spiritual darkness to the kingdom of God’s Son (Col. 1:13). This radical change is called the new birth (1 Pet. 1:23). Then, and only then, do new possibilities open up. New desires, new affections, and biblically enlightened reasoning will draw the will to fervently pursue the God-honoring life. No battle with the lust-provoking capabilities of pornography will ever be won without the overpowering longing to love God with all one’s being. Internet blockers, Scripture memory, accountability partners, cold showers, and six-mile runs may provide some help, but the problem lies deeper than temptation and self-discipline. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. The mind, the emotions, the conscience, and the will are to be carried along by the deep and strong current of awe-inspired, love-responding desire to please God (Phil. 2:12-13). “I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term than to gain a distaste for it, because of a superior satisfaction in God” (John Piper).

There are strategies given in the Bible for combating sexual sins that flow from a God-seeking heart. Fortifying oneself to stand strong in the face of temptation (a good conscience is part of a spiritual immune system), looking long and hard at the consequences of failure to resist sexual immorality (e.g. profaning God’s name, guilt, enslavement, sexually transmitted diseases), expressing our need for help to God (“do not lead us into temptation”), and escaping from lust-inciting situations are all necessary. One place to start immediately is to pray for sexual purity. Pray that God would expose the patterns of lust that exist in your life. Pray that you might not be ambushed by Satan. Pray that you might experience the transforming power of God’s grace in

your thought life. Pray that God would give you a greater love for Him. And never forget that God is with you when you are at home alone.

How I Will Vote in the Upcoming Presidential Election (October 3, 2004)

There are not many events that attract more media attention than a presidential election. It is all over the place. Every day there is a new poll and endless discussion about what the percentage points mean. The news is filled with the I-said-he-said routine. I can remember the day when media frenzy was at a lower decibel level. In the days of radio, it was difficult to get as emotionally worked up as in our modern television shouting matches. Television changed a lot of things about political campaigning. In the early days national party conventions were actually kind of interesting. The candidates maneuvered behind closed doors to get the delegate count needed for nomination. The Nixon-Kennedy debate in 1960 ushered in a new era of competition for votes. Suddenly, the kind of image projected on a small screen in the living room shaped voter opinion. Richard Nixon's five o'clock shadow and a sweating upper lip did not help him. John F. Kennedy's calm, cool, and collected appearance did not hurt him. The rest is history. Here we are now in the year 2004 and the news talk is all about the presidential debates. Who will win the debate? Who will be seen sweating? It would seem that the most important thing is not the character and policies of each candidate but rather camera angles, lighting, make-up, the avoidance of smirks, and the expressions on one's face when they are not talking.

The biggest and most important story is not image creating, clever sound-bites, and debates. The ability of the voting public to think in an informed and responsible way is the issue that demands special attention. One has to be concerned when a voter, undecided as for whom to vote, is waiting on the most persuasive television campaign ad. Too many cast their ballots based on emotion and shallow, flawed thinking.

How should we vote? A few big-ticket items need to be kept in mind. First, we are not electing a messiah who will deliver us from all our problems. We are choosing a president who has limitations personally and politically. No political party will be able to solve the real problems that are eating away at our nation's soul. Second, God is sovereign over the outcome of the election. God raises up leaders and brings down leaders. The fact that a particular party gains power and their candidate is elected president does not mean that God approves of his character and decision making. God may turn a nation over to the kind of leadership it deserves.

I will vote for the presidential candidate whose worldview is most consistently truth based. He doesn't have to be a Christian, but he ought to know how to interpret reality. He ought to know the purpose of government (Rom. 13:3). Does he believe that bigger government is the key to solving all our problems or is it a divinely ordained institution for punishing wrongdoers and commending those who do good? He should believe that the family is a divinely given institution. It is not subject to re-definition. He must believe that every human life is sacred. The so-called right to choose does not take precedence over the protection of the helpless and innocent. He should be committed to justice for all and transcendent moral law. If he thinks economic matters trump God's moral law, he is a dangerous man. He will need a correct understanding of peacemaking. Wars will not cease until the King of kings and Lord of lords returns to earth. In the meantime, our nation must have a strong military and know what constitutes a just war. True peacemaking recognizes that evil exists and must be resisted by a

police force and military that is tethered to a truth-enlightened local and national conscience. The presidential candidate I will vote for must cherish religious and political freedom as “God-given, inalienable rights.” Will the new president appoint judges who are hostile to Christianity and the moral precepts upon which this nation was built?

These are some of the critical issues that must be thought through when preparing for those few minutes in the voting booth. Qualifications in such areas as experience, integrity, economic and domestic policies, and a proven record must be given close scrutiny. Too many Christians do not vote. Many are ignorant of the fundamental issues involved in voting for the right candidate. This ought not to be. Will our nation be given the kind of president we deserve or the kind of president we need? May God shed His grace on us.

Some Questions for a Presidential Debate (October 10, 2004)

I take a great deal of interest in the questions presented in presidential debates. Questions are not value neutral. They reveal the interests, moral beliefs, and political philosophy of the one asking the question. Sometimes the interrogatories are zingers. You wonder how he will handle a particular question. And then there are the marshmallow questions that offer the respondent an opportunity to wax eloquent about generalities. I would like to propose some questions for a presidential debate. They are not perfect, but they would, I believe, make for some excellent talking points. They may hopefully smoke the candidate out on what he really believes and not what he thinks people want to hear. This is not an exhaustive list, but it’s a start.

“What do you believe is the purpose of our federal government?” What do you think is the best way to uphold our Constitution, protect our freedom, and encourage personal responsibility? Could you also explain how you view the difference between giving people what they want and giving people what they need? The purpose of this question is to determine the candidate’s views on expanded government and limited government.

“What kind of people will you appoint to the Supreme Court?” Will they see the Constitution and the law as based on evolving custom or on unchanging “natural law, derived ultimately from divine law?” Is the United States Constitution a malleable document subject to the changing opinions of society or does it represent the thoughts and ideals of its original authors?

“What do you intend to do to uphold the family as a divinely-willed institution?” Does the state have the right to usurp the role of the family? Will you encourage legislation and appoint federal judges that would be supportive of same-sex marriage? Do you think gay marriage is a basic human right? If the federal government has the right to outlaw polygamy, does it have the right to outlaw same-sex marriage? Also, could you please explain how presidential advocacy of a constitutional amendment supporting traditional marriage is an attempt to divide this country?

“Do you view human life as sacred?” When does human life begin? If it begins at conception, what justification is there for killing a developing infant for the sake of scientific research and experimentation? Do you support stem-cell research? Upon what moral grounds would you deny personhood to human life, if you believe it begins at conception?

“Would you please explain your position on abortion?” Is the value and worth of an individual dependent on his or her social usefulness or their inherent dignity as one made in the image of God?

“What is your view on the separation of church and state?” Do you think that the church is to be an instrument of the state to advance the state’s own interests? Do you understand the separation of church and state to be the same as the separation of God and state? Should an elected official (a president) stand against a moral law in the interest of politics?

“Do you personally subscribe to a naturalistic world?” Is our world the product of chance through time or the result of a creative act of an infinitely wise God? Is it your view that an increasingly secularized state is best for the future of our nation? Do you believe that ethics is based on a standard outside of human beings or do you believe that standards of good and bad are determined by what the individual values?

“What is your view on the relationship of United States to the United Nations?” To what degree would the United Nations have authority to determine issues related to our national defense? Must our government receive permission from the United Nations before acting on human rights and national security issues?

“What do you believe about world peace and disarmament?” Do you think it is possible to achieve peace among the nations of our world through disarmament? Is it wrong for our nation to have nuclear weapons in its arsenal? What do you think is the best way to insure the peace and security of the United States?

I have other questions, but this will do for now. I doubt very seriously an in-depth discussion of the above issues will take place. Political debates in our day yield more heat than light, or should we say more style than substance?

Vote Yes to Define Marriage as the Union of Man and Woman (October 17, 2004)

Constitutional Amendment

To define marriage as the union of man and woman. (Senate Resolution No. 595) Shall the Constitution be amended so as to provide that this state shall recognize as marriage only the union of man and woman?

Yes

No

The above Constitutional Amendment will be on the ballot on November 2. Our vote should be yes. There are those who may have a deeper lying agenda that say, “The language of the ballot is deceptive, misleading, and in no way reflects the full extent to which the constitution will be amended.” This opinion is without merit and reflects a fundamental failure to understand what is at stake in a constitutionally stated definition of marriage.

It is necessary to state without equivocation that any attempt at the legitimization of same-sex marriage is immoral, unwise, and social suicide. The fact that this even requires a public debate is a commentary on the corrupted level of our social and cultural condition. What is particularly

alarming are the shallow, short-sighted, and morally flawed arguments used to promote same-sex marriage. The following propositions should guide us through the fog of deceptions being used to advance gay marriage.

Marriage is a divinely-willed institution that has served as a foundation for societies since the beginning of the human race. The institution of marriage is not a man-made social contract that can be redefined to suite our moral preferences (Gen. 2:24). Those who object to the Christian assumptions of such a moral axiom are invited to view all societies throughout history. Marriage and the family have been regarded for what they are, the glue of social order. When it breaks down everything collapses.

Marriage between a man and a woman provides protection and a nurturing environment for children. It is in marriage that children are to be given, through instruction and example, what it means to be a husband and a wife. A father and a mother contribute a gender, social, and relational model for the next generation. The nature of masculinity and femininity are a vital part of the development of boys and girls. Boys need to see what true manhood is. They need to observe a father loving and caring for their mother. Girls need an understanding of how a man is to treat a woman and how a wife is to respond to her husband. Those who want to deny the importance of these realities will bring harm to us all.

Homosexual and lesbian relationships dishonor the institution of marriage. Such partnerships are an abomination before God (Heb. 13:4). The joy of marriage is found in the wisdom of God, our Creator. Social experimentation to develop “new family structures, including gay partnerships” is arrogant and doomed to catastrophic consequences. Echoes of the French Revolution may be heard in the background. The cult of reason divorced from divine revelation has slain its multitudes. In our day it is not a campaign to create a new calendar, but a drive to establish a new social order based on humanistic, redefined moral categories.

Upholding the male-female bond in a marital relationship is not unfair discrimination. The claim is made that opposition to gay marriage is discrimination. Discrimination is the act of making or recognizing differences and distinctions. Discrimination is not intrinsically bad. There is right and there is wrong. This is because all moral judgments are ultimately based upon truth that is outside of the individual. Even those who argue for the acceptance and approval of homosexuality do so by a moral judgment, i.e., that homosexuality (and gay marriages) is a moral and civil right. However, the law by its very nature discriminates. For example, it discriminates against polygamists. What is at work here is a not-so-subtle attempt to use the charge of discrimination to throw the opposition off balance. To use the words “prejudice and discrimination” assumes the moral legitimacy of homosexual marriages and/or civil unions. If marriage is the union of a man and woman (one man and one woman), then it is not discrimination in a morally malevolent sense. It is right in a moral and legal sense.

Human rights are granted by God our Creator. Human government can confer constitutional rights, but even these are subject to moral law and civil prudence. For example, fourteen-year-old boys don't have the right to enlist in the Marine Corp. For that matter, there are other qualifications necessary besides age, such as physical condition and citizenship. A son does not have the right to marry his mother or a daughter the right to marry her father. We live in a day when by judicial fiat a right can be discovered in the constitution (e.g., the right of a woman to take the life of her unborn child). It is an underlying worldview that declares “rights.” Rights are

either based on an unchanging, universal moral order or are the product of an evolving culture and tradition “completely relative to particular times and cultures” (Total Truth by Nancy Pearcey). Legal rights must never be confused with moral rights.

It Matters Little. It Matters Much. (November 7, 2004)

Frankly, I am glad it is over. For the last four years we have experienced an unending presidential campaign. Every day the news was filled with charges and counter charges. A high degree of acrimony dominated public discourse. Accusations, slander, and bitter attacks were used incessantly in order to insure a victory in the November 2 election. Both parties were guilty of boisterous, self-assured claims about what is best for America. This does not mean that I was not a political partisan. I voted for my candidate with great relish. But I did not do so under the illusion that political answers are the best answers. I get the distinct impression that many of our citizens view politics almost religiously. It is as if the right president, the right political party can solve our problems. I don't think so.

The past presidential election and its aftermath matters little. In the grand scheme of things there is a much greater story. I am not suggesting that our president elect does not know this (I recently heard President Bush say, “Life is bigger than politics”). I am merely reminding us of an ultimate reality. The really big story is God's redemptive-kingdom plan centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. A thousand years from now our current political landscape will be but a grain of sand on the shore of God's eternal kingdom. The headlines ought to read, “Jesus Christ is building His church.” That's not likely to happen, but it ought to run on the marquee of our minds. Going into all the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ must never be eclipsed by any human program however noble it may be.

The past presidential election and the new facts it has created matters much. God raises up national leaders and brings them down. We have to be very careful about interpreting the providence of God (e.g., “Our candidate won. So, God must be pleased with us.”). However, God does work through human government to establish moral order, restrain evil, and create peace. It is in this kind of social and political environment that the church is given special opportunities to tell all nations there is only “one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). The Roman Empire gave the early church roads, peace, and governance that facilitated the rapid spread of the gospel. God has ordained the strength and moral vigor of nations as a means of advancing the gospel. The nation in which the body of Christ resides by necessity is the staging area for world evangelization. God uses kings and presidents to further His plan. He used Cyrus, king of the Medes and the Persians, to release Israel to return to the Promised Land (Isa. 45:1). History abounds with many other examples of God's guiding hand. The material resources of America are extraordinary. As Christians we can give money, travel, and assist believers in economical deprived countries.

Do we consider ourselves as people who have an abundance of resources? I have seen how far a seemingly meager gift can go in other national economies. In some places a hundred dollars a month can enable a pastor to serve his flock. A new computer can do wonders for a believer who is patiently working on an eight-year-old model. Missionaries who are supported by the generosity of their home church can play a vital role in planting a church in a gospel impoverished place. No, American money is not the answer to everything. God first of all wants

our hearts. Is our love set upon Him? If so, then our check books will follow. We will look for ways to be involved in the Great Commission.

The people and needs of Romania are fresh in my mind. I think of Valentin who is serving as pastor of the Way of Joy church in a very poor area of the city of Iasi. There is not enough money among the poor people in his little congregation to support him. I think of Luminitsa, the young Romanian girl working among the Gypsy children, who wants to be a missionary to Brazil. Where will she get her support? I think of Marcela, a skilled translator for the Bethlehem Bible Institute in Iasi, who works on an old computer doing mountains of valuable translation work. I could go on. I look at my own material possessions. Is there more that I can do? I am sure there is. I awaken each day to the reminder, to whom much is given, much is required. That should matter much to us.

The Waiting Room (November 14, 2004)

We have been here before. Some things never change. People are camped out throughout the area. Some are reading newspapers. One large family is receiving an update on the progress of their loved one's operation. A man is attempting to comfort a lady dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex. A few people are trying to sleep. At least their eyes are closed. We are in the waiting room at the Piedmont Hospital. Steve Barrett and his two daughters, Shay and Nikki, are prepared for at least a three hour wait. Earlier we gathered around Linda for prayer as she was being wheeled into the operating room. The latest MRI (just before the operation) did not reveal any change in the walnut size tumor in the center of her brain. We prayed for God's mercy, that the surgeon will have the best use of his God-given skills and acknowledged our trust in God's infinite wisdom. The attending nurse listened patiently.

Steve is telling us about the gradual realization that Linda was developing some kind of neurological problem. Her forgetfulness was beyond normal. At our age short term memory is not what it used to be. This tumor appears to be nonmalignant, but it will be a very delicate operation requiring state of the art microscopic instruments. Talking with family and old friends helps. I look back on my parents' surgeries and consider them to be some our closest of family times. We prayed together, got caught up on the latest news about extended family members, and visited our shared memories. But we would rather not be here. A Thanksgiving gathering is preferred. There we can discuss our ailments, the cost of health insurance, and play with the grandchildren. I think Thanksgiving is more like heaven (without complaints and ailments) with the greatest joy of all, Jesus will be there. I like that thought. All of our pain and suffering will be behind us. We will never run out of time for anything. God will have wiped away every tear from our eyes, "there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

Do the people in this waiting room know about the realities of eternity? Sometimes I think there are fumes inhaled that create a loss of touch with reality (things as they actually are). Actually, most people are drunk. There is little if any thought of heaven or hell, that we are all sinners, and if we die in our unredeemed condition, we will spend an eternity in hell. Laughter, cell phones, newspapers, and an approaching weekend of football don't reveal what is a heartbeat away. The fumes breathed are known theologically as the noetic (because of sin we don't think right)

effects of the fall of Adam into sin. We are born spiritually blind. Only God the Holy Spirit can create the understanding needed to grasp the meaning of the cross of Christ.

The operation is over and the surgeon has told us that everything went well. The tumor, about two inches in size, was removed through a three-quarter inch hole in the skull. It is amazing what modern medicine can do, but all praise goes to God who makes it possible. We saw Steve heave a sigh of relief as the doctor gave him the good report. Steve later interpreted that sigh as a praise-the-Lord. It will take weeks of convalescence and the loving help of family and friends. The walk through the valley of the shadow of death is never an easy one. But we need not fear evil. Our Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, is with us through the dark ravines of life when death is a very real threat. He gives us courage to deal with all our fears whatever they may be: impending death, loss of a loved one, job insecurity, prolonged illness, imminent surgery, a new math class, a bully on the school bus. Whether God delivers us from an evil in this life or from this evil world, we have the guarantee of His presence. Are we prepared for the dangers ahead? Only the Lord can lead us through death's dark shadows for He alone has conquered death. The resurrected Christ was dead but is now alive forevermore. Savor this truth in the waiting room of life.

A Thanksgiving Table (November 21, 2004)

Our increasingly secularized culture fails miserably in its encouragement to be thankful. It is ironic that in such an affluent society as ours, there is so much complaint. The last several months of hard-fought political campaigning gave us a steady diet of discontent with the economy, health care, education, and you name it. We are also plagued with everybody's insistence on their rights. Government entitlements are traded for votes. The "right to happiness" in our founding documents seems to have eclipsed thankfulness for the opportunities and freedoms we presently enjoy. But the greatest tragedy of all is the absence of a national acknowledgement of thanksgiving to God. The original intent of Thanksgiving Day was to give thanks to God for plentiful crops. Interestingly, the World Book Encyclopedia (1975 edition) tells us that "Thanksgiving is also a time for serious thinking, church services, and prayer." On a cold December day in 1619 English settlers near Charles City, Virginia stated in their charter that there would be an annual day of thanksgiving to God for their arrival in the new land. We must not allow the apostles of secularism to lead us away from a God-acknowledging time on Thanksgiving Day.

May I suggest a psalm to read and ponder on Thanksgiving Day? Psalm 103 is a great hymn of thanksgiving spoken by the psalmist to himself. It has been said that "he is cataloging the goodness of God, enumerating his blessings, lest in a moment of depression or backsliding, he should forget the source of his prosperity and take God's grace for granted." Take a careful look at how David does this. His opening words remind us that thanksgiving is a self-administered means of changing our outlook on life (vv. 1-2). Sometimes we have to shake off our apathy and say what needs to be said. We must take charge of our minds and memories if we are to meaningfully kindle our emotions. We dare not fall into the trap of threading mere words through our lips while our hearts are far from God. Forgetting to acknowledge our God-given benefits may be a sign of a deeper problem, namely, that we have allowed satisfaction with our comforts to dull our spiritual senses.

What are the benefits that come from God? In short, thanksgiving embraces the expanse of God's redeeming work (vv. 3-5). One's relationship with God is the essence of our purpose in life. Because of who God is, forgiveness is immediate and is the greatest benefit of all. But our infirmities of body don't go unnoticed. Physical healing comes from God though it may be delayed or even denied (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:13-23). David was overjoyed with deliverance from a pit. Perhaps this was a rescue from premature death (6:5; 28:1). Give thanks to the Lord for the healings that He has granted us.

But is our thanksgiving based solely on what we get from God? There is something far more important. We praise God for who He is. Thanksgiving sees the light of God's mercy beyond the rain shadow of human unworthiness (vv. 6-14). God's grace to us is generous and His justice is tempered with mercy. We are therefore assured that God designs our journey through life in order to train us in righteousness. He displays His love and mercy upon us immeasurably and understandingly. We can find no greater example of this than what God has done for us in Christ on the cross. It was there that justice and mercy kissed. Pardon for sin is possible to those who put their trust in the Son of God.

There is more. Thanksgiving chooses not to dwell on the boundaries of a fading life, but upon life with God forever (vv. 15-18). Our lives, like grass and flowers, will wilt away in a short time. But our response should be the enjoyment of God's provision, never forgetting that His blessings are contingent upon our obedience to His commands. God has a special love for those who fear Him. Are you in awe of God, trembling at the thought of displeasing Him? There is a cornucopia of good things that come to those who pursue God and His precepts.

There is no sound sweeter to the ears than the rising crescendo of praise to God from all creation (vv. 19-22). No part of the universe is beyond the sovereign rule of God. Angels are invited to join in the chorus of praise. One day a redeemed creation will add its voice to the swelling tide of thanksgiving to the Lord who is worthy of exaltation. No child of God sings solo in the congregation of all creation. Will there be praise in our hearts in this Thanksgiving and Christmas season? Set your table this Thanksgiving Day with praise for God's mercies. Read Psalm 103 and join your voice with others in blessing the Lord. O come, let us adore Him!

The Dark Shadow of Discouragement (December 5, 2004)

We have all experienced it. It can knock the emotional wind right out of your sails. Everything takes on a lack luster appearance. Where there had been enthusiasm and an optimistic spirit, there is now a loss of zeal. A mood of pessimism takes over. The difficulties and problems that had been there before are now suddenly blown out of proportion. They stand before you like bullies daring you to do what needs to be done. You think about quitting, doing something else, going somewhere else – anything would be better than your present circumstances. It is discouragement, the loss of desire to go on because of a loss of hope.

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). The biblical record bears this out by revealing episodes of discouragement among God's people. It was discouragement that entered into Israel's failure to enter Canaan. On the threshold of the Promised Land, the children of Israel let the obstacles ahead keep them from achieving their objective. Their attitude was marked by a lack of faith. The giants in the land (the sons of

Anakim) intimidated them. They were afraid. They balked and consequently failed God. Forty years later Joshua charged a new generation of Israelites to be strong, courageous, and not to be dismayed (Josh. 1:9).

Elijah is an example of a servant of God who was ready to throw in the towel (1 Kgs. 19:4). After a courageous, God-exalting confrontation with the prophets of Baal, Elijah ran for his life when Jezebel put a price on his head. He became discouraged and wanted to die. Even the Servant of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, encountered the temptation to succumb to the apparent futility of His earthly ministry. Knowing that His mission was to show the glory of God, He said, "I have toiled in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (Isa. 49:4). Jesus expressed to the Father what He saw, which was little visible reward for His work.

There are a variety of roads one may take to discouragement. If my motive for Christian service is to promote myself, I am a sure candidate for disappointment. Dependence on others rather than on the Lord can lead to disillusionment. When somebody else fails, I quit. Anyone can fall and fail you. But the Lord will never fail us. Physical and emotional fatigue contributes to discouragement. Sleep loss, inadequate diet, and a lack of exercise is a sure recipe for debilitating pessimism. Failure to meet with God in the Word and in prayer creates distortions in the way problems are processed. Discouragement comes when I try to live without the resources God has provided for preserving service. Unbiblical expectations and unrealized goals can cloud the mind and warp one's perception.

What is the cure for discouragement? In the first place, it must be remembered that struggling with despondency is not in itself a sin. The Servant of God wrestled with "frustrations and feelings of futility." The crowds began to thin out (Jn. 6:67). He faced rejection, unbelief, and misunderstanding. When He died, what had He accomplished? However, in the Servant's struggle with discouragement He did not sin (Heb. 4:15). He knew who He was and what He had come to do. He entrusted His life and work to His Father. The words "yet surely" in Isaiah 49:4 reveal oceans of truth about the way Jesus dealt with discouragement as do the words "and My reward (is) with My God." He understood that it was for God to decide whether He had been a failure or not. Peter captures the soul of Jesus when he says that Christ "kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23). There it is. Discouragement will be a part of life, but it must not stay or be allowed to turn us from the work God has given us to do. When the idea visits us that we have failed and have been unsuccessful, we must show it the door. Our circumstances must be seen from the standpoint of God's perfections. Stand with God in the matter you are fighting. Revisit the truth that the work God has given you to do can never be a failure. Keep on obeying God and move toward the light of faithful servanthood through and beyond the dark shadow of discouragement.

My Brother's Keeper (December 12, 2004)

I am the oldest brother of five boys. I was born in 1941. Tim was born in 1943. Because of this I always had a playmate in those early years. We had many adventures together. He usually did what I asked him to do which sometimes got us both in trouble. One of my earliest memories is my asking Tim to climb on top of the chest of drawers. I told him if he would jump, I would catch him. It seemed like a fun thing to do at the time. He jumped. I couldn't stop him from hitting the floor. I wasn't much bigger than he. The floor came up to meet him. Our mother was

not amused by our attempt at a circus trick. There was the time after a heavy thunderstorm we went out to play in the ditch running fast with overflow. I told Tim not to follow me. But this time he wouldn't listen. He fell in the ditch and cut his head on some glass. With blood running down his face we went to get some emergency help from our mother. Guess who got a scolding for endangering his younger brother?

As we got older Tim became quite valuable to me as a catcher for my imaginary baseball games. I always wanted to play baseball. Tim was not so enthusiastic, but he was cooperative. I had him squat down on the back side of the sewer cover (manhole cover as it was known to us then) as home plate. I pitched and called the balls and strikes and won every game until Tim got tired and went in the house. One of our last adventures was a hike we decided to take while our family was camping in the Smokey Mountains. We got bored, and it occurred to us that if we walked a little (so it seemed) distance up the mountain we could get a great view of the campgrounds. We headed up the path. It wouldn't take long. The woods got darker. Suddenly, we thought we heard something. Maybe it was a bear. We took off running all the way back to the camp site. In the meantime, a posse composed of our parents and a Forest Ranger had been looking for us. Our father's fury will go down in family lore. We didn't think we were lost. We knew where we were.

College came for Tim and me. We set off in different directions. I was preparing myself for full time Christian work. Tim went to a Christian school that became a stumbling block to him. He quit going to church. He struggled with the absolutes of Christianity. Tim ventured far from God. He carried a lot of anger toward our father (his own words). The Bible was not to be trusted. Our grandmother died praying for Tim's reconciliation with God. I also prayed and longed for a relationship that didn't have a God-hole in it. In the last few years something amazing has happened. I will quote Tim's words as they appeared in an article he wrote for a well-known devotional guide. "But when I turned to the Lord and began seriously to read and study the Bible, I learned that I am never abandoned or alone. God is our true and reliable father and will never leave us, even in our darkest hours." I can't wait to see our grandmother as we rejoice together in what God has done.

The drama of redemption starts out with a story about two brothers. The relationship ended tragically. Cain killed his brother Abel. When asked by God where his brother was, he sarcastically replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain lied about his brother's whereabouts and topped off his fratricide with an insolent evasion of his responsibility. Human sin ruptures relationships. But thankfully reconciliation is possible by the grace of God. As of this writing I will be going to spend a few hours with Tim before his heart surgery. We will talk about our growing up years together. I will tell him that I love him. We will pray together. I am my brother's keeper.

The Grinch Who Stole Christmas meets Charlie Brown (December 19, 2004)

There is a lot of grousing over who stole Christmas. Did the Grinch do it? Was it Hollywood? Perhaps it was the ACLU. They are certainly among the usual suspects. I should explain myself. There is an argument going on over the place of Christmas (or any religious holiday) in our pluralistic society. The secularists seem to be in a full court press to make the weeks between Thanksgiving and December 25 free of any public displays of Christianity and its Christmas

traditions. The bank teller and the salesclerk wish us a “happy holiday.” One gets the impression that some higher-up in the business has sent word out that “happy holidays” is not as likely to offend customers as does “Merry Christmas.” Manger scenes certainly must not be seen on government property. Christmas music is edited to eliminate Christian themes. We are subjected to endless renditions of “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Frosty the Snow Man.” The public school scene is a minefield of potential offenses. Depending on the school’s principal, “winter break” is preceded by Santa Claus, elves, and cookies. The no-offense Christmas season is a conflicted one for sure.

And we must not forget the movies. Gene Veith in his recent article in World Magazine entitled “Empty Bromides” calls attention to the annual serving of seasonal film flicks. There is “Surviving Christmas,” “Christmas with the Kranks,” “Polar Express,” and perhaps the most dismal of all, “Bad Santa.” As Veith points out, “The secularized Christmas seems to be losing its jolliness.” A brief survey reveals anti-Christmas movies that frequently wallow in sappy sentimentalism. The hollowness of a Jesus-less Christmas is sure to yield an abundance of empty stockings.

But rather than spending precious time lamenting the loss that has been suffered, there is opportunity waiting in the wings. The steadily encroaching tide of secularism needs to be met by Christians incarnating the Christ event. The early church was born and thrived in a pagan world. Christians distinguished themselves by displaying Christ in their daily lives. They spread the good news that a Savior had been born, who is Christ the Lord. He laid down His life for our sins. He was raised from the dead. To believe on Him is to enjoy the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. The world has no message that is a match for this. Generosity and abounding joy are hallmarks of a Christ-transformed life. As we show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, Christ makes His appearance. No court of law can keep that from happening.

Invite non-Christians into your home. Let your warm hospitality melt the suspicions and isolation, hanging like ice-cycles in our neighborhoods. Exalt Christ by bearing verbal witness to the meaning of His life, death, and resurrection. Let us make sure that our children and grandchildren know who the Christ child was, what He came to do, and what He will do in the future. If we allow Christmas to be merely a body-wearying, mind-numbing pursuit of gifts, we are betraying the Redeemer who bought us with the greatest gift of all. I love the scene in Charlie Brown’s Christmas. Charlie can’t find anyone to explain to him the meaning of Christmas. Finally, Linus comes to him dragging his blanket and sucking his thumb. He immediately informs Charlie that he can tell him the meaning of Christmas. Linus walks out onto a stage and quotes Luke 2:8-14. Christmas is about Christ. Linus walks off the stage blanket in hand and thumb in mouth. Point made. Did the Grinch steal Christmas? I don’t know. But one thing I do know. Linus has told us where we can find it.

Resolutions (December 26, 2004)

New Year’s resolutions. The very words send a shiver up the spine of many. Memories of resolutions made and resolutions broken litter the landscape of our minds. Well intended resolve for a new and better year often founders on the shoals of old habits that stubbornly hang on, malignant laziness, or unreasonable expectations. But for whatever reasons, we tend to shy away

from making written goals that we aspire to pursue. It is my proposal that we revisit the subject of resolutions.

Jonathan Edwards has distinguished himself in American history as a theological giant. His life and writings have preached to millions. Edwards was a pastor, theologian, philosopher, and saint extraordinaire who lived by resolutions that he wrote out as a young Christian (age nineteen). Though his life was relatively short (he died at the age of fifty-four in 1758), he left a witness of devotion to God that should inspire every child of God. He wrote out seventy “Resolutions” composed with the solemn reminder: “I am unable to do anything without God’s help.” A brief survey of some of these resolutions will help us to reevaluate our own spiritual vitality and, hopefully, commit ourselves to greater love and allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

“1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God’s glory and to my own good, profit, and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, however so many and how ever so great.” It was Edward’s determination to spread God’s fame and seek the good of others no matter what the cost. Savor that thought for a moment. I must not approach life as merely a collection of days. Instead, I must see it as one grand story drawn together by an overarching purpose. Do I see my life and the coming year that way? Or have I given myself over to a life-game of trivial pursuit?

“3. Resolved, if ever I shall fall and grow dull, so as to neglect to keep any part of these resolutions, to repent of all I can remember, when I come to myself again.” We are to take our sluggishness and sin seriously. In the words of the Puritans we need to do some “soul-vomiting” during our journey to heaven. When was the last time you fell down on your knees and asked God for forgiveness for a sin you have committed?

“5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.” Do I know how to manage my time without being a crank? I think it is a good habit to regularly pause and evaluate the way I am using my time. How much time do I devote to mental bubble gum?

“17. Resolved, that I will live so as I wish I had done when I come to die.” Can I single out those attitudes and sinful habits that will one day cause me great grief? We need to determine God’s priorities for us and let them define our lives.

“18. Resolved, to maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking.” Ouch! We live in a land of full pantries and refrigerators. Does my appetite rule me? Do I overindulge? We all need to commit ourselves to eating healthfully. Do I love God with all my heart and all my stomach?

“24. Resolved, whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, to trace it back till I come to the original cause; and then both carefully endeavor to do so no more, and to fight and pray with all my might against the original of it.” Yes, there is the danger of introspection, but we Americans tend to live at such a fast pace that we don’t examine our hearts (desires and motives) as we should.

“28. Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of them.” Did I read my Bible through this past year? We have a new year in front of us to spend meaningful time in the Scriptures.

“67. Resolved, after afflictions to inquire what I am the better for them, what good I have got by them, and what I might have got by them.” If we really believe that an infinitely wise and loving God is sovereign over our circumstances, should we not trust God in the most difficult of times? “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes” (Psa. 119:71).

“70. Let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak.” May God give me the grace to use my tongue for the encouragement and faith-building of others.

O Death, Where Is Your Sting? (January 2, 2005)

The death of a father and grandfather in a head-on automobile accident, the death of a local businessman after a year-long bout with cancer and failing kidneys, the death of a twenty-nine-year-old mother after two years of battling Hodgkin’s disease, the death of a twenty-year old, only son, in an automobile accident. These have been in our family’s personal experience during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season. Beyond this circle of death are the scores killed weekly in Iraq and within the last week the tens of thousands in southern Asia swept into eternity by killer tidal waves. Still other headlines stand gloomily in the background; Baghdad blast that kills 29, fetus-snatch suspect appears before Judge. Bad news is nothing new, but sometimes it reaches deafening proportions with death always standing there with its sickening grin. The king of terrors ultimately silences every tongue, snatches children from their parents, severs marriages, and leaves incalculable grief in its wake. The poet, Shelley, grasps the reality of death, “Death is here and death is there. Death is busy everywhere, all around, within, beneath, above is death and we are death.”

If your worldview is defined by belief in human evolution, death is reduced to various forms of roadkill. Naturalism views death as the extinction of personality and individuality. If we are matter and nothing else, death is merely the exclamation point at the end of a hopeless life. The dirty little secret of humanists (those who view God as a wish-fulfillment) is the cold assertion, as stated in the Humanist Manifesto II, “...there is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body.” To Eastern Pantheistic monism (Hinduism and Buddhism) death is framed in terms of karma (you are getting what you deserve) and reincarnation (recycled existence without any pardon for sin). The bleak summation of a monistic interpretation of reality is that “no human being in the sense of individual or person survives death.” According to an Islamic worldview, death takes one either to paradise or hell based upon good works weighed out by Allah.

When we invite the Christian worldview into the room with the Bible as its final authority, we are given the truth about death. God decreed that death would reign as the penalty of sin (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:17; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 7:13). Adam and Eve were created able not to sin. They were warned that death would come if they disobeyed God. Satan denied the possibility of death (Gen. 3:4). The Evil One always wants us to avoid the reality of death. Adam and Eve experienced death when they willfully disregarded God’s command and ate the fruit from the tree of good and evil (Gen. 3:7, 19; 5:5). A state of spiritual death occurred immediately. Physical death

began its ugly work. The curse of sin and death enveloped the entire creation. Man, the sinner, gave himself over to rebellion against his Creator (moral evil). Nature fell under the bondage of decay (Rom. 8:19-22). The earth groans (natural evil). The animal creation became red “in tooth and claw.” Cats eat birds, weeds take over the garden, and drought and blight kill crops. Tornadoes destroy property and lives, mosquitoes bite and infect with malaria, earthquakes move the ground, and tsunamis sweep away property and lives.

Is there any hope for this curse-ridden creation and death-plagued humanity? There is. The irony is that the end of death is found in death. The death of Jesus Christ is the moral and spiritual center of the universe. The death of death has occurred in the death of Jesus Christ (Rev. 21:22-23; Heb. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:10). Spiritual death (the separation of man from God) is abolished through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:1-3). Physical death is defeated through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Jn. 5:21-28). The second death can have no power over the believer because of his union with Christ (Rev. 20:6; Rev. 2:11). By submitting to death Jesus Christ triumphed over it. The sting of death has been removed by His atoning death. Freedom from the fear of death is found through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

When we look into the faces of those who have been brutalized by death, the love and compassion of Christ should flow from us. We will reach out in mercy to help relieve the physical pain and misery. We will give of our resources. We will show up in some way to help. We cannot remain as bystanders offering theological explanations. We will be moved to support those in the body of Christ who are near the human devastation. We will increase our efforts to take the gospel of Jesus Christ of those who have survived and who will one day themselves die. They must know that the sting of death has been removed in Jesus Christ.

Tsunamis (January 9, 2005)

I cannot get that huge wave out of my mind. I have seen the footage of the tidal waves rushing over land, buildings, and people. But there is that one still picture of a solid wall of gray water about thirty feet high, poised to devour anything and everything in its path. By now we have all been drawn into the pain and suffering that has been visited upon the millions along the shorelines of South and Southeast Asia. Disasters are not respecters of persons. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians have experienced devastating losses. The problems of evil have also rolled in with the waves. There is the immediate, experiential problem of evil that wells up in the heart of a brother whose sister has been swept away into a watery grave. There is the problem of evil as an intellectual puzzle. Why is there evil in this world? There is the problem of evil people preying upon the hurting in humanitarian scams and child kidnapping. There is the problem of natural evil. What is wrong with nature? How did it get this way? As one journalist has said, “Why us? Why here? Why now?”

Interviews have been conducted to elicit explanations from those of various faiths and philosophies regarding the human tragedy of killer tsunamis. Hindus speak of the power and capricious nature of the gods. These angry gods must be placated. Buddhists talk in terms of karma and the necessity of generating “good merit that can be transferred to the deceased as a positive force in their next lifetime.” This would seem to mean that if enough good is done in this life, you won’t live in a fishing village on the Indian Ocean in the next life. The Muslim interprets the destructive tsunami as the will of Allah giving the survivors an opportunity to gain merit for the judgment day to come. Interestingly, there is a rumor passing through Muslim

communities that the deadly tsunami was a judgment on Muslims and infidels for moral compromises. Some Muslims are even saying that the earthquake that triggered the tidal waves was due to a joint American and Israeli nuclear test.

Jesus Christ was interviewed by some of His contemporaries regarding two incidents of disaster and death (Luke 13:1-5). The first was the slaughter by Pilate's soldiers of innocent Galilean worshipers. The second was that of a tower that fell killing eighteen people. The implication was that the victims deserved their death due to some sin they had committed. "Did God judge them for excessive sin?" Jesus' answer is most illuminating. The death of anyone reveals the sinful condition of every human. A natural disaster, like a deadly tidal wave, exposes the mortality of humanity. People die every day but when thousands die at one time it is particularly poignant. Jesus does not say that those crushed by a falling tower did not deserve their fate. He widens the issue. We all deserve to die because we are all sinners. So, what should we do in response to wars and natural disasters? We are to repent. It has been said that a tragedy is a loudspeaker "to call attention to our guilt and destination." D. A. Carson has pointed out our flawed thinking. "It is a mark of our lostness that we invert these two (peace and tranquility and pain and death). We think we deserve the times of blessing and prosperity, and that the times of war and disaster are not only unfair but come perilously close to calling into question God's goodness or his power – even perhaps, his very existence. Jesus simply does not see it that way." This is not to say that Jesus ignored the necessity of kindness and compassion toward those who are suffering. There is the parable of the Good Samaritan which tells us to love our neighbor. But what Jesus is emphasizing in Luke 13 is the recognition of the seriousness of our condition. Without repentance for the sin of rebellion against God and His salvation in Jesus Christ there is a death that will be eternal. To die physically without having placed one's faith in Christ is the greatest of all disasters.

There is a lesson to be learned from the animal kingdom. It is extraordinary that there has been very little loss of animal life in the tidal waves that hit the shores of Southern Asia. Elephants actually broke their chains and ran to higher ground five minutes before the tsunami hit land. Some special sense of impending danger drove them to a safe place. While we show compassion and minister to the victims of disasters, we must never forget the far greater message bound up in nature's groaning and mankind's mortality. Sinners must turn and run to the higher ground of God's forgiveness (Rom. 3:20-26). Flee now from the wrath to come.

Slavery, Segregation, and the Church (January 16, 2009)

Hooded, sheet-wearing, Bible-quoting racists (Ku Klux Klan), cross-burnings on Stone Mountain, segregated public transportation ("Colored sit from rear to front. Whites sit from front to rear"), water fountains, restrooms, schools, and churches. This was the South where I grew up. A popular swimming lake (located near what is I-285 and the airport today) displayed a sign at its entrance prohibiting "colored people and Jews" from enjoying the cool waters in the hot southern summer. As a boy I looked at the sign, was grateful I wasn't excluded, and went swimming. How easy it is to not have a problem with other people's problems. I remember the janitor at the church I attended. Lij (short for Elijah) could stay in the men's room and clean up the church building, but he and his family weren't welcome to worship alongside white folks. But things began to change with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. The Civil rights activism led by Martin Luther King Jr. with its boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and eventual

legislation changed society's segregationist ways. There is still a lot of well-disguised racism, but race relations are markedly improved over what they were during the days of Jim Crowe.

An embarrassing chapter in the struggle for racial equality in America has been the oftentimes feeble response of the church. The political activism of evangelical Christians since the 1980s was absent in the 1950s. Whereas many pulpits throughout the South had sought to justify slavery prior to the Civil War, their spiritual descendants did the same with segregation. I was once told by a student at a well-known Christian university that God said, "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Prov. 22:28). This was an attempt to use the Bible to "prove" racial segregation.

The child of slavery, racial segregation, presented a formidable challenge to those who worked for racial reconciliation in the body of Christ. It was African American pastors and churches that led the way to end racial discrimination. Sadly, I didn't see many of my white brothers and sisters in Christ rise to the occasion. I heard sermons on the Tower of Babel (a favorite segregationist text) and eloquent appeals from well-known Bible teachers to resist racial integration. I do not wish to villainize my spiritual fathers. In many ways they unwittingly planted the seeds of racial reconciliation. They did this by their evangelism and world missions zeal that reached across racial lines. They taught me the Scriptures that began a transforming work in my life (though they did not see the racial implications of what they were teaching). It was not until 1961 while in college that I began to awaken from my benign segregationist slumber. I read the book, Black Like Me, in which John Howard Griffin, a white man, told how in 1959 he had darkened his skin and traveled the South as a black man. My white eyes were beginning to open to what had been the invisible world of the southern black. In 1964 while in seminary I became friends with John McNeal, a married black student from middle Georgia. For the first time in my life I had a friendship with a black brother in Christ. My world and my plans for the future were being reordered.

The journey from slavery to segregation to racial integration is not over. As one generation was blind to the evil nature of racial discrimination, what is it that we do not see? We can pass judgment on those who failed to acknowledge and repent of racist attitudes. But how comfortable are we with the materialism that infests modern society? The unborn are aborted and it is gauzed over as a woman's reproductive health issue. Appeals are made to let scientists experiment on human embryos. This is not to say that Christians have overcome racial prejudice. How many churches continue to leave "transitional" neighborhoods for the safety of another white ghetto? The vast urban areas of our cities go without a strong gospel witness because of crime problems. African Americans, Hispanics, Caucasians, and all other racial and ethnic groups in the body of Christ must work together to pray for reformation and revival in the church. I pray that the progress we have made in racial harmony will not be wasted in the lukewarmness of compromise with a culture that is not a friend of the truth. And woos us above all else to be comfortable.

The Return of Moloch (January 23, 2005)

Shelomith and Abigail were brimming with delight as they compared their pregnancies and childbirth stories. They laughed over the adventures of their baby girls, who were only a few months old, and dreamed of who these darling children would grow to look like (her mother's

eyes, her father's nose), and what roles they would play in the community of Israel. But one evening Abigail's husband, Shema, hot and tired from another seemingly hopeless day in the sun-parched field, brought sad and chilling news. It had been decided. There was no other way. Their young daughter, Timna, must be taken and given as an offering to the god Moloch. The priest had announced that children must be sacrificed if there was to be rain which the nation so desperately needed. The parched land cried out for ground-soaking rains. Only the gods could give it. Abigail wept upon hearing what was to be done with her bright-eyed baby girl. She looked into her little girl's face. Her mind was racing with ways to avoid this awful thing. But the decision had been made. Shema and Abigail both knew that their child like others in Israel would have to pass through the fire if Moloch's blessings were to be received. They wrapped Timna in the blanket especially woven for her birth. They walked silently together down the hill to the valley of Ben-hinnom. They could hear drums, bells, and chanting. With his priest attendants standing by there stood the image of Moloch before them. With one final look into the innocent and angelic face of Timna they presented her to the priests, who with prayers to the god for renewed fertility and prosperity, laid their firstborn in the fire-reddened arms of Moloch, protector and provider. The gift of this young life would help to insure blessings. Abundant harvests would replace the barren fields. They watched without visible emotion while the flames reduced their baby to ashes. Moloch had been given their most treasured possession. Now what would he give in return, hopefully peace and plenty.

This true-to-life story was probably repeated thousands of times (Jer. 32:35; Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kgs. 23:10). Could such a horrible ritual take place in our day? I tell you it does. It takes place in the killing of millions of unborn children every year in America in the name of the god of pro-choice. How many aborted babies are offered on the altar of personal rights deemed more important than the rights of the unborn? Life is given by God. He created life (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7). Our every breath is a manifestation of life given by God. What makes human life sacred? It is because every man, woman, and child are made in God's image. God is the author of human life. The high value of human life is reflected in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). The wonder of what God has done for sinful human beings, who deserve only death and eternal judgment, is seen in the everlasting gift of forgiveness and joy through faith in Jesus Christ. Bound up in this sublime gift is also the resurrection of our bodies. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we have the promise of our own resurrection body.

When does human life begin? The Bible is not ambiguous about this. The fetus is described as a person. It has developed all its human physical characteristics by about eight weeks (Jer. 1:4-5; Lk. 1:41-44). The biblical ethicist, J. J. Davis, is certainly right when he says that the "biblical writers saw a continuity between the prenatal and postnatal states." God's hand is seen in the development of the fetus in the womb (Psa. 139:13-16). David saw his dignity, his value, his meaning in life as arising from God's involvement in the development of life in the womb. This truth is the occasion for praise, gratitude, and worship.

Where do the Scriptures lead us in this matter of the fetus and the question of whether it is fully human? The benefit of any doubt regarding the fetus should go to the fetus. We should treat the unborn as human, since in the words of one theologian, "it is highly likely that God regards a fetus as a person capable of (at least potentially) that fellowship with God for which man was created." Such a critical issue as human life being at stake demands that fetal life is treated as

infant life. Would we not act on the presumption that an unconscious person is alive and not treat him as dead till proof is certain? If one is driving and sees what may be either a pile of rags or a child lying in the street, one will assume it is a human. What logic is it that treats the unborn as disposable when God counts it as life given by Him? The gods of our age have made the innocent and defenseless in the womb as potential offerings. These child sacrifices are most often for something other than saving the life of the mother. We have become all too comfortable with Moloch's flames.

Ambulances and Hospitals (February 13, 2005)

Everything seemed to be normal. I finished teaching two classes, rode the shuttle to the Charleston airport, and ate a bite of supper before the flight to Atlanta. And there is where the problem began. I have eaten hundreds of tuna fish sandwiches in my life, but this one was not going to let me forget it. The catch of the day (or was it the catch of last year?) was sitting heavy on my stomach all the way to the Jackson-Hartsfield airport. Eric, Cheryl, and my three grandsons took me with them to a restaurant on Virginia Avenue. I didn't eat. I observed and felt miserable. The next thing I knew an Atlanta City policeman offering explanations of what may have happened. I had passed out and broken into a cold sweat. The officer was trying to reassure me. It was kind, but it didn't help. I passed out again. My brain needed oxygen. Thankfully, an ambulance came and picked me up. I had wondered what it would be like in the back of one of those fast rides to the hospital. During the next four hours my body was ravaged by all that a case of food poisoning can do. The next day and a half the ice storm of January 2005 was viewed from my hospital window.

Since my siege of sickness, you have told me of similar stories of bouts with bad food. Apparently into many lives some food poisoning must come. I think of all the places and things I have eaten and had not experienced any trouble, certainly not like this. It presented me with a first; an ambulance ride to a hospital of someone else's choosing. But my relatively brief crisis of physical suffering has been a useful instructor. It has given me the opportunity for some lessons in the school of affliction. How fragile our physical well-being is. It can change without much notice. This doesn't necessarily mean that God is suddenly displeased with us. Among other things it is a jolt of reality. We are mortal. We get sick. We will not die healthy. "But we have this treasure (the gospel of Jesus Christ) in earthen vessels (our frail and fragile human bodies) (2 Cor. 4:7).

I am thankful for the emergency medical help available. If we are going to need an ambulance, we want it to be in the U.S.A. What would we do without nurses? They were there to see if I needed anything, to give counsel, and take vital signs. There is no place like home, but a good nurse can stand in the gap. Think of our missionaries and what they may have to deal with in medical emergencies. Many of us have been in some of those places and our prayers should be much better informed as a result. Loving, helpful, and caring brothers and sisters in Christ are emergency personnel in their own right. Those men who came to me in my weakest moments were God's representatives in a special way. How does God show us mercy? It is through His servants who clean up our messes.

Thank God for a loving family. In the providence of God, Eric was with me through the early hours of my ordeal. He accompanied me to the hospital, stayed by my side, and slept in a

straight-backed chair and on the floor in my hospital room. He was sacrificial, thoughtful, and protective. I am blessed. Our circumstances are always under the guiding hand of God. Though Beth was unable to be there, she was eager to come home and be the mercy-giver she has been so often in the past. Her loving and kind ways are evident in Eric and Miriam.

Our church family surrounded me with concern, prayers, help, calls, cards, and visits. A gift of bananas helped me through a day when the need for some nutrition exceeded my appetite. Two men even braved the ice storm to bring me a green plant. I have cherished memories of God's abundant care through Christ's body. Where is God in our suffering? One place for sure is His presence in His children.

The last several months seem to have had more than their share of physical infirmities. Funerals, brain surgery, heart by-pass surgery, automobile accidents, and cancer have made their appearance. This is not the way things are supposed to be. Suffering was not a part of paradise. But when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, pain, suffering, and death descended upon creation. Non-Christian world views simply don't have an adequate answer to the great symphony of sorrows and sighs that plague humanity and nature. There is only one way in which we may set our moral and spiritual compass in the face of evil. It is the cross of Christ and the empty tomb. Ambulances and hospitals should make us thankful for the conquest of evil in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will all be sick at some time in the future, and we will all die. But through it all Christ comforts us by His promises and people and is waiting to receive us into His heavenly presence.

Poison Ivy (February 20, 2005)

When my grandchildren come to visit and want to walk in the woods, the first talk we have is about poisonous plants. I show them poison ivy and explain how harmful it can be. It grows on vines twining on tree trunks and can spread out over the ground. The carbolic acid in poison ivy can create a lot of human misery. If you have ever been afflicted with a case of poison ivy, you can remember the itching, reddened skin, and the blisters. I have known some people who have gotten it in their eyes. You don't want this to happen to your children or grandchildren. The plant easily disguises its danger. Its leaves are red in the early spring, then shiny green, and in the autumn, it turns red or orange. If you are going to venture into the out-of-doors, you need to recognize poison ivy's three leaflet design and beware.

But there are even greater dangers facing our children and grandchildren. We must prepare them to detect those ways of thinking that will do harm to soul. Like poison ivy there are poisonous systems of evil thought spread out over the landscape of life. One of the most pervasive injurious philosophies is the thought that all that exists is matter. Matter is all there is, and that's all that matters. It is presented more deceptively beautiful than that but make no mistake about it. It is deadly. The famous astrophysicist, Carl Sagan, articulated this viewpoint rather bluntly: "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." One abysmal teaching of naturalism is its view of death. There is no life after death. In the words of Bertrand Russell, "No fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave." Try to let that thought bring comfort to you on your death bed. To ignore the eternal is the greatest of tragedies. This interpretation of reality can be found in theology (atheism), ethics (ethical relativism), biology (Darwinian evolution), and economics (socialism). It flourishes in state colleges and

universities. There are even forms of it in Christian educational institutions. There is no safe place.

Another variety of noxious thinking is commitment to pleasure seeking. The idea is that life is to be defined in terms of personal fulfillment through the experience of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. This is not a new concept. It is as old as Satan's appeal to Eve in the Garden of Eden; "Eat this fruit and you will be happier than you imagined possible." The tricky thing about a philosophy of self-gratification is that few will claim to be card-carrying pleasure-seekers. They will instead be found pursuing pornography wherever it can be found, living from one movie or one great meal to the next one. Feelings drive them. They seek those things that make them feel good; methamphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, and sexual partners outside of marriage. Hedonism is encountered wherever one turns. It is the premise of countless television commercials and movies.

A first cousin to hedonism, which is essentially a philosophy of despair, is the outlook on life that says nothing has meaning. Hopelessness feeds the pleasure-seeking mentality. But it also nurtures the dark, angry persuasion that nothing is valuable. Contemporary art and music are filled with gloominess. The philosophical term for this is nihilism (the rejection of objective reality, moral, laws, etc.). Nihilism is naturalism's (secular humanism) gift to the world. If we are as humans nothing more than a highly sophisticated form of chemical soup, then let's just go ahead and plan our funerals. The attempt to live as if life is meaningless may be appealing to some, but it is unlivable. It is futile to deny our very nature which demands meaning.

That everyone has truth in their own way is a poisonous perspective of recent vintage. It sounds user-friendly and offers the appearance of solving the truth wars. Instead of there being only one true truth there are many truth constructs. According to this reasoning, objective truth does not exist. Abby ("Dear Abby"), a queen of newspaper advice, says "in my view, the height of arrogance is to attempt to show people the 'errors' in the religion of their choice." Though Abby is not counted among the academic elite, she has expressed the judgment of what is known as postmodernism. If you have wondered how and when the values of "tolerance," "openness," and "inclusion" were crowned, you have to look under the rock of denial of all absolute truth claims.

These are only a few of the poisonous systems of thought that are calling for the allegiance of the next generation. We have some work to do. Our youth need to see a Christianity that is the real thing. They need answers to their questions. They need to be thoroughly grounded in the faith of historic Christianity. They need to know how to recognize the poison ivy of thinking that only increases the pain of hopelessness. "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" (Psa. 34:8).

Give Me Some Men (February 27, 2005)

What is masculinity? The last three decades have seen countless magazine articles and books devoted to answering this question. What role does nature and nurture play in what it means to be a man? The president of Harvard University has found himself in the midst of frenetic media attention over a statement he made regarding the possible lack of aptitude of women in math and science. Was he suggesting that the brains of men give them an advantage in math class? The pendulum of persuasion swings back and forth regarding the differences between men and

women. At the present time advancements in neurological studies are revealing some interesting things. Men excel at thinking in three dimensions (men love maps, but I think we knew that). Some psychological tests have shown that females are better at reading the emotions of people.

Another dimension to what constitutes masculinity and femininity is found in education. The claim has been made that there is a war against boys (The War Against Boys by Christina Hoff Sommers). The contention is that a “misguided feminism is harming our young men.” Boys are competitive, full of energy, and many have a hard time sitting still in class. Put them in a classroom where there are girls and watch some of the differences. The girls sit quietly, pay attention, and do their homework. Educators are concerned by the fact that boys are less committed to school than girls. One survey has shown that by twelfth grade, males are four times as likely as females not to do homework. Many boys have been medicated for “hyperactivity.” In some ways I am not surprised. Recess and out-of-door activities helped keep my generation of males naturally “sedated.” Today I see many young boys getting very little exercise. Computer games, electronic toys, and television have become more interesting than ball games in the yard and adventures in the woods.

But what should really concern us is the need for young men who will step forward as leaders. True masculinity is not merely physiological. Men are to be leaders, protectors, and providers by God’s design. This requires courage, informed risk-taking, strength of character, and sacrifice. If we are going to rear a generation of godly men who know the true meaning of masculinity, we need to follow the biblical paths of wisdom. Boys must grow up in homes where God-honoring masculinity is modeled by dads. Divorce and single parenting are not the pillars of society. If boys are going to learn how to be men, they must have it modeled for them. Much of the gender confusion in our day is directly attributable to broken homes and absent fathers. It has been observed that “hypermasculinity (i.e., “macho posing of aggression, violence, and predatory sex canonized in rap music”) is one indication that boys are not learning how to be men. Another attack on true masculinity is sexual promiscuity. Sex outside of marriage with either a female or a male is a repudiation of true masculinity. A promiscuous male “sexual athlete” is a corruption of God’s design for male sexuality.

Our young men need older men who have a proven record as moral leaders and faithful providers. Future fathers must grow up with men around them who are loyal to their wives and know how to take responsibility for children. Younger men need to see single men who take their celibacy seriously by seeing it as a means of serving God in extraordinary ways (1 Cor. 7:32). The husbands of tomorrow should have as their heroes husbands who cherish their wives by protecting them, providing for them, and laying down their lives for them. Do we want to see our boys grow up to be men in the truest sense? Then we must give them an example. Yes, of course, boys need their mothers. The identity of true femininity plays an integral role in male social development. But boys are forged into real men by knowing what it means to provide moral and spiritual leadership in the home, by abstaining from sexual relations before marriage, by taking financial responsibility for their wives and children, and by seeking to please God in all things.

The words of an old song serve us well. “Give me some men who are stouthearted men, who will fight for the right they adore. Start me with ten who are stouthearted men and I’ll soon give you ten thousand more.” Christ’s men are men after God’s own heart. They want what God wants and will settle for nothing less. They have a ravenous appetite for righteousness. They rise up

early in the morning and meet with their God. They lead their family in worship. They are unashamed of the gospel of Christ. They will stand up for justice. They will show mercy. They will tell the truth. They will stand against evil. Give me some men who are stouthearted men for the glory of God.

A Conference for Shepherds (March 13, 2005)

On Tuesday morning, March 1, Justin and Brook, Bryan and Carla, Van Edwards, and Beth and I took a flight to Los Angeles, California. We attended the Shepherds' Conference at the Grace Community Church. Upon arriving late in the afternoon, we found ourselves in heavy traffic. It took us two hours to go twenty miles to our evening meal at the home of Bill and Donna Shannon. We were greeted with warm hospitality and a delicious taco salad. Early the next morning after a dawn's early, light run we drove to Grace Church and registered for the five-day conference along with 3200 other pastors. It was non-stop from there. Our days were filled with general sessions, seminars, and frequent visits to the bookstore. This was not a short-term missions' trip. It was a pastor's briar patch (remember Brer Rabbit?). Good Bible preaching, God-exalting music, meals with friends, free books, and bookstores. Preachers were born and bred for this kind of pleasure. But Van is an example that you don't have to be ordained to enter into the love of the truth and desire to be a faithful shepherd.

John MacArthur spoke on the Book of Jude ("The Long War on the Truth"). We were reminded of the danger of spiritual terrorists who are engaged in a "relentless siege on the truth." Subversion of the gospel message, self-fulfillment theology, and the development of the "seeker-friendly church" movement serve as a test of the doctrinal discernment of Christians. Style takes precedence over substance. Personal experience and feelings are trumping Bible exposition. Instead of contending for the faith, the church is compromising with error. Pastor MacArthur called upon shepherds to protect their flocks from untruth. The words of Jonathan Edwards ring in our ears, "In like manner should ministers travail for the conversion and salvation of their hearers. They should imitate the faithfulness of Christ in his ministry, in speaking whatsoever God has commanded him, and declaring the whole counsel of God."

In the general session of Thursday morning R. C. Sproul delivered the first of his two powerful messages on justification by faith alone. The vital Christian truth has been a life-long passion of Dr. Sproul. In no uncertain terms the difference between the Roman Catholic view of justification by faith was contrasted with that of the Reformers. Perhaps a brief test at this point is what we need at Berachah. Is there a difference between believing the sinner is saved by faith or by faith alone? Are we made righteous at conversion or are we declared righteous? Is imputation essential in God's work of justification of the sinner? Is there a difference between a profession of faith and a possession of faith? We must allow such questions to drive us to the Scriptures to understand, in Jude's words, "our common salvation."

The three to four hundred pastors' wives in attendance were given the added delight of participating in a noon tea catered by Command Performance, the official caterers of the Reagan Library. Patricia MacArthur spoke. Beth, Brook, and Carla sat with a lady from the Ukraine. They were encouraged to hear of the changes taking place in that country under their new president. Many of you prayed for the December 29, 2004 elections and can thank God that the new administration is seeking the Christian ethic in public and private life.

I must not forget the seminars. Joe Francis, a teacher at the Master's College and associated with the Institute for Creation Research, and Stephen Boyd, professor of Old Testament, gave an excellent examination of the claims of theistic evolution. And in case you didn't know it, there are very few Christian colleges committed to an early earth creation interpretation of Genesis. Many Christian colleges teach that God used evolution to do His creation work. I was able to think back over my own experience with Christian fundamentalism from the 1940s to the present day. Phil Johnson, editor of many of John MacArthur's books and long-time staff member at Grace Church, lead a seminar session entitled "Dead Right: The failure of Fundamentalism." It is possible to be right in a wrong way. The failure to distinguish between primary and secondary doctrines, the lack of accomplished theologians, and a ruthless response to fellow Christians with whom there were disagreements have all contributed to the death of the fundamentalist movement.

It was a memorable week filled with God-exalting worship, Bible-rich teaching, and warm Christian fellowship. Thank you, Berachah church family, for making it possible for your fellow servants and under-shepherds of God's flock to get our spiritual batteries recharged.

The Road to Easter Sunday (March 20, 2005)

The days of the week are more than mere time markers. God entered into the creation of the world by way of a week of six workdays and a day of rest. Man's work week has been historically, at least where the Jewish and Christian influence has been significant, a reminder of God's creation week.

The week of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has forever changed the way we think about Friday and Sunday. It was on Friday that the Savior of the world finished His redemptive work on the cross. On Sunday morning Jesus came out of the grave. The first day of the week is a cherished day. It is a day of new beginnings, hope, and the promise of eternal fellowship with God. Sunday is a sweet day to Christians for all that it represents. The bodily resurrection of Jesus makes it so. But it would be good for every believer to go through what has come to be called the Passion Week. I recommend that we become very intentional about the way we think, live, and worship in the week leading up to Easter Sunday. Consider it a road to be traveled with its God-given memories and meaning. We will walk through each day according to the traditional view that Jesus was crucified on Friday, Nisan 15.

Sunday (Palm Sunday) was the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The clouds of the death of the Servant of God were gathering over the city of Jerusalem, but to see and hear the crowds on that day you would not have known it. The Sanhedrin was plotting Jesus' death. Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's true King, but few, if any, seemed to grasp the meaning of His festive entrance into the holy city. The crowds did not understand. The disciples were ignorant. The religious leaders were angry. Jesus was in tears (Lk. 19:41-44). The crown rights of God's Servant did not satisfy the expectations of the spiritually blind. His rights to the throne of David would have to be purchased through the suffering of His atoning sacrifice. *On this Palm Sunday let's reflect on the fact that the answer to the human problem is the defeat of sin and death, not political triumph.*

On Monday Jesus returned to Jerusalem. He passed an unproductive fig tree and placed a curse on it. When Jesus came to the Temple courtyard, He vented His anger at what religion had done to His Father's house. The Lord of the temple took a whip and drove out the money changers. The cleansing of the temple was an exhibition of its kingdom intent (Hag. 2:9; Mal. 3:1; Isa. 2:2-3). At the second coming of the Messiah, He will take His place in the millennial temple and the Word of God will go forth from Jerusalem. *On Monday let's pray in a special way, "Thy kingdom come."*

Jesus passed the withered fig tree on Tuesday and declared it an object lesson in faith-driven prayer. The disciples were given a vivid memory of the truth of the power of God demonstrated in the response to faith. A series of controversies marked Jesus' day in the temple. He gave His last public discourse and revealed important prophetic truth to His disciples on the Mount of Olives. In the Messiah's teaching on authority and the colossal hypocrisy of the Pharisees a stake was driven into the heart of an apostate Judaism. Jesus was David's Lord, but the Pharisees were blind leading the blind. The destruction of Jerusalem would serve as a paradigm of the events preceding the coming of the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory (Mk. 13:26). *On Tuesday let's ponder the shortness of time and the significance of the age in which we live.*

Wednesday seems to have been a day of quiet. Jesus probably spent the day in Bethany awaiting His rendezvous with death. Thursday evening Jesus met with His disciples in an upper room on Mount Zion, preparing them for His sacrifice for sin and the days beyond. Heavy hearts were encouraged. The Holy Spirit was promised. The Passover meal was eaten and explained in startling terms. The bread and the wine were vivid symbols of the Savior's broken body and His spilled blood. *On Thursday let's rehearse the glories of the gospel.* Gather the family and give thanks to God for the all-sufficient, atoning death of Jesus Christ that brings us the forgiveness of sin.

And then it is Friday. Good Friday it has been called. It is good because of what was accomplished, but it was bad because of what sinful men did to Jesus. The King of the Jews was scourged for our redemption. He was pierced through for our transgressions. The physical suffering was excruciating. But the greatest horror was the judgment of God that fell upon Jesus for our sins. It had to be this way because He was opening a new and living way to God (1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 10:19-22). It was Friday and He cried from the cross, "It is finished." Wherever we are on Friday at about 3:00 p.m. *let's offer up praise to God for the Savior who has taken our sins that we might have God's righteousness* (2 Cor. 5:21). Then we must wait for Easter Sunday morning. You know what happened then. *Let's meet at the empty tomb.*

A Matter of Life and Death (March 27, 2005)

There are crises that, in a unique way, reveal our beliefs in an immediate way. These index crises expose one's worldview; what is right, what is wrong, and in the Terry Schiavo case, what is the value of human life? It's difficult to sort out the real issues from the more peripheral ones because so many have said so much in the last week. Did Terry Schiavo say that she would rather die than live in a "vegetative state?" Is she aware of her surroundings (family, caregivers, etc.)? Is no hope of recovery or improvement grounds for removing her feeding tube? Has the government (legislative or judicial) over-stepped its bounds? Is the sanctity of marriage under

attack by those who want to deny Terry Schiavo's husband the right to make medical decisions on her behalf? Do her parents have any legal or moral rights in this matter? Is quality of life a determining factor in whether one should live or die?

Mercy killing is not a new phenomenon in our society. Dr. Kevorkian's suicide machine, books such as "Final Exit," and Clint Eastwood's Academy award winning, "Million Dollar Baby," have all pushed the right-to-die movement forward. Terry Schiavo's now famous case has revealed in a new and horrifying way the extent of the moral anarchy of our age. But the question that stands first in line is: "Is mercy killing ever morally permissible or justifiable (and are there cases where it would be morally obligatory to remove a patient's suffering?)" A Christian response is necessary.

There are moral absolutes. God has established a moral creation because He is a moral Being. The Terry Schiavo story has become the occasion for a major worldview clash (Christian theism versus naturalism). The principle of life informs a Christian belief. God gives life and only He can authorize any taking of human life. Human government does not have autonomous rights. It cannot create rights. Suicide is wrong because it is self-murder. The sanctity of human life has its roots in Christian teaching. The principle of death is an issue. Death is not a friend but an enemy. The last enemy to be destroyed is death and that will happen because of the death of death in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who have not experienced God's pardon of sin in Christ and who are counting on their own good works to take them to heaven are deluded. The gaping jaws of eternal separation from God in hell await those whose only preparation for physical death is a living will.

Murder is wrong. Scripture forbids the taking of innocent life of creatures made in God's image. It is not a coincidence that many of those who want Terry Schiavo to die are also advocates of abortion on demand. The principle of suffering is vital. Suffering can be an opportunity to glorify God. Affliction can have meaning because of the meaning of Jesus Christ's death on the cross. Joni Eareckson Tada is a living testimony how "God transformed an immature and headstrong teenager into a self-reliant young woman who is learning to rejoice in suffering." I am not surprised that a culture of death is developing. Suffering without God is a bleak outlook.

Healing and loving caregiving are also potent factors in times of great pain. God may choose to heal. Recovery is sometimes possible and should not be ruled out. Comfort and help for the hurting are always right. Even in those cases where recovery and improvement may not be possible, merciful care should be given. And for the Christian there is always the hope of a future resurrection body when all things will be made new. The principle of precedent should guide our thinking as well. This is sometimes called the wedge principle or the slippery slope argument. The practice of so-called mercy killing sets a dangerous precedent. It all starts with an attitude that there is such a thing as life not worthy to be lived. In the words of one ethicist, "One might want to limit the breadth of the category of people who qualify for euthanasia, but once it is decided that certain people are to die, it is hard to find any logical grounds for keeping others alive." While there seem to be some legitimate legal concerns involved in Schiavo's case, there are those guilty of moral turpitude seeking to hide behind the skirts of a judicial process. It is possible to be legally right and morally wrong.

The confusion over which handicapped and incapacitated people get to live and those who should die is a dilemma of modern man's own making. The inability to think discerningly and

morally is due to the judgment of God (“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts ...” Romans 1:18ff). When man wants to live without God there will be nothing but the increasing loss of moral perspective. So then, is the removal of Terry Schiavo’s feeding tube a merciful act? No. What man calls mercy may not be mercy. It may be murder. But God has revealed His mercy in His Son, Jesus Christ. The empty tomb of Jesus Christ offers us our only hope in a world that views personal existence as only a matter of life and death.

Sing Like We Believe It (April 3, 2005)

The last fifty years have brought significant changes in the way Christians do congregational worship. Much of this change has come within what is known as the Free Church tradition. By Free Church is meant those churches that have stood outside the established Church of England and have come to comprise much, if not most, of American Protestantism. During the 1800s the views of the revivalist, Charles G. Finney, began to make their impact on congregational worship. The sermon was preceded by “preliminaries” and followed by what was often a lengthy invitation. This model still followed in many churches today. The 1960s saw another wave of change in congregational worship. A greater variety of musical instruments made their appearance. The overhead projector and power point made it possible to project the words of hymns and gospel songs on a screen. Worship teams and more enthusiastic singing began to characterize the Sunday morning worship service. These and other changes in music style have contributed to what has come to be called “worship wars.” Connecting the word “war” with worship seems strange, but there have been problems. How a church does its music has become the occasion for congregational civil war. Some of the battle lines have been generational in nature, with the youth wanting a different musical experience than their parents and grandparents. But that doesn’t explain everything. If the Bible is to inform and circumscribe our corporate worship, we must do our thinking along its lines.

How does music fit into our worship of God? The early church was born with a song in its mouth. Paul and Silas sang during the night while in jail in Philippi. The Corinthian and Ephesian congregations were admonished to sing with spirit and mind fully engaged making melody with the heart to the Lord. True worshipers are singers of spiritual songs to the Lord. The Holy Spirit makes it possible to sing joyfully unto the Lord and joins believers together in mutual encouragement and edification. Worshiping in song is to be the declaration of biblical truth in a variety of musical styles and songs. The Word of Christ is to enrich our public worship (Col. 3:16). Speaking to one another in song can take place through a wide range of musical styles and forms. As singing people, we value diverse expressions of love for God. This would include the voice (solos, choir, ensembles, duets, trios, etc.) and other instruments (piano organ, guitar, wind instruments, percussion instruments, etc.). The musical styles and songs of God’s people with any musical instrument must always be for the purpose of glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ. This is accomplished when the heart is prepared. If our music is merely artistry, ability, and show, then it is not truly Christian. Christian music is not for entertainment. It is for the exaltation of God. Hypocrisy produces music that is out of harmony with God. We honor God when we offer thanksgiving to Him in the name of Christ. Hearts that are filled with delight in God cannot help but break out in exuberant praise.

The application of these fundamental truths regarding our worship in song should affect us in many ways. The Christian ought to come to Sunday worship already a worshiper the other six

days of the week. To sit or stand alongside other believers in a worship service and stare off into space, daydream, and mindlessly thread words through one's mouth is a mockery of God-inspired worship. To sing a familiar hymn or chorus and not have a clue as to what we just sang is scarcely easy. The mind is to be engaged when we sing, savoring the precious truths that fall from our lips (1 Cor. 14:15). We are to listen to ourselves and our fellow believers as we sing unto the Lord. But singing is not just a matter of the mind. If our hearts are filled with joy, then our cups will run over. This would mean strong singing, even if you can't carry a tune. If you want to raise your hands while singing as an expression of adoration of God, then do it. If others around do not do the same, don't let that become an issue. The enjoyment of God can show itself in different ways through different personalities, but it must always be the offering of genuine devotion to the Lord (Jn. 4:24). Allow brotherly kindness and love guide you in the way you participate in worship. Be open to a variety of musical expressions in worship. One of the reasons music is the occasion for conflict is because our basic response to music is emotional. But that must not be allowed to define our level of involvement.

As you enter the next worship service bring the following things. Bring biblical truth to inform, guide, and pulsate at the center of your singing. Bring a sense of responsibility for your thoughts and concentration on the words being sung. Bring an awareness that God is our audience. Bring a singing, worshipful heart. Martin Luther's words are worth remembering, "If any would not sing and talk of what Christ has wrought for us, he shows thereby that he does not really believe." We are believers. Let's sing like it.

The Death of a Pope (April 10, 2005)

Roman Catholics throughout the world are mourning the death of John Paul II. He has proven to be the most popular Pope in modern times. Since his ascendancy to the papacy in 1978 he has won the admiration of Catholics and many non-Catholics by his moral courage, congenial manner, intelligence, and ecumenical bridge-building. The praise that has been heaped upon him since his death reflects more than mere media over-speak. Pope John Paul II was liked by many. One thing that has especially endeared him to so many was his willingness to stand up to tyrannical, atheistic Communism. He is credited, along with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, as contributing to the demise of the Potemkin Village of the former Soviet Union. The façade of the "worker's paradise" needed some international leaders who were willing to stand up to the bullying tactics of the Soviet leaders.

The non-stop news regarding John Paul II has exposed the viewing public to Catholic teachings, tradition, and rituals. While much of it is somewhat curious to the non-Catholic, one thing is patently clear. The Roman Catholic Church believes in the primacy of the papacy. According to its teachings the Pope is the visible head of the church, Jesus Christ being its invisible Head. The word "pope" comes from the Latin word "papa", which means father. He is also known as the Bishop of Rome. The succession of popes through the centuries has lent itself to the appearance of an unbroken authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This sense of tradition, stability, and authority has appealed to many who are dismayed over the moral, spiritual, and ecclesiastical anarchy of our age. Even some well-known evangelical Christians have renounced their Protestant heritage to join the Roman Catholic Church.

How did the papacy arise in the church? The Roman Catholic Church claims that the Apostle Peter was the first Pope. This special authority given to Peter is said to be taught in Matthew 16:17-19 and John 21:15-17. This is obviously no inconsequential assertion for it serves as a basic doctrinal plank in Roman Catholicism's belief regarding authority. Catholic dogma says the Church is the final authority and the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, the "divinely appointed guide to the faithful." The Pope is considered to be infallible in matters pertaining to faith and morals when he speaks *ex cathedra* (out of the chair of Peter). The Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility was defined in 1870 and is part of a fundamental difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestants, namely, the matter of authority. To understand Rome's view of ecclesiastical authority one must picture a pyramid with the authority of the Church at its apex and the Bible and tradition in the lower two corners. According to this view the Church has given us the Bible and claims the right to interpret the Bible for us. This is in total contradiction to what the Bible teaches about itself and the matter of doctrinal authority. Belief in matters of faith and morals resides in the Scriptures, not in popes, church councils, or tradition (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The doctrine of papal infallibility and the attendant belief in the final authority of the Church over the Bible is theological fiction. It is in glaring contradiction to "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The Word of God stands over the Church. The Scriptures are the infallible authority for the Pope and everyone else. It is the Bible that is to bind the conscience, not the Church, councils, traditions, or popes. The grand gospel truth of justification by faith alone is a testimony to the fallibility of the Church. It was the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Leo X that anathematized Martin Luther and his followers for championing the truth that salvation is found in Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone, and not in the sacramental system of Rome. This one doctrine alone stands as a continental divide between those who believe the gospel and those who do not. Roman Catholics, Protestants, and anyone else who desires to be the friend of God and enter into His heaven at death must repent of all attempts to gain a righteous standing before God by baptism, going to Mass, penance, indulgences, or any other works. At the moment of faith in Christ one is declared righteous, "clothed with the righteousness of Christ." Any pope, pastor, theologian, church member, or idol worshiping pagan who wishes to pass through the gates of heaven into God's holy presence must come the same way, by the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ and the infinite worth of His all-sufficient atonement.

The death of Pope John Paul II with all its pageantry, ritual, and lines of mourners is a window through which every candidate for death must look. We will all die. Millions may not attend our funeral, but the one final assessment of our standing before God that matters most, is that of God Himself. If you died today, are you clothed in the righteousness made possible by the finished work of Jesus Christ? Only those properly attired may enter into His presence.

By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed (April 17, 2005)

The hangman's noose, the gas chamber, the electric chair, lethal injection, a firing squad, and the sword have all been instruments of capital punishment. They do not conjure up comfortable feelings. Having to put someone to death, though government is given that right, is not a pleasurable thing. God, the one who has ordained capital punishment, has said that He takes no "pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 18:23). Society is deeply divided over the legitimacy of the death penalty. Those who think it should be abolished argue that it is barbaric,

discriminatory, and fails as a deterrent to criminal violence. We are hearing arguments that the United States is out of step with the more civilized nations of the world who have abolished the death penalty, and that its continued use is keeping America from being a human rights leader.

The highly publicized case of abortion clinic bomber, Eric Rudolph, has raised the question again. Should society put to death those who have been found guilty of murdering their fellow citizens? Is it a contradiction to say that one believes in the sanctity of human life and yet argues for the use of the death penalty? To further complicate matters, even certain religious leaders tell us that the idea of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is antiquated and should yield to a more enlightened approach to the punishment of criminals. Those who are advocates of capital punishment are made to appear as unmerciful, backward, and unenlightened. But what is the truth? Is there any moral sanity that can guide us through the critical issues of life and death? A Christian worldview holds the keys to morally sound and truthful conclusions.

The sanctity of human life requires capital punishment (Gen. 2:17; 9:5-6). Man has been made in the image of God. Violence in the form of murder is an outrage against God. It has been wisely noted that “murder is wrong because it is killing God in effigy.” One of the first directives given to Noah as he embarked upon a new world was the right of government to take the life of those who have shed the blood of their fellow man. The global flood of Noah’s day was brought on by the evil and violence of the pre-diluvium civilization (Gen. 6:11). God ordained capital punishment for the nation of Israel for a number of offenses (Deut. 17:12; Lev. 20:15-16; Ex. 22:19). While Israel’s law is not necessarily to be the law of non-theocratic nations, certainly it can be said that the death penalty is not inherently morally wrong. The teaching of Jesus does not set aside the Old Testament mandate for capital punishment (Matt. 5:21-22; Jn. 8:1-11). Jesus was not critical of Israel’s use of the death penalty. Murderers were to be judged according to the Mosaic Law.

Human government is given the right to take human life for a justifiable reason (Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 25:11). Human government is ordained by God and its laws are to be obeyed (unless they are commands to break God’s laws). When human laws are broken, government has the right to use force as punishment. That is the significance of the symbol of the sword in Romans 13:4. Paul is affirming the right of government to take the life of a criminal. Such abiding truths as justice and personal responsibility are foundational to the case for the morality of the death penalty. Retribution and the right of government (but not individuals) to exact vengeance for crimes committed are not only right, but necessary for the protection of law-abiding citizens. The nation that forfeits its responsibility to hold people accountable for their actions in relation to its laws is committing social suicide. If someone commits a crime freely, he is morally responsible. Attempts to mitigate the crime of murder by appeals to rehabilitation and supposed developing moral sensitivities are brutal and confused. It was Adam Smith who said, “Mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent.” We should find no comfort in the arguments of legal and ethical standard bearers who tell us that violence only begets more violence. The agenda behind such a shallow bromide is not in the best interest of justice and mercy.

Are the lives of convicted criminals “more worth preserving than the lives of an indefinite number of innocent victims”? Is the purpose of the penal system to rehabilitate? Is overlooking a capital offense a loving thing? Is it possible to create a legal system that can eliminate all human error in criminal convictions? Is capital punishment an appropriate response to evil? The answers to these questions demand moral clarity, but that cannot come about until the issue of ultimate

authority is resolved. Is moral law based on the opinions of man or upon the character of an infinitely wise and just God?

Polished Brass and a Sinking Ship (April 24, 2005)

There is a particular view of eschatology (premillennialism) which has been criticized for its so-called pessimistic view of the present and future. The premillennialist position believes that Jesus Christ is coming again and will, after a time of Great Tribulation, set up His kingdom on this earth. However, before Christ returns, moral, social, and spiritual conditions will worsen significantly. There will be a time of apostasy in the church (1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3). This apostasy is defined as “a departure from truth previously accepted, involving the breaking of a professed relationship with God.” It is dispensational premillennialists who are especially singled out for criticism. Dispensationalists believe that the kingdoms of this world will fail and come to an end before the millennial kingdom, which is a literal kingdom of a thousand years (dispensationalists hold to such core teachings as keeping the church and Israel distinct, a consistently literal interpretation of Scripture, and the glory of God in His kingdom plan). During the Great Tribulation the professing church will align itself with ecumenical and anti-God forces (Rev. 17). This scenario is in stark contrast to the dreams of a one-world ecumenical brotherhood of modern globalism. One well-known evangelist, a premillennialist, from a generation past is widely reported to have said that we should not bother to polish the brass on a sinking ship. The sinking ship is this world which is doomed to be judged by God. The brass polished would-be efforts to make this world a better place to live. That is an oversimplification, but the idea is, why waste one’s time trying to save the world when it is sinners who need to be put in the lifeboats of eternal life?

Those who espouse other eschatological systems prefer to see themselves as more optimistic about the present and the future. Postmillennialists, who believe that Christ will return after the Millennium (but not a literal thousand-year time period) see this world as becoming better and better as the gospel is spread throughout the world. A Christianized world is expected according to this view. But premillennialists have been accused of being unnecessarily gloomy for other reasons. There are those who believe that Christians have a cultural mandate to establish the Lordship of Christ over every area of life - politics, medicine, education, literature, economics, etc. The basis for this view is found in Genesis 1:26-28. Since many Christians who are premillennialists have not been particularly socially active and have concerned themselves primarily with evangelism and world missions, they are seen as having contributed to the secularization of society.

How is the Christian to live in this world in view of his belief in the Second Coming of Christ? A survey of the New Testament yields keys to understanding how the believer in Jesus Christ is to live in a world destined for judgment. The key word is “watchfulness,” which is being alert to the times in which the believer lives. There is the danger of becoming intoxicated with the spirit of the age and of becoming complacent and careless in the seasons of life (Mk. 13:5, 9, 13; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 1 Pet. 1:13; 2 Pet. 3:4). Watchfulness involves commitment to a fervent, consistent, and biblically informed prayer life (Lk. 18:7; 21:36; 1 Pet. 4:7). Watchfulness means that the tears of our grief and earthly sorrows fall into the hands of a loving and returning Savior (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Phil. 3:20-21; Rom. 8:18-23; Jas. 5:7). Earthly affliction is the waiting room for our entrance into the delights of Christ’s kingdom. Watchfulness means that the truth of the

coming Messiah and His coming kingdom is to be taught with clarity and consistency, and power (Acts 28:31; 2 Tim. 4:1-2). Watchfulness means that we are to be resolved in our warfare against the tyranny of sin (Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:11-15). God's children will fight sin in the hand-to-hand combat of their personal lives and in the world around them. They will not look the other way while innocent infants are killed and ripped from the womb. The social evils of racism, child abuse, and the break-down of the home will not be allowed to strut around on the stage of life uncontested. Christians owe everyone, saved and unsaved, the debt of love.

Watchfulness means that we are to be sobered by our accountability to the returning Savior and driven to please the one who will reward the faithful (Matt. 25:14-29; Heb. 2:5; 10:37-38; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:5).

Yes, this world is a sinking ship (1Jn. 2:17; 2 Pet. 3:7). It has a rendezvous with the holy God of heaven. This is reason enough for Christians to call all sinners to the lifeboats of eternal life. Is caring for AIDS patients, adopting orphans, holding up a standard against the pornography industry, challenging the pernicious evil of Darwinism, and helping unwed mothers merely polishing the brass on a sinking ship? No. It is the self-sacrificing love of Christians calling desperate, soon-to-drown sinners to the hope that is in Christ Jesus. Christians, man the lifeboats - the Savior is coming.

Eve, the Mother of Us All (May 8, 2005)

Even with a biblically informed mind, it is difficult to imagine what Eve's early life was like. Think of it. She was created out of Adam's rib. When Adam woke up, there she was, a woman of incomparable beauty, health, and intelligence. Evolutionists owe Eve an apology for their ape-like makeovers. Actually, Darwinists don't believe in a biblical Eve in any sense. One of the latest theories is that our 10,000th great-grandmother was only one of a number of muscular food gatherers who could have torn animals apart with her hands. But God says that He fashioned (the Hebrew word is *banah* meaning to fashion or build) Eve from the physical body of Adam and brought her to him (Gen. 2:22). The rental DVD of this story and scene would not stay on the shelves. Whatever she looked like, the man was very impressed, to put it mildly. He broke into a poem of thirteen words which roughly translated means, "Wow!"

How long was Eve in Eden before she encountered the Tempter? We don't know. But it was probably not long. As we all know the first mother did not do well on her first test. She took Satan's bait, disobeyed God, and ate the forbidden fruit. Eve was voluntarily deceived (2 Cor. 11:3). As one commentator has succinctly stated, she listened to the creature rather than the Creator, followed her impressions rather than instructions, and made self-fulfillment her goal. She was a thoroughly modern woman. Eve's sons and daughters should take warning. When God's authority is rejected and replaced by a lesser god, there will be the devil to pay. Mothers who think they know better than their Creator and lead their children to believe that meaning and happiness can be found outside of God are sad stories in themselves.

Eve's story is sad because she failed her children, the entire human race. Even though Adam bears the final responsibility for our imputed guilt and inherited sin (Rom. 5:12), Eve's gullibility lives in infamy. Eve bore many children, but two sons are on the first page of her family album. Did she actually think Cain would be the deliverer promised by God (Gen. 3:15)? Eve was the first mother to bear children with a sinful nature. She was also the first mother to endure the

heartbreak of a rebellious son. Cain murdered his own brother out of anger over God's rejection of his self-styled worship. What grief it must have been for the mother of all living to watch the sin she had helped to spawn cut down her beloved Abel.

Our mother Eve speaks from the grave. A woman can have a lavish table of the grace of God spread out for her, and yet lose it all by believing what is not true. Mothers who listen to their own hearts rather than an infinitely wise God sow the seeds of their own sorrow for generations to come. A mother can be sweet, thoughtful, compassionate, and self-sacrificing, but if she does not know God's salvation in Christ, she cannot give her children what they need most, God's love in Christ wrapped in a motherly heart. If Eve could give her testimony, she would tell of God's merciful provision of clothes for her nakedness (Gen. 3:21). Her original attire had been made of fig leaves (an attempt to solve their problem of shame and guilt). But man-made religion will never solve the sin problem (Gen. 3:7). The story of redemption is bound up in the words, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). The mother of a sinful human race witnessed the shedding of blood to clothe her. The animal skins were more than a fashion statement. There was more to her covering than met the eye. The clothing was symbolic of her redemption on the merits of Christ's future sacrifice upon the cross (Rom. 3:25). Is it not possible that Adam and Eve received instructions concerning the necessity of animal sacrifices as a part of worship?

What is Eve, the first mother, saying to all mothers? The best dressed woman is clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The legacy of the mother of us all is the hope brought through motherhood. The first gospel proclamation was attached to Eve's childbearing when God announced condemnation upon the serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the woman, Eve, would deliver a final and fatal blow to Satan at the cross. Eve's motherhood brought more than a sinful race. It eventually gave us the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was He who purchased Eve's redemption and destroyed the works of the devil (Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8). The mother of us all is a story still being told.

The Meadowlark (May 15, 2005)

I enjoy birds, all kinds of birds, especially songbirds. Wouldn't it be exhilarating to just go up into the air over the tops of the trees or fly the straightest line to your destination looking down on all that traffic? But we are not birds. God has created them and their melodies for our pleasure. Even as I write this, I am hearing at least four different songsters. I even have a Songbird Symphony tape my daughter gave me. The birds sing against the background of a gurgling brook. The songs of birddom have been the background songs of my entire life. The whip-poor-wills filled the woods by the hundreds with their evening calls as I slept on the porch at my aunt and uncle's home. I miss the whip-poor-wills. They are not heard in the Atlanta area as they once were. There was the canary at my grandmother's house. With morning light streaming into the kitchen her pet canary sang its happy song. There were the Blue Jays. I have mixed emotions about them. They are a sassy bunch. They would aggravate me making all that "jay-jay" noise outside my window when I was a teenager trying to sleep-in on a summer's morning. The mockingbird is special. One of them can imitate the songs of 32 different kinds of birds in 10 minutes. What a repertoire. A mockingbird offers its rich sound on warm, moonlit

nights in the spring. They are very territorial creatures. I have watched one attack himself in the reflection on the hub cap of my car.

It was only this week that I encountered one of my favorite songbirds. I was jogging slowly in the grass cooling down after a run when I was startled by a meadowlark making its see-yeeer whistle flapping its wings as if it were hurt. It's wing appearing to be broken. They do this when they are trying to protect their young. I had come close to stepping on her nest of four white eggs in the grass. Mother meadowlark was doing her best to lead imminent danger away from the next generation of cheerful singers. The truths of God are scattered all over nature. God likens the protective care of His people to mother bird spreading her wings over her young (Deut. 32:11-12; Ex. 19:4; Psa. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7). One of the best known of these sweet reminders of God's enduring care and guiding providence is found in Psalm 91:1 and 4. Insecurity plagues the human race. It is one of sin's children. You can see it so plainly in children. They love a familiar place and the knowledge that father and mother are near. One of the best gifts loving parents can give to their children is the security of loving attention and assurances that all is well.

The words of the psalmist are calmly reassuring, "He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge." They tell us that God is "our shelter when the winds begin to howl; under God's providence we are defended, protected, perfectly safe – someone else is in charge - someone big, strong, and experienced, who never goes off duty." These words from Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. are true to biblical realities. Insecurity is remedied by understanding the kind of protection God gives His children. When God's providence smiles in the deliverances from danger God gives, we are to rejoice. But there are times when His providence frowns and we trip and fall and break an arm, when a burglar breaks into the house, and other injurious things happen. What are we to make of these? The promise of God's shelter in the storms of life must not be twisted into a guarantee that nothing harmful will befall God's people. Psalm 91 gives only part of the picture of God's providence. Sometimes we get migraine headaches and cancer under His wings. But that does not betray our reason for faith in Him. Bad things can happen to good people, but God has not abandoned them. We have the promise that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those called according to His purpose." Hold on to that. God's wings are never folded. He never forsakes His young. Even in pain and death He is with us. He doesn't explain everything to us, but we know that "no final evil will befall us." Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

Faith doesn't necessarily make brain tumors go away. It doesn't keep us from automobile accidents. Faith knows that God knows what He is doing. He is trustworthy even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Evil can do some awful things to us. But when the storm is over and the footfalls of danger have gone, we have come closer to our Lord who has endured the greatest of suffering for us. The cross and the empty tomb guide us to our heavenly resting place. He was broken for us that we might live. That little meadowlark was reminding us that our loving Father will never leave us or forsake us. God is a God worthy of our trust.

My Little Church (May 22, 2005)

Last Sunday made me feel happy. We had sung good hymns, heard God's Word, baptized a new, young believer, placed our bids on pies and babysitting services for the kingdom's sake, and

listened to two of our young men tell us about the needs in New Guinea and how to discipline ourselves for godliness. At the end of the day I told Beth, “I like my little church.”

Before we go any further some words need explanation. The word “my” is technically not correct. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the church and does not share that position with anyone else. My church is the one where I am a member, attend, and serve as one of the elders. The word “little” is a comparative term. The church where we are active participants is not as big as a lot of churches, but it is larger than many others. In comparison to what are known as “mega-churches” (thousands in attendance), “little” is the appropriate word. Little does not imply inferior, weak, or unimportant. It is an expression of affection.

The word “church” also needs to be defined. A local church according to biblical standards is made up of professing Christians (1 Cor. 1:2). The basis for belonging to it is a relationship to Jesus Christ. Christians are related to one another in a family (“household,” 1 Tim. 3:15). A local church will have meetings with some regularity (Rom. 16:5). It will be somewhere, but it does not require a permanent building. Its members will meet as often as is necessary, but it does not exist to merely meet. A local church will have some form of organization (Phil. 1:2). Elders and deacons have been ordained by God as the primary functioning officers. But they do not serve alone. Christ has distributed individual spiritual gifts to function for the building up of the church. The gifted will serve in a variety of ways. A local church will observe the ordinances. New converts will be baptized as a public confession of their faith in Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). There will be fellowship around the communion table to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ. And finally, a local church will devote itself to the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42). Solid instruction in the Scriptures is life-giving blood for the church that exists in its meetings for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). The local church exists in the world for the purpose of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19-20).

I love my little church. It is not perfect. No church is. But it is filled with people who crave the exposition of God’s Word, who serve faithfully, who give generously, who pray regularly, who share the gospel with their families, friends, and neighbors, and who respond to the needs of others. Sunday school teachers labor week after week to pass on God’s eternal truth to the next generation. A Missions Team works hard at missionary care and world missions ventures. The Bosnia Team organized a Sunday dinner and a silent auction that was delightful to watch. People were drawn together in a God-honoring project of sending ambassadors of reconciliation to the Muslim people in war torn Bosnia. This is only some of the body-life spiritual energy expended week after week. My little church encourages me.

There are those who are attracted to the so-called “mega-churches.” If you have entertained such a thought, there are some questions you should ask yourself. Will you know everyone in the congregation by name? Will they all know you? Will you be accountable to anyone? Yes, that word “accountable” is often overworked and misused, but it does communicate an important biblical truth. Part of the “one-anothering” of local church body-life is accepting responsibility for growing in the faith and being meaningfully involved in the lives of others. Will the pastor of the mega-church be available for counseling and encouragement when you are struggling with a problem? Will you be leaving a ministry gap for someone else to fill? Praise bands, gigantic media screens, movie clips, drama teams, and short sermons may attract the thousands, but don’t forget the thousands of smaller congregations faithfully carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

Does my little church need to grow in grace, change, be ready to reinvent itself, repent, and seek revival? It does, if it is going to be the kind of church that pleases Jesus Christ. The words of the Head of the church must always be bound up in our self-examination. There is the danger of leaving our first love (Rev. 2:1-7). The church must beware of any tolerance of doctrinal error (Rev. 2:12-17). It must be on guard against the sins of the culture becoming sins of the church (Rev. 2:18-29). Spiritual deadness and lukewarmness are an ever-present danger (Rev. 3:1-22). I love my church so much that I pray for you daily that we will not dishonor the Lord of the church. May God grant us joyful persistence in seeking the lost, building up the saints, and planting other little churches throughout the world.

To the Class of 2005 (May 29, 2005)

Dear Class of '05,

Well, you made it. By this time, you have either graduated or will graduate from high school soon. You have come a long way from your kindergarten days. Think of what you have had to do, all those bus rides, school lunches, new subjects (remember the day you started doing fractions?), new teachers, new friends, and tests. Yes, I know some of you are home schoolers and you have a different history. There was no home schooling available in my youth. The only ones who stayed at home from public school were those playing hooky (this was one of our words. It means to skip school.). If you have come up through home schooling, you have received many benefits from it. The constant caring supervision by concerned parents is a gift from God. Be thankful for it.

It's hard for me to imagine that you were probably born in the late 1980s. Ronald Reagan was President. When I started the first grade Harry S. Truman was President. Things have really changed haven't they? You are the first generation to grow up with the computer. And you wonder what it must have been like to have only three channels on television. But all this is not the most important thing about graduation. I, a member of the class of 1959, have some words of advice. I hope you will give them some consideration. No doubt your parents have already told you most of these things, but please allow me to reinforce their wisdom.

Know God! I hope you already know a lot about God. It has been the responsibility of your home and your church to instruct you concerning the character and ways of God. Do you know all of His attributes? That's very important, but that is not all. Your knowledge about God is to result in a closer personal relationship with Him. The better you know God, the more passionate you will be about spreading His fame. The wonder of wonders is that we can be friends with the sovereign God of the universe (Jn. 3:16; 17:3). Those who do not know God's salvation in Jesus Christ are starting out life alone. That's a scary thought. Make it your life's goal to be a carrier of the good news of the gospel.

Get wisdom! That is not original with me. Solomon said this, thousands of years ago to his son (Prov. 3:13). When I was a young Christian (in my late teens), I started asking God to help me to know how to live life. I prayed for wisdom hundreds, if not thousands, of times. You will need the skill of knowing how to make the right kind of decisions. Ask God to give you the discernment to pick the right kind of marriage partner. Don't let mere emotions make the deciding call. You will need wisdom in choosing friends, reading the right books, what college to

attend, how to rear your children, and hundreds of other matters. Don't allow yourself to live Biblelessly. You will pay a high price for such negligence. Resolve to read the Bible through once a year for the rest of your life. When we get to heaven you can let me know how you did.

Get yourself prepared! Prepared for what? Prepare to serve God and people. What does this require? It may include college, military service, or some kind of vocational training. Don't settle for just immediate personal comforts. Discipline yourself. Learn a foreign language, how to swim, how to fix electrical problems, how to cook, how to build a house. Take advantage of the opportunities you have. Try to be well-rounded. Read good books. Develop your gifts. All of this is part of being a good steward with what God has given you (Matt. 25:14-30). Look for people who have something to teach you and listen to them. Don't let the thirst for entertainment turn you into a turnip.

Hate sin! You may say, doesn't everyone hate sin? No, they don't. There are thousands of ways we can break God's law, and they are all gift wrapped. That's the way sin is. It is appealing. If it weren't, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in. Wisdom teaches that disobeying God is not something to be treated lightly (Prov. 14:9). Pornography, cheating, adultery, lying, and greed have enslaved their millions. Don't let drugs and alcohol take charge of your life. The road to a wasted life is not without its warning signs. The fool ignores them and goes on to personal ruin.

The class of 1959 had its dreams. Many said that they didn't need God, and set out on life's journey without Him. Others were smitten by the joy of knowing God. This didn't make their lives easier, but it made the way pleasant because of God's friendship. I pray that when the winter of your life arrives that you will have lived it always hungering for more of God.

Because of God's grace,
Pastor Dial
Class of 1959

Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices (June 12, 2005)

Thomas Brooks, a puritan pastor in the seventeenth century, has written a book that describes spiritual warfare with the greatest of understanding. It is entitled, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices. It is a classic and should be read by every Christian. Too many Christians have a woefully inadequate view of Satan's strategy. The way some contemporary Christian writers have spoken of "spiritual warfare" you would think that only in recent years have we really come to know how to do hand-to-hand combat with the devil. The proposed plan of battle of some of these self-styled warriors against Satan and his demons leaves one wondering about the biblical base for their conclusions. Such ideas as demonized Christians, territorial spirits, demons inherited from ancestors, and binding, loosing, and taking authority over the powers of darkness do not represent apostolic instruction.

The apostle Peter warns us that Satan is on the hunt to do harm to Christians (1 Pet. 5:8). He is a hungry lion "seeking someone to devour." That someone is the Christian who is intoxicated with unbiblical thoughts and is spiritually drowsy. The apostle Paul declared that "we are not ignorant of his (Satan's) schemes" (2 Cor. 2:11). This brings us back to Brooks' book. In it he lays out thirty devices of the Evil One. It gives us a look into the devil's play book. The Tempter is

exposed for who is He, a trick shot artist. He knows how to “present the bait and hide the hook” and how to paint “sin with virtue’s colors.” It is by these kinds of devices that Satan works on Christians.

Another device of the devil is “by extenuating and lessening of sin.” His idea is, little sins are not as bad as big sins. So, we ought to bear with “a little pride,” “a little worldliness,” and “a little drunkenness.” Like Lot who wanted to settle in a “little” Sodom (Zoar) and still live, so we can commit a “little sin,” and our soul shall live (Gen. 19:20). The puritan pastor gives some biblical remedies for such flawed thinking which put the lie to the thinking that so-called little sins won’t hurt you enough to kill you. This is the stuff of true spiritual warfare. His first remedy is the reminder that perceived little sins have done the greatest damage. Eve’s bite out of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6) yielded no few consequences. Handling the Ark of the Covenant carelessly cost Uzzah his life (2 Sam. 6:7). We must know that “the least sin is contrary to the law of God, the nature of God, the being of God, and the glory of God.” Another remedy is to see so-called little sins as giving birth to greater sins. Adultery, murder, and grief sprang from David’s wandering eye (2 Sam. 11:2). Much moral mischief has been spawned by a remote control in the hand of a man in a motel room.

So-called little sins must be seen as displeasing the Christian’s greatest Friend by yielding to His greatest enemy. A little sin violates the conscience and becomes a steppingstone to even less concern for doing God’s will. Illegal drugs and lives enslaved to alcohol have often begun with a little joint or a little drink. This kind of danger leads to another remedy. When little sins get their foot in the door, the whole body will follow. This is what Paul told the Corinthian church as it looked the other way while some of its members engaged in immorality. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6). One of the hazards associated with “little sin” thinking is that great sins may prompt immediate repentance while repentance may be ignored with little sins. For example, a young person who gets entangled in DUI charges may be scared into life altering repentance. But when it comes to a lie that is used to avoid the truth about the real reason for a broken curfew, repentance is nowhere to be found.

Strong measures must be taken against little sins. Daniel and his three friends were willing to be eaten by lions and burned to a crisp rather than do something politically correct, but morally wrong. Brooks says, “We must choose rather to suffer the worst torments that men and devils can invent and inflict, than to commit the least sin whereby God should be dishonored, our consciences wounded, religion reproached, and our own souls endangered.” Little sins bring great conviction to the biblically informed, Spirit-sensitized conscience. A final remedy is found in the truth that, “there is more evil in the least sin than in the greatest affliction.” In other words, little sins carry a big price tag, namely, the death of Jesus Christ. The wages of sin is death whether that sin is great or small. We must not forget “that God the Father would not spare his bosom Son, no, not for the least sin, but would make him drink the dregs of his wrath.”

Our Bible study on Wednesday evening through the summer will track further with “Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices.” If you want to know how to wage warfare against the enemy of your soul, come and join us. Spiritual warfare is fought successfully by those who are not ignorant of Satan’s schemes.

A Father's Hope (June 19, 2005)

After sixty-four years of living, forty-one years of marriage, twenty-years of formal education, thirty-nine years in the pastorate, twenty-years of teaching in a Bible College, and forty-nine years of being a Christian, a few thoughts for my children and grandchildren are necessary. With the apostle Paul I can say, "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). The hope of being with Christ is drawing ever nearer. It is a sweet anticipation. I want this hope to be owned and cherished by all my family. Heaven is no fantasy. Its reality rests upon God who is a truth teller. But until that day when we will enjoy the New Jerusalem together, please hear these longings. This is also a call to you my Berachah church family, especially the fathers, to rededicate ourselves to leave no son or daughter behind in our heaven-bound journey.

Miriam, you came to us almost thirty-nine years ago. Our hearts sang with delight as we wrapped you in that yellow blanket and drove away from the hospital in our 1956 blue Chevrolet. You were strong of will. We soon found that out. You grew up in church. You probably don't remember it, but you would stand on the back pew in that little country church in Indiana and mimicked my song-leading arm motions. Now, as a grown woman with three children of your own, you share the weight with Stacy, your husband, of preparing them for the rest of their lives and eternity. Never forget, that after all is said and done, the most important contribution you can make in the lives of Brennan, Melanie, and Meredith, is an example of authentic Christianity. Stacy, as their father, do all that you can to give them the strong anchorage of knowing what they believe and how to live out their faith in Christ. You work hard in providing for your family and have shown much kindness to your in-laws. We are thankful. Brennan, don't settle for a life of merely having savored material things. Be strong for Christ. Don't be ashamed of him. Melanie, you have already given me much encouragement. You took the initiative to start a Bible devotion time in your school. I guess it was hard for third-graders to turn down the invitation of a fifth-grader. Your grandmother and I pray that you will always love God's Word. It is much better than chocolate ice cream. Meredith, at age five you seem to be ready for high school. But we know better. You have strong opinions and are more than willing to express them. You will need wisdom in life. We all do, and only God can give it. Ask God to teach you how to live life His way.

Have You Repented Lately? (June 26, 2005)

Christians in Eastern Europe and Russia are sometimes referred to as "repenters." What is the significance of this? Certainly, it is theologically correct. It is an act of repentance when a non-Christian turns from his false objects of trust to Christ. The Hebrew and Greek words for repentance mean to turn from something to pursue something else. It is a change of direction, or as the Greek word indicates, a change of mind (*metanoeo*). God calls the sinner to a radical reversal of thinking and desires. All Christians are repenters in that sense (Acts 3:19). But what about faith? Isn't the sinner to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31) in order to be saved? It is best to think of conversion to Christ as both repenting and believing. They are not two separate steps. To hear some explain it, one would think that repentance is some kind of work that takes places in coordination with believing. This is needlessly confusing and wrong. Jesus said, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). All those who are non-Christians are to change the way they think about their self-trust and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

When you “change your mind” and turn from your “dead works” and turn toward God and faith in Christ Jesus, eternal life becomes yours (Acts 20:21). Repentance was preached and practiced by Old Testament saints (Ezek. 14:6, 18:30). John the Baptist preached repentance (Matt. 3:2). Jesus preached repentance (Matt. 4:17). Peter preached repentance on the Day of Pentecost and throughout his apostolic ministry (Acts 2:38; 2 Pet. 3:9). Paul preached repentance throughout his ministry to Jew and Gentile (Acts 26:20; 2 Tim. 2:25). Have you repented of your unbelief? The gospel is, “Christ died for our sins, rose again to prove His claims.” You may be saved from your sins through faith in God’s provision in Christ (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 4:25; Eph. 2:8-9). The most horrible thought imaginable is to die without having been born again.

But there is more. Repentance is not only the turning from the old life of unbelief to faith in Christ. It is to become a way of life for the Christian. The believer in Jesus Christ is going to sin and when he does, he must repent (Lk. 17:4; Rev. 3:19). Thomas Brooks said that “Repentance is the vomit of the soul.” Repentance is no easy thing, but it is a necessary thing. Our sins charm us. We think that when we lie about where we have been or what we have done that we have solved a problem. Television “sit coms” promote this kind of thing incessantly. What are we to do when we cheat on a test, lie to the IRS, starve ourselves to look thin, visit a pornographic web site, or choose to live without reading our Bible and prayer? We must repent. What must a husband and wife do when they sin against one another and seek a divorce? They must repent. What does this kind of repentance look like? Read Psalm 51. This was David’s prayer of repentance after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. To get the forgiveness that he needed, David threw himself upon God. He took full responsibility for his sin. Because of his repentance the guilt of sin was removed (51:7-9).

Repentance is a hard work and can only be accomplished by God’s grace. Brooks scores again when he says, “Repentance is a flower that grows not in nature’s garden.” God makes it possible for us to turn from the awfulness of our sin and receive his forgiveness. Do you profess to know Christ as your Savior? If you truly belong to Christ, then the waters of repentance will flow out of your heart. You will want to be nearer and nearer to God. Your sin will haunt you. It will trouble you deeply. Repentance is not merely the vain repetition of words, merely saying you are sorry for what you have done. That is only a comment about how you feel. True repentance is a gut wrenching “throwing-up” of the sin that has been committed against a holy God. When we have repented there will be concern for what sin has done to us and what it has done to others. David was vexed over the effect of his sin on the nation of Israel. How has our bitterness, lust, deceit, laziness, lack of witness for Christ, greed, and the love-affair with ourselves harmed others? Repenters must get this vile stuff out of their spiritual stomachs. It is only then that restoration of appetite for God and growth in Christ can proceed as it should. Have you repented lately?

The Christian Patriot (July 3, 2005)

The movie, “The Patriot,” had its fans and its critics. Some, with a mind to the contrary, viewed the violence in the name of patriotism disgusting. True, the British “redcoats” were portrayed as tyrannical villains, but the patriot was merciless as he settled scores in the name of liberty. Where were the Christians in the war of independence from Great Britain? They were on both sides and equally convinced that they were in the right. Modern Americans sit under the tree of

freedom from their British overlords because many Christians took up the fight for the establishment of a new nation.

The American Civil War brought Christians into conflict with one another over the right of states to secede from the union. Where one was born seems largely to have determined loyalties. In some cases, brother fought against brother. Christians who were not necessarily for slavery rallied to the defense of their families and state. Wars such as the War Between the States and Revolutionary War in America forced the church to think about what constitutes good citizenship as revealed in the Scriptures. Even in our own day the war in Iraq has some Christians at odds with one another over its legitimacy.

On this July 4th the features of biblical patriotism need to be revisited. The Bible does not endorse any particular form of government. Whether it is a dictatorship, oligarchy, monarchy, or a democracy, God's people are to obey the laws of their government. Civil government has a two-fold God-given purpose. The good of society by being a terror to evildoers and praising those who exemplify good citizenship constitute the essence of good government. This is accomplished by the protection of life and property and the preservation of peace and order. Through fines, imprisonment, confiscation of property, and the execution of the death penalty human governments function to repress evil. This all reminds us of the value of law as a restraint to wrongdoing. Those who say that morality can't be legislated are right if they mean you can't have laws to prevent anger. But laws and penalties against crimes of violence and murder are not morally neutral. God has ordained human government to protect its citizens in an evil world.

A fierce debate rages today over the relationship between church and state in a constitutional republic. What seems to have been lost in appeals to a strict separation of church and state is the will of our founding fathers, namely a free church in a free state. The Bible does not subordinate the church to the state nor the state to the church. The state is not to establish a state church, but nowhere in the founding documents of our nation is it declared that God is to be banished from the public square. Those who are working for a secular state are conspicuously promoting unconstitutional endeavors and schemes of rebellion against God Almighty.

Patriotism for the Christian honors the right to serve in the military. This is not a violation of responsibility to obey God's laws. In relation to the spiritual kingdom God's servants do not fight (Jn. 18:36). This, however, does not conflict with bearing arms and fighting for one's country. When the war is a just war, soldiering is both a service to one's nation and a ministry on behalf of God (Rom. 13:4). A biblically enlightened conscience led some to fight as Loyalists to the throne of England in the Revolutionary War and others to fight as American patriots. The Civil War created a similar divergence of action. God's judgment is equitable and according to His infinite wisdom. Today we have young men and women serving in our armed forces all over the world. Many have given their lives in the service of their country. This is an honorable and noble cause. They need our support and prayers.

The nations of this world will not bow their knees to Jesus Christ until He returns in glory at His second coming. Human government does not hold the solution to moral and social ills. Nations are doomed to futile efforts as they seek to bring about a utopia. But, like Daniel and his three friends, the church of Jesus Christ is to serve God by holding its respective governments accountable to God. At the same time service is to be rendered to one's nation as a true patriot as long as no demand is made to disobey God. Christian patriots know that one day the kingdom of

the world will become “the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.”

Alcohol: To Drink or Not to Drink? (July 10, 2005)

Should a Christian drink alcoholic beverages? Should a Christian engage in the so-called recreational use of drugs (marijuana, cocaine, etc.)? There was a time, only a few decades ago, when these questions were answered with a resounding “no.” It has become quite fashionable for professing Christians to drink alcoholic beverages. Some church young people find it no big deal to play with illegal and legal drugs in search of an emotional joy ride. It must be acknowledged that a strong strain of legalism encouraged the measurement of one’s spiritual status by such things as abstinence from alcohol, movies, and other behavior restrictions. But the old legalism has given way to a culture of license that is incompatible with the grace of discipline.

With regard to the consumption of alcoholic beverages, several summary responses present themselves. There are those who say that total abstinence is commanded by the Scriptures. Those passages in the Bible that refer to believers drinking wine (1 Tim. 5:23) are interpreted to mean grape juice. Another school of thought is that drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation is permissible whereas drunkenness is condemned. These two ways of thinking yield to a third understanding of the Bible. It is believed that it is permissible to drink “a little wine.” The Christian conscience cannot be bound in the matter of alcohol. Instead, individual Christians must come to their own convictions based on the best way to use their liberty in Christ. What is the biblical path that must be followed with regard to beer, wine, liquor, and other such beverages?

The Scriptures condemn the immoderate use of strong drink. Christians are not to get drunk (Eph. 5:18). To be controlled by alcohol rather than the Holy Spirit is alien to a zeal for God. The Christian is not to associate with those who call themselves “brothers” but are drunkards (1 Cor. 5:10). There are certain people who become dominated by their sinful desires. They are dangerous company, especially if they profess to be Christians. Christ’s people are not to be drawn into close companionship with them. Drunkenness arises from one’s sinful nature (Gal. 5:21; Rom. 13:12-13; 1 Cor. 6:10). Intoxication is the result of decisions we make, not genetic determinism. Drunkenness is self-destructive (Prov 23:29-35). It breeds a host of ills such as foolish decisions, violence, poverty, family breakdown, and death. The vice-like grip of love for alcohol can bring a nation to ruin (Isa. 5:11).

Christian liberty permits one to either abstain from or partake of alcoholic beverages in moderation. Total abstinence is not God’s requirement for all His people. Self-control and moderation bound up in love for God should guide the believer’s behavior (Gal. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:6; Tit. 2:2). Alertness to the possibilities of a personal fall serves as a caution light when contemplating any non-moral issue (Rom. 13:14; 1 Cor. 10:12). The body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Since the body of the Christian belongs to God, the question is of paramount importance, “How would alcohol, or any food or drink affect my body?” We are to glorify God in everything we do (1 Cor. 10:31). Our culture’s fixation on personal rights, if made a litmus test for our decisions, is a move away from living under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of God’s Word.

Often overlooked in the question of drinking alcoholic beverages is the responsibility the Christian has to others. The believer who desires to please God must be willing to give up his rights for the welfare of others (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8, 10). The restriction of one's freedom in Christ will be necessary as a part of loving one's neighbor as himself. Also, to be considered is the enormity of the problem of alcoholism in our society. We live in a situation that is significantly different from Bible times. In the first century wine was mixed with water. Up to two hundred parts of water to one part wine was a preferred norm. The people of Bible days could not have imagined the high alcohol content of beverages today.

If you choose to drink alcoholic beverages in moderation, have you arrived at this decision on the basis of peer pressure or biblical convictions that your liberty in Christ gives you? Are you drinking alcoholic beverages without full freedom of conscience? Have you considered the possibility that a susceptible "weaker brother" (one who has not developed adequate biblical convictions) is being caused to stumble? Are you abusing your liberty? How necessary is alcohol to your joy, contentment, and adjustment to the pressures of life? Can you cope with the stresses of life without chemical dependence? Alcohol can easily become a god, but it will never offer what God alone can give us.

A Time to Gather Stones (July 24, 2005)

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time to gather stones. He meant God's control of human affairs does not rule out man's responsibility. If fields are to be readied for planting of crops or building houses, then stones must be taken off the land. That means work is necessary if progress is to be made. This is not an earth-shattering idea, but a necessary reminder of the God-ordained value of work. God works through the believer's work. Certainly, God's grace makes our interests, desires, plans, and energy possible. Because of this, productive activity takes place. This is a good time to review the gathering of stones in our church life since so many in our congregation have been scattered during the brief summer break.

The summer months have been busy with a missions' trip to Bosnia, Vacation Bible School, and Youth camps. With the new technology of digital cameras and power-point projectors we are able to see immediate, colorful, and engaging reports on where our church family has been and what happened. This is good. Reports, mostly presented on Sunday evenings, inform us and enable us to feel a part of all that is going on. The Bosnia Missions Team gave us a sense of "you-are-there" in their pictures of the people of Gorazde. The students in the seminary in Novosibirsk, Siberia were again brought closer to us in Frank Pass's presentation. Steve and Kim Reitz, with Crossworld in Gorazde, have expressed their gratitude for our partnership with them in the midst of a Muslim population. The Bennetts will soon take us on a picture-trip to their ministry time in Costa Rica.

Bryan Ryan has shouldered an extra load by coming back from his teen camps and organizing our Vacation Bible School. We weren't sure if we were going to be able to have it this summer given the limited pool of workers. But faithful servants in our church family rose to the occasion. Scores of boys and girls heard the Bible truths bound up in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. And to top off a week of evangelistic outreach, a 3 x 3 basketball tournament was conducted on our much-used basketball court. Over twenty of our neighborhood young men joined in on the competition. If we are going to be a church without walls, it is going to take this kind of thing to

build relational bridges into our community. The eleven baptisms in several months are a cause for rejoicing in God's salvation and challenge us to increase our commitment to the work of evangelism.

The Ladies Bible Class will resume in September after its summer sabbatical. But the study "Helpers by Design" has been meeting twice each month in various homes. Summer Care Groups have met on Wednesday evenings in the Fellowship Hall to study Thomas Brook's Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices. There is much to be gained by looking at our adversary's playbook. If the Devil's temptations are to be successfully resisted, we need to know what they look like.

More "stone-gathering" is in our near future. Awana will begin in September. The second year of our Bible Institute will offer a course in Hermeneutics. Look for the flyer that will explain all the details. The Faith Builders Sunday School class will begin a study in Church History starting in September. Keep your eye on the Book Nook for the course textbook, Christianity Through the Centuries, by Earle E. Cairns. This overview of the history of the Church will explain "the development of doctrines, movements, and institutions" in the church. Attention will also be given to "the impact of Christianity on its times and to the mark of the times on Christianity." An exposition of 2 Peter will begin soon on Sunday mornings providing a helpful biblical backdrop for the church history study. A series on the principles and nature of revival will be offered by Justin Culbertson on Sunday evenings. This close look at revivals in the Bible is being linked to a special Saturday morning conference at Faith Bible Church in September on Revivals in Church History. Several local pastors will be speaking. Further information will be provided.

Pray that the necessary zoning changes on our property will be permitted without any complications. This relatively insignificant change from agricultural to residential zoning will make it possible to proceed with the construction of our new building. And, speaking of prayer, all the stone-gathering mentioned above calls for Christian intercessors to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need."

Back-to-School Supplies (July 31, 2005)

The beginning of the new school year in the middle of the summer still catches me off guard. However, a recent trip to Wal-Mart made it quite evident that something is happening. Mothers were pushing their shopping carts, attended by their school-age children, buying all the necessary (?) back-to-school supplies. This is a much bigger issue than it was in 1947-48 when I was in the first grade. Backpacks, computers, MP3s and such, were nowhere in sight. A new shirt, some pencils, and a Roy Rogers lunch box were just about all that was needed. But there have been other far more significant changes since 1947 than supplies and technology.

Let's start with those attending public school. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents have changed over the past fifty years. This is not meant to be a launch against public schools, but some warnings are necessary. It seems that more teachers and administrators are either antagonistic or merely passive toward the Christian worldview. How does this show up? Anything that might smack of the promotion of religion, especially Christianity, is nixed ("Get that pilgrim out of the play"). Self-esteem development drives much of educational philosophy.

Positive reinforcement and an absence of criticism and punishment decorate the classroom. And then there is Charles Darwin. The preferred creation myth is evolution. It is deemed a fact and any voices to the contrary will be patronized at best. Fathers and mothers must not look the other way while all this indoctrination is taking place. Children must be steeped in the Christian worldview, participate in worshiping the God of creation, and taught how to think biblically. That is a tall order, especially in the younger grades. But Christian parents must be proactive and thoroughly engaged in the education of their children.

School children are bringing loads to school, which far outweigh their backpacks. The baggage of divorced parents, drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse, and a movie-and-television-saturated thought life, can make the classroom a very tense experience. Are you praying for our Christian teachers and administrators? They are in a mission field which desperately needs Christ's presence. Students from Christian homes need encouragement, wisdom, love, and strength as they navigate through the public school.

Those who are committed to home schooling have opportunities and challenges as well. The advantage of a parent-controlled learning environment can yield many developmental dividends. A Christian worldview can permeate every academic subject. Time can be used to the maximum. The student is able to take on extra projects under parental supervision. The demands of curriculum selection, knowledge of the subjects being taught, and a lack of interaction with other students are not insurmountable. But as all home school parents know, it takes dedication, husband and wife teamwork, and self-discipline to learn in a home environment. But God can supply the graces of the Spirit necessary.

How does God supply what is needed in the education of our children and teenagers? Know God. The work of self-education requires vast amounts of energy. For the Christian, energy for God is needed if a bold witness for Him is to be sustained. Reading, mathematics, science projects, and social studies require alertness to the encroachments of a naturalistic worldview. Harry Blamires in his book, The Christian Mind, discusses six characteristics of a Christian mind at work in contrast to the secular mind. They are supernatural orientation, awareness of evil, conception of truth, acceptance of authority, concern for the person and sacramental cast. The most important back-to-school supplies are minds occupied with what God thinks about history, health, race, sex, politics, law, or any other subject. It is a mind that measures all of reality by the purposes of God in creation, the drama of redemption, and the coming kingdom. It is a mind that resists preoccupation with the self (how one feels and how one feels about how one feels) and cares for all peoples everywhere. Every Christian involved in the preparation of the next generation for the future would do well to read David W. Gill's The Opening of the Christian Mind. The hurriedness of life must not be allowed to leave the most important things undone, part of which is the knowledge of how to take every thought captive to Christ. No student is adequately supplied for school who does not know how Christians are to think.

A Famine of Truth (August 7, 2005)

If churches and pastors were subject to malpractice lawsuits as hospitals and physicians are, we would have an ecclesiastical crisis on our hands. The practice of medicine is subject to strict standards, as it should be. The television commercial that shows a man sitting at his dinner table with a knife in his hand being told by a surgeon over the phone how to proceed with self-surgery

evokes a laugh. The forlorn man says to the doctor, “Shouldn’t you be doing this?” What is not funny is the way many contemporary preachers are handling the Bible. They use hit and run hermeneutics, tell one story after another, and leave a butchered Bible in their wake. While all the time the congregation seems to be paying rapt attention, taking notes, laughing, or saying amen. These responses are not bad in themselves but what is being preached to them is malfeasance of duty. It is a violation of trust. A pastor is responsible before God to handle accurately the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

The times in which we live are bad. We are faced with a moral and ethical crisis of staggering proportions. This crisis is exacerbated by the non-Christian world and life views clamoring for adherents and bringing with them a host of idols. Eastern religions parading in western suits of clothes proclaiming altered states of consciousness, reincarnation, and karma deceive the unwary. We are in the midst of a crisis of authority. Pilate’s “what-is-truth” cynicism is eating away at the fabric of social stability. Many are buying into the notion that truth comes from within each individual or is merely a social construct (i.e. one’s truth is as good as another). And to top it all off, we are suffering from a crisis in the pulpit. There is a drought of biblical exposition. Pastors have retreated from a robust proclamation of the truth of God’s Word to an experiential-based pudding which poses as expository preaching.

What is it that constitutes authentic Bible exposition? Expository preaching is not pasting verses on felt needs of people. It is not a running commentary without a theme, outline, or logical cohesiveness. You are hearing expository preaching when the text of Scripture is being exposed. It is an explanation of the Scriptures which is true to its historical and contextual location with proper care being given to grammar and word meaning. It is then applied by the Holy Spirit as it flows through the personality of the preacher, then through him to his hearers (a paraphrase of Haddon W. Robinson’s definition). There are three essential elements bound up in this process. First, there must be Scripture. If you don’t need your Bible during a message, you are probably not hearing an expository message. Secondly, there is interpretation. The biblical text is laid open for all to see and understand. The goal is to determine what the intent of the biblical author was. This requires preparation on the part of the preacher and concentration for the hearers. Thirdly, application must be made. Frequently Bible exposition is given a bad name because the meaning of the text is not related to life situations. This is one reason why a “psychologized” Christianity has crept into the pew. Psychological categories such as self-esteem, co-dependence, and self-actualization have replaced sin, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, and maturity in Christ.

One of the great Bible expositors of the past century, John Stott, has astutely observed that, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the low standards of Christian living throughout the world are due more than anything else to the low standards of Christian preaching and teaching.” It is not necessary to preach through books of the Bible to do expository preaching, but it offers the best opportunity to follow the flow of the Holy Spirit’s thought through the text of Scripture. Every text of the Bible has a context, and it must be honored. To quote Stott further, “The worst kind of preaching allows people to say, ‘Well, I’m sorry, I don’t agree with you. I think you’re twisting the Scripture.’” In too many instances believers with open Bibles and hungry hearts are being given a stone rather than the bread of truth. Are you committed to a steady diet of expository preaching or are you allowing yourself to become comfortable with cheap and dangerous substitutes? Berachah Bible Church believes that the teaching of God’s Word must be flowing through our spiritual veins if we are to be the church we ought to be. Are you hungry? Eat often

and tell others where they can find a meal of the wonderful words of life. If the American church continues to exist without demanding Bible exposition, God will send a famine “for hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Has this famine already begun?

Cost-Counting Christianity (July 14, 2005)

Before we are converted to Christ, we have no way of knowing what the cost is going to be. But after having followed Christ for a period of time with an earnest desire to please Him and love Him with our total being, we discover little by little what a cross-bearing, self-denying life means. It may involve choosing a ministry that takes us thousands of miles away from parents, friends, and the familiar comforts of our hometown. Our children may not be able to see their grandparents for months or years at a time. We may live in a simple, small home without air conditioning in a hot, humid, and mosquito infested environment. A family member who is intent on getting a divorce may need to be confronted, and they may not speak to us again as a result. Did we know these things when we came to the living and true God for salvation?

Jesus spoke about these things when He was surrounded by people who were following Him on His journey to Jerusalem to be crucified. Many were professing allegiance to Jesus. So, He does not mince words. The road to glory goes by way of the cross (Lk. 9:51). Those who would participate with Christ in His kingdom must respond to His invitation by believing in Him. The door of opportunity stood open (Lk. 13:1-14:24). For those who are followers of Jesus Christ the challenge is the difficulty of discipleship (Lk. 14:25-35). Here is where Jesus stated in no uncertain terms that the road to glory is paved with commitment and discipline. Growing in Christ (discipleship) means absolute loyalty to Him. Our love for the Savior should be so intense that love for all others would seem as if they were unloved. This is not a condition for eternal salvation, but a condition for following hard after the Lord Jesus Christ. Carrying one’s own cross means a willingness to follow Christ no matter what the cost. This means joyfully accepting any inconveniences in order to share the gospel with non-Christians. It will involve forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply. It includes laying up treasures in heaven and not on earth.

According to the story of the rash builder, discipleship means planning and sacrifice. The construction of a building is not something that should be entered into without careful calculation regarding the cost of the project. A king does not lead his army into battle without assessing the possibilities for victory. What does Christ want? He calls for disciples who take Him seriously and who will not live by emotional impulses. Instead, they give Him uncompromising allegiance. All that they have is at His disposal. Is this a description of our relationship to Jesus Christ? Some professing Christians think that as long as they have prayed a prayer to accept Jesus, that is the end of it. Fire insurance has been purchased. Hell has been avoided and so on with life, to do things our way. But Christ wants all of us all the time. This does not ignore the fact that as Christians we sin, get lazy, and may even deny Him at times (remember Peter?). But we must not excuse our feeble life. God will discipline those whom He loves in order to bring us into alignment with His purposes. He may even have to dispense with disciples who render themselves useless (Lk. 14:34-35). The sinning follower of Christ may have to be ushered out of this life (1 Cor. 11:30).

There will be a cost for living the Christian life the way God intends it to be lived. This reality, though, should not be confused with the free offer of the grace of God in Christ. No one is saved by counting the cost. How can an unbeliever even begin to grasp the significance of placing their possessions, talents, time, and family at the disposal of Christ? Obedience flows out of faith (Rom. 1:5). The lost are called to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The journey on the road to glory begins the moment one is born again. The Lordship of Christ becomes an unfolding experience in countless ways. Discipleship calls for thousands of choices, and they will not always be easy. Counting the cost will require vast quantities of biblical teaching, the guiding work of the Holy Spirit, tears of repentance, and wise decision making. This is not a grim, duty-bound joyless life. It is one of lavishing upon Jesus the gifts of love-inspired sacrifice.

To those who have not come to know the thirst-slaking, hunger-satisfying life that is in Christ, there is indeed some cost-counting to be done. It cost Christ His life in a brutal, blood-spilling death on the cross to pay for sin. There was no other way to pay the debt we owe to God. "Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." Because we could not pay the cost of our redemption, the Savior paid it. Those who belong to Christ and follow Him count it all joy to live a cost-counting journey to the gates of glory.

Blood, Sweat, and Tears (August 21, 2005)

At one time in their history the Florida A & M Rattlers football team used a three-squad system, calling them blood, sweat, and tears. I don't recall who did what in the offensive and defensive alignments, but the description represents a vivid picture of commitment to their assignments. The idea of hard work is the meat and potatoes of athletic competition. Football teams all over the United States are bleeding, sweating, and probably shedding a few tears. I remember one of my high school teammates crying out loud during a particularly difficult drill. I also remember as an eighth grader going into the football locker room after a very close and hard-fought game. Our team lost. One of the seniors was sitting up against the wall crying like a baby. This really caught my attention. He was also a golden gloves boxer. Don't tell me real men don't cry.

The apostle Paul saw something beyond all the hard work of athletes to excel and win. He wrote to the Corinthian church, whose city hosted the famed Isthmian games every two years and reminded them of what it takes to be a world-class servant of God. It takes self-denying, labor-intensive, year-round commitment to win the race or the boxing match (1 Cor. 9:24-27). How can it be any less for the Christian who loves God and lives to please Him? The body has to be disciplined. The athlete leads his body. He doesn't follow it. To buffet the body is to accept hardships in order to spread the gospel. But there is a danger here. Without some other vital truths, Christianity could be reduced to a severe, tough-it-out, joyless regimen. The truth is that because of the believer's love for God (loving God with one's strength, Deut. 6:5), self-control is a delightful choice.

The Christian life as hard work is an oxymoron to many in the church. "Let go and let God" is the motto often proclaimed in Christian life conferences. However, it represents a flawed view of true discipleship. Faith is not independent of effort. Listen to Scripture. Unity in the church requires effort (Eph. 4:3). Living a God-pleasing life demands thought, planning, and energy (2 Tim. 2:15; Heb. 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:5, 10). The generous use of the word "work" in the New Testament tells us something important about following Christ. Without a doubt we are not

saved by our works but by God's grace (Eph. 2:9). But we have been born again for the purpose of good works (Eph. 2:10). It is work to come alongside a brother or sister in Christ and help them bear their burdens (Gal. 6:2). It doesn't come easy to get up early in the morning and read your Bible and pray. There will be some tears shed when two believers repent of their sins toward one another and reconcile. Resisting temptation is heavy lifting. It is relatively easy to yield to temptation by hitting the right keys and going off into the world of cybersex. It requires strength to run away from Potiphar's wife wherever she may be found (Gen. 39:12).

There may be some who will cringe at all this talk about self-discipline, effort, blood, sweat, and tears. It may smack of legalism and a joyless Christianity. Legalism perverts effort in the Christian walk into a prideful attempt to bribe God with good deeds. It is a mutation of the deadly sort that gives true Christianity a bad reputation. The work that goes into loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength is a pleasure and can only be accomplished by God's grace. Notice the times the various words for power are used in the Epistles of the New Testament. Paul says that he did what he did through the working of God's power (Eph. 3:7). His prayers for fellow believers are laced with petitions for God's power (Eph. 1:19; Col. 1:11). Peter encourages the church with the truth that God's children have been endowed with divine power at the moment of their regeneration (2 Pet. 1:3). Divine energy is needed if God's work is going to be done through earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). Both physical and spiritual strength come from our omnipotent God. Thankfully, therefore, we are not left to ourselves to engage in the labor of love for God's kingdom.

We have been given examples of those who shed their blood for the sake of the gospel (e.g. Stephen, Acts 7:58). Tears and trials were a large part of Paul's service for the Lord (Acts 20:19, 31; 2 Cor. 2:4). Cross-bearing is sweaty and hard work. But, oh, what everlasting joy there is for those who want nothing more than to run the race to win, who cherish the prospect of finishing well, and who count it all joy to work hard for the pleasure of God.

Are You Growing? (September 4, 2005)

The growth of children is a fascinating thing to watch. From infancy to young adulthood the process of physical, emotional, and mental change is a story filled with expectations, surprises, and measurement. When our son Eric was still in his preadolescent and adolescent growth patterns, we regularly measured his height with marks on the wall (I'm sure the next owners of the house have painted over them by now). He was playing basketball and developing height was a concern. Even weight was a consideration when playing on a football team with a seventy-pound weight limit. Some of the boys were taken to a sauna to sweat off a few pounds before a playoff game.

This is all rather amusing, but there is one kind of growth that is most serious. When we are born again by the Spirit of God, the Christian is called a babe in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1; Heb. 5:13). As a new creature in Christ two spiritual realities exist side by side. The believer is adopted into God's family as a son with the full rights of heirship (Gal. 4:5, 7). Everything the new Christian needs to live a godly life is immediately supplied at the moment of spiritual conception (i.e., regeneration, Tit. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:3, 4). But at the same time, a growth process begins. Change must take place. This takes time, massive amounts of biblical truth, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the necessary amounts of pain and suffering. It is God's design for the believer in Jesus Christ to

live a productive and fruitful life. This will prevent uselessness and lack of productivity (2 Pet. 1:8). To underscore the gravity of this condition, it is described in terms of becoming spiritually nearsighted and blind. What does this entail? The lack of spiritual growth, which is actually retrogression (i.e., backsliding), can lead to acute mental confusion regarding spiritual realities. It could be called spiritual amnesia (2 Pet. 1:9). This is a warning light. Because of disobedience to God's Word, there can be periods of lack of fruit-bearing in the Christian life. This is an abnormality, but it can happen.

The Corinthian church suffered from an epidemic of carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-3). And it was leading to varying degrees of divine chastisement, even sin unto death (1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Jn. 5:16). To lapse into a carnal state (i.e., a Christian living like an unbeliever) is not establishing "a special class of Christianity." The carnal Christian is one who is disobedient to Christ in certain areas of his or her life. It is ugly. It shouldn't happen, but it does. What does all this have to do with the maturation process of the Christian? Growth in Christ is to be a climb toward increasing degrees of godliness. But becoming more like Christ can be impeded by rebellion and reversion to non-Christian ways. Fruitfulness is stymied. There must be repentance or there will be discipline.

What conclusions can be drawn from all this as we participate together in knowing what it is to love God more? Fruitbearing is the expectation of God for every believer. Fruitbearing is the change that occurs in the believer's life by the power of the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Word of God (love, joy, peace, patience, etc. become the identity of God's children). The lack of fruitbearing may occur in the believer's life. It is possible to go through times of uselessness to God. It is also possible for a believer's fruit (evidences of Christlikeness) to be restricted and variable. We must be careful about passing judgment on whether one is saved or not, based merely on our own perception (e.g., "If you are not bearing fruit, you are not a Christian"). Our list of spiritual fruit may be incomplete, uninformed, or prejudiced. There are also those who evaluate the caliber of a person's Christianity based on the "total" concept. It is claimed that following Christ is all or nothing. The failure to appreciate the relative nature of discipleship/spiritual growth can lead to confusion and even the discouragement of struggling Christians. If one is not following Jesus Christ at all costs, dead to self, totally committed, or experiencing "total transformation," does that mean they are not saved? There is a treasure of truths that belong to the new believer (i.e., positional truth) that has to be translated into experience.

Growing in holiness of life is a life-long pursuit. Every child of God should long to be conformed to the character of God (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Any argument, excuse-making, or rationalization that raises the flag for spiritual mediocrity is deceitful and must be rejected. We don't coast to the gates of the heavenly city. It is a rigorous but joyful journey. Christians are not all traveling at the same rate. Some lag behind, disappoint, fail, and get off on side roads that prove to be dead ends. We are to "admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with all" in our pilgrimage to the city of the living God.

A Hurricane's Story (September 11, 2005)

On the television screen it appeared only as a four-inch-in-diameter swirling red mass. But the reality was that it was a category five hurricane named Katrina. Its outermost cloud bands gave it coverage of hundreds of water-churning, land-buffeting miles. It came ashore early in the

morning on August 29 with the eyewall slightly east of New Orleans. It slammed into the Gulf coast with a deadly ferocity. Homes, stately live oaks, barges, and bridges were demolished and pushed around like a child's toys. But this was not child's play. Thousands of people have had their neighborhoods blown away or washed to who-knows-where. All storms have an unsettling nature about them. We may like to watch them from a distance and even be exhilarated by the wind, thunder, and lightning. But to be caught in the middle of nature on a rampage can make even the strongest weep.

Is there anything to be learned from such a catastrophic storm as Katrina? The television networks are filled with angry victims and politicians blaming everyone but themselves. Why didn't relief come sooner? How could there be such seeming ineptness in the richest nation of the world? Debates rage over the future of the city of New Orleans. Should it be bulldozed or restored to its historic charm? However, there is a story behind this storm and all storms that goes relatively untold. Centuries ago, King David of Israel watched a monstrous storm in his own land. It was so overwhelming that the moods of the mind could only be expressed in poetry. With his God-guided hand the psalmist penned a song that could be entitled, "The Lord of the Storm." It tells a story that transcends low pressure systems, gale force winds, and ground-shaking thunder. It is a poem about God, His power, and where to take refuge when hurricanes take over.

Psalm 29 opens with an unrelenting call to worship the Lord. David was so impressed with the power of the "forces of nature" that he calls for worship of the King of creation (vv. 1-2). He even calls on the angels to assist in offering praise to the Lord of the storm. The declaration of God's greatness is the only sane thing to do when rain, wind, thunder, and lightning overwhelm the senses. A subplot may also be found in this appeal to give God credit for His glory and strength. The Canaanites interpreted the weather in terms of their god Baal, the alleged storm god. Like mother-nature to moderns, Baal was a figment of the imagination. It is the true God, not a fictitious god like Baal, to whom our will and mind is to be subordinated.

David proceeds with his riveting, poetical account of the march of the wind and devastation. One can almost hear the thunder roll in the repetition of "the voice of the Lord." Storms communicate eternally valuable lessons. God is in absolute control over all of nature. Not one raindrop falls without His permission. "For God is the King of all the earth" (Psa. 47:7). What we call disasters execute God's infinitely wise purposes (Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6). The champions of unbelief may scorn "Intelligent Design" as contradicted by the massive destruction of Hurricane Katrina, but in doing so are pitiful in their attempts to challenge the Maker of heaven and earth (Job 38:1-3; 8-11). The majesty and power of the God of the universe should leave us awestruck. The peals of thunder echoing across the land reminded the sweet psalmist of Israel of the actual voice of God "which is infinitely beyond it." When God speaks, the earth trembles. As one commentator has said, "The storm is not an outbreak of meaningless or hostile forces, but the voice of the Lord, heard in all His works" (Derek Kidner).

Many are reluctant to associate storms with the judgment of God. One does not want to appear insensitive to human misery left in the wake of storm surges and violent winds, but the fact remains, hurricanes tell us that the world is under the judgment of God. We live in a sin-cursed world that is dying. What we see in nature is not the way things ought to be. The rebellion of the first Adam plunged the human race into the mire of moral and natural evil. Nature is groaning, longing for its redemption. It "waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19,

22). Hurricanes tell us that God is calling sinners to repentance (Lk. 13:1-7). Jesus made no bones about it. We all deserve to die. Judgments in this life are God's last effort, so to speak, to bring sinful human beings to Himself for the eternal joy of fellowship with Him. As God ruled over the universal flood of Noah's day, He continues enthroned, offering the grace of forgiveness to those who repent and come to Jesus Christ for eternal life.

Where did David's storm leave him and the rest of us? God's power is available to benefit those who trust in Him (Psa. 29:10). He alone can enable hurricane-weary people to live hopefully. God's peace is available to those who trust in Him. There is a greater storm that is coming when the wrath of God breaks upon the earth in the great and terrible day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:3). The Lord of the storm offers His people *shalom*. Peace with God can be ours because the howling winds of God's wrath fell upon His beloved Son, in whom He was well-pleased. Because of the refuge that is in Jesus Christ things can be as they ought to be in this life and in the world to come.

The Hungry and the Thirsty (September 18, 2005)

Hurricane Katrina, in its aftermath, has thrust upon us the greatest humanitarian crisis in modern times in America. Thousands of people from the Gulf Coast region, especially New Orleans, are looking for food, clothing, and shelter. The evacuation preceding Katrina's wind and water left many with little time to pack personal belongings. Try to imagine having only a couple of days' notice before leaving your home, knowing that you may not see it again. The evacuees from such a calamity are not only physically destitute, but also have to contend with severe mental and emotional stresses. There is much that can be done for those who have lost so much.

However, before some of the various deeds of love, mercy, and kindness can be proposed, there are some necessary biblical perspectives. One of these is an understanding of the role of good deeds in response to those in need. The apostle Paul said, "Let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). Christians are to make the invisible God visible through demonstrations of His love. The parable of the Good Samaritan should come to mind here. Who is my neighbor? It is anyone who has a need. So, the question is actually, am I a neighbor? Someone has said that "Love is not measured by the intensity of its feelings, but by the sacrifice it stands ready to make." As children of God, we owe a debt of love to believer and unbeliever alike (Rom. 13:8).

Another fundamental understanding of the nature of good deeds is that they cannot merit God's favor and acceptance. One verse that is frequently quoted when pondering the human condition is Matthew 25:40, which says, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." These words of Jesus have quite often been ripped from their context in order to advance a works-righteousness theology. The false idea is, to quote from a recent newspaper article, "The criteria for entrance into the heavenly kingdom, Jesus tells us, is whether or not we treated the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and those in prison as if they were Christ Himself." If by this is meant that we get into God's heaven by our deeds of mercy, then that is a heresy. It is possible to give all of one's possessions away to those in need and die and spend eternity in hell (1 Cor. 13:3; Matt. 7:22, 23). But what was Jesus saying? Works serve as a "spiritual character-index." Those who are born again will demonstrate this spiritual reality by their response to the physical needs of fellow

believers. The failure to demonstrate tangible acts of kindness to those who are hurting is a symptom of unbelief.

How then should the church, Christ's body on earth, respond to the victims of Hurricane Katrina? We should pray for all sufferers. Pray that relief will find its way to them and that much grace from God will come in the form of helping hands, loving deeds, and gospel witness. Give financially to a reputable charitable organization. Give generously to Christian ministries who are loyal to the Scriptures and have a proven record of mercy in the name of Christ. Give to your own church's established disaster relief project. Look for churches within the area hardest hit by the storm. Let them be your eyes and ears in determining specific projects that will help people. Our church is communicating with two such churches in the New Orleans area in order to identify meaningful ways to assist God's people. Visit local relief shelters in order to lend a helping hand. Thousands of people have made their way to the Atlanta area from the Gulf Coast region in need of hospitality, conversation, and encouragement. Volunteer to help the church staff in gathering information on needs that can be presented to the congregation. Think of some way in which you can use your own resources to alleviate the suffering of displaced people (an apartment, an automobile, food, a refrigerator, etc.). Keep up with the news regarding special needs that have arisen in the hurricane damaged area (the internet can guide you to many helpful links).

The above are only a few of the avenues open to those who want to show Christ's mercy to suffering people. Be wise. Be careful. Be patient. Be active. But don't not do anything while waiting on the "perfect" opportunity. There will probably be many things over a period of months our church can do to serve the thirsty, hungry, and homeless. "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in Him?" (1 Jn. 3:17).

Boys, Friends, and the Winter of Life (September 25, 2005)

I knew a boy who loved to play baseball. He lived for the next game and the competition. He played for the Rhinos. But there was another boy who also loved the game. He played for the Cubs. They knew one another as one player who competes against another. Little did they know the kind of friends they would become. These two boys became teammates on the high school football team. One was bigger and stronger and played tight end. The other had the physical attributes for a running back. In their senior year they played a team that was ranked number two in the state. It was a close game. The score was tied with two minutes left in the game. The quarterback threw a deep pass. The running back flew down the field, turned and jumped and caught the ball. The tight end laid down a bone jarring block. Touchdown! The number two ranked team was defeated.

They were no longer boys. They were young men. There were matters that were far more important than hits and touchdowns. When the would-be running back was fourteen, he was converted to Jesus Christ. He had heard an evangelist preach the good news of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life at the church he attended. His life was forever changed. His friend began to ask him questions about the Christian faith. Was it all true? Could one trust the Bible? The questions kept coming. One evening the two teenagers attended a Youth for Christ rally. The Moody Science film, "Red River of Life," was shown. The wonder of God's handiwork in

creating the human body demanded a response. The lineman with all the questions went forward at the invitation. His friend followed him into an inquiry room. There the big lineman became small. He bowed his head and trusted Jesus Christ for his salvation. The two friends became brothers in Christ. They began to pray for their high school, their teammates and coaches that they too would come to know the Savior of the world. They talked and prayed about their future.

College took the two friends off in different directions. Preparation for Christian service in Bible College and seminary took the halfback to distant cities. The lineman became a banker in his hometown. But he was restless. He wanted to know the Bible. He wanted to teach the Bible. There was only one thing to do. He enrolled in seminary. Four years later he graduated and took a pastorate. For over thirty years the two friends kept in touch. They were teammates in the body of Christ. Each pastored a church. They could go months without conversing, but when they did, they picked up right where they left off. Theological problems, Bible interpretation, and the burdens that go with caring for a flock became their running conversation into the winter of their life. The years had passed so quickly. The playing fields of their youth had long ago yielded to the responsibilities of family and church. Grey hairs had replaced crew-cuts.

One of the most valuable possessions we can own is a genuine, lasting friendship. A true friendship weathers the winds of time (Prov. 17:17; 18:24). Love and loyalty bind two people together and overcomes distance and difficulties. A true friend will accept you as you are, even with your annoying habits and idiosyncrasies. Many a pretended friend has been found to be like a butterfly, fluttering through one's life to get what they want and then they are gone. Friends tell one another the truth (Prov. 27:6 "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."). Real love is made out of truth, not lies and deception. That is why a genuine friendship can be a source of good advice (Prov. 27:9 "Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel."). The disciples had no greater friend than Jesus. He taught them how to forgive, told them how to get along, and was loyal to them even when they abandoned Him. There is a song that in some ways has become worn by its use, yet its truth is a comfort; "What a friend we have in Jesus" (Jn. 15:14 "You are My friends, if you do what I command you.").

There is a sense in which our friendships, forged in the family of God, can portray the beauty of the Savior's friendship with us. A relationship where two walk together in God's truth, who sacrifice for one another, encourage one another, and have their eyes set on that sweet arrival in heaven, has the look of Christ about it. How sad it is to see men who come to the winter of life and have no male friends. How thankful I am for the men in our church with whom I can pray, laugh, receive counsel, and shepherd the flock of God. It is also a special grace that in this winter of my own life I recently had the joy of spending time with my old friend who threw that block for me under the lights a long time ago.

Another Pay Cut (October 2, 2005)

The daylight hours are growing shorter. The shadows are lengthening. Fall is upon us. And with it are some financial shadows that are falling across our path. The price of gasoline is stubbornly staying at near three dollars a gallon and may increase even more in the short term. The housing market is glutted with homes for sale. Businesses are feeling the effects of Delta Airlines declared bankruptcy. What was once a symbol of enduring financial stability, Delta is now

fighting for its survival in the highly competitive and financially unstable airline industry. One of the immediate effects of Delta's cost cutting is pay cuts. Its employees are experiencing shrinking pay checks and challenges to budgets, bills, and plans for retirement. The stresses that come with these economic changes are not small. Many of us remember quite well the social upheaval caused by the demise of Eastern Airlines. Some were not prepared for the financial fallout that occurred. There was anger, divorce, and a multitude of interpersonal conflicts. The entire community was impacted. New careers were sought. Houses went up for sale. Early retirement was taken. Families moved. Lives changed.

These same kinds of things are taking place again. Some have prepared themselves for a new set of economic realities. They have lived within their means, saved money, and stayed out of debt. Others have found themselves unable to sustain a lifestyle that allowed for little or no room for pay cuts. This is not to say that pay cuts don't hurt. They do require adjustments and sacrifices that are not easy to bear. With that in mind it would be helpful to review God's wisdom in the matter of finances. Money and material possessions are temporary in nature and do not provide lasting satisfaction (Prov. 27:24; 1 Tim. 6:17; Jas. 5:1-6). How quickly material wealth can disappear. Just ask Katrina and Rita Hurricane victims. One day you have all your worldly possessions at your disposal and then in a few minutes or hours they are gone with the wind. We must never forget that true satisfaction in life comes by having one's life centered upon God (1 Tim. 6:6-8). Financial gain is vaporous and is subject to lasting disappointment. The joy that God gives does not depend on how much money one has. If we invest our happiness in financial gain, we are inviting some very unsavory characters into our lives (misery, disillusionment, and sorrows to name a few).

God has promised to provide the Christian with the basic necessities of life and with these we ought to be content (1 Tim. 6:8; Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:25-33). Food and clothing are the essentials. A job to provide these basics is a provision of God. We are to work hard (the birds work at feeding themselves all day long) and be satisfied with God. It is a truism that "what you do with your money shows where your values lie." If seeking first the kingdom of God is not our passion in life, there is no financial plan in the world that will be adequate. But when God's wisdom shapes our financial decisions, we will not spend more than we are making (live on less than you earn). We will give generously to our local church and other God-honoring ministries. High-interest credit card debt ought to be eliminated. Are you an impulse spender? Leave that piece of plastic in your wallet at home in a bag of frozen water, if you can't control its use. Save as much as you can. Do you have an emergency fund? Are you prepared to buy another refrigerator when your present one has served its time? The failure to set up a savings account may be an indication you are funding a lifestyle you can't afford. Everyone who claims to be a Christian should be meeting their financial obligations. Do you have bills that are going unpaid? Incurring financial obligations is not wrong (mortgage, car payments, etc.), but once a promise has been made to a creditor it should be fulfilled. Lying or stealing can come in many forms and one of those is the failure to pay one's creditors.

Pay cuts can serve as pruning, so the believer in Christ can bear more fruit. A reversal in a family's income can uncover attitudes and values that are hindering spiritual growth and productivity. Short-temperedness, grumpiness, and complaining as a response to our disappointments are villains that need to be shown the exit. We have a debt of love that is to be paid to all in our household and to those in the workplace. Anger over what the company has done to one's prospects for financial security is an open door for the evil one (Eph. 4:26, 27).

Satan would love nothing better than to exploit our bitterness toward a CEO who bailed out with a golden parachute. Yes, even the mismanagement of the company in which we have invested some of the best years of our lives is part of God's purpose for us (Rom. 8:28). We must not forget the Joseph principle, for it was he who said, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Living on less is an invitation to experience more of God. It gives the opportunity to discover more of His wisdom and more trust in His ability to provide for us. It is a call to the body of Christ to rally around that member who is suffering. It is the occasion for the church of Jesus Christ to demonstrate the greatest defense of the faith, namely how much we love one another (Jn. 13:35). A pay cut can be an open door for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Moment of Silence (October 9, 2005)

Being a grandparent offers opportunities to revisit places that were long ago a natural habitat. Recently our five-year-old granddaughter, Meredith, called (yes, she did it all by herself. How could we resist?) and invited her grandfather and grandmother to grandparents' day at her school. The morning came and we were there. The place was alive with children dutifully following their morning routines, teachers and administrators cheerfully welcoming everyone, and older people (a.k.a grandparents) waiting for instructions. We went to Meredith's room, and she came happily bounding toward us. Memories were not very far away. Well painted, cinderblock walls and shiny floors beckoned us through the building. Classrooms were colorfully decorated with pictures, student artwork, and other environmentally stimulating decorations. As I recall, our rooms were not quite so busy with stuff. There were the teachers, all women, patiently and kindly setting the schedule for the morning. I can only remember one male teacher in the four different grammar schools I attended. Announcements were being made from the principal's office. Then came the singular moment and we were awakened to the fact that things are not the same. All the classes were asked to observe a "moment of silence." For those whom the public school is an everyday experience this is probably taken in stride. But for these two sixty-somethings it was depressing.

There they were. Hundreds of children, age five to ten, who came from all kinds of homes with who-knows-what sorts of worries, fears, grief, and insecurity. Now what in the world is a five-year-old going to do mentally with a moment of silence? For one thing, aren't moments of silence reserved for memories of the deceased? But that presents another problem. Does one turn to a pleasant memory of that person? What if there are only bad memories? The moment of silence could be a hazardous thing if one is not properly prepared. But I imagine that a moment of silence could be quite welcome to a weary schoolteacher at about three o'clock in the afternoon. We had a version of this when we were asked to put our heads down on our desks after lunch for some moments of silence. This tended to invite trouble from the more mischievous boys in the class. I am sure the principal and teachers all meant well by their request that morning for a moment of silence. It was, after all, the agreed-upon substitution for prayer in school. The Supreme Court put an end to that some years back.

We are now being told that the separation of church and state prohibits the imposition of prayer to a deity by the state. Thomas Jefferson's now famous wall of separation statement in a private letter in 1802 has become the shibboleth of liberals and others committed to our national well-

being. But how one derives this from the “establishment of religion” clause in the First Amendment is beyond me. I have the sneaking suspicion that there is a not-so-subtle agenda at work here, namely, the gagging of God in public life. Ironically, however, at the swearing in of Chief Justice John Roberts, he said he needed God’s help in order to fulfill his duties (“so help me God”). If the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court needs God’s assistance, I am sure my five-year-old granddaughter needs it too. There is a lot of divine help needed for our children. Every year 500,000 to 1,500,000 children are sexually abused. There is a thirty-five percent divorce rate at work among professing evangelical Christians. There are forms of child abuse beyond the physical. Divorce, alcohol and drug abuse leave innocent little children struggling for survival in schoolhouses across our nation. For many of them the only time they hear the name of God is in the profane language of television, movies, and parents. To add insult to injury the nation’s future adults are submitted to the myth of evolution as an explanation for our existence on planet earth. That moment of silence can be filled with the comforting thought that no matter what kind of emotional or physical abuse you may be enduring, you are only an accident. There is no ultimate meaning in life. Chance rules the day.

The moment of silence seems to be here to stay for awhile. But it doesn’t have to rule the day. Or should I say, ruin the day. Parents ought to make sure their children are loved, instructed, and prepared for a day at school and the rest of life. Let society proceed on its merry way to self-destruction, but my grandchildren don’t have to be eaten alive by it. We can teach them and fill their minds with what matters for time and eternity. God has given us what we need to know. It’s in the Bible. Does that rule out a well-rounded education? Of course not. But the school day can begin with a prayer within that little mind, asking for the Creator’s wisdom and strength for the day ahead. That’s a moment of silence that redeems the time.

The Back of the Bus (October 30, 2005)

Living in the Atlanta area in the 1940s and 50s offered some unique conveniences. One of those was public transportation. We could get on a trolley (it traveled by an electrical current that ran from overhead wires) and in twenty minutes we would be in downtown Atlanta in the front of the Rich’s Department Store. From that spot you could walk to the movies, department stores, the Federal Bakery, the Planter’s peanut shop, and the S & W cafeteria. It was better than a sterile, closed-in mall. There were sights, sounds, and smells that contributed to the special experience of being in the city. The trolley ride only cost fifteen cents and you could get a transfer to anywhere else in the system. To many older Atlantans those were the good old days.

But they weren’t such good old days for the black population of Atlanta. There was a sign in the front of every trolley which read, “White passengers sit from front to rear, and Colored sit from rear to front.” This was not a convenience, among other things, if you weren’t white. If you were black and were seated in the middle area of the trolley and there was no room for a white person to sit you were expected to get up and give the white person your seat. The trolley operator controlled this situation (all the trolley operators were white). No matter how weary the black passenger, the white rider was entitled to the seat. Most white folks didn’t question this state of affairs. Society in the South mandated many entitlements to the white population for no other reason than their skin color. It was the status quo until one cold day on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama that things began to change. Rosa Parks, a black lady, was sitting in one of those middle seats on the bus when she refused to get up and let a white man have her seat.

She was arrested, tried and found guilty of refusing to obey a bus driver. What is strange is that this even had to happen. How could a Christian dominated white culture be so content with the racism of a segregated society?

What is really scary is that as a teenager I too accepted segregation as an inherited fact of life. It aroused no moral outrage. It was just assumed that this was the way things were supposed to be. Where were the Christian voices raised to challenge the system? I don't remember any, at least in the South. Actually, churches dug in their heels and, by and large, resisted the Civil Rights movement. The owner of a Christian restaurant handed out axe handles in defiance of those who sought to integrate his place of business. The Ku Klux Klan held rallies on street corners where white robed firebrands quoted Bible verses and preached the supremacy of the white race. Christian schools refused to enroll black students. Churches self-righteously turned away protestors (protesting their segregated church) from their services. It was a shameful and sad day in American church history.

All this should not be lost on us. It is easy to adopt a self-righteous and condescending view toward previous generations. We think, "How blind and prejudiced they were." "We are much more enlightened and have moved beyond the foibles of our forefathers." The culture of our day bewitches us just as the segregation mentality did decades ago. Living in debt up to our ears and paying enormous sums of interest is accepted as necessary. Compassion as a virtue is the excuse to slay the unborn. There are no protests. Christians divorce, and their church is silent. The Bible is butchered, and truth is abandoned as churches continue on with their happy hour of feel-good theology. Is anyone sounding the alarm? The church marches to the drum beat of the culture and no one seems to notice. Every generation has its evils to fight. The problem is that those evils masquerade as good. They are those things that pretend to make life better for us. They ensure our security and comfort. We are medicated by what is approved in our society. A Christian school can teach evolution (disguised as theistic evolution) in its science classes, but never mind, we have a dress code and like-minded friends. All is well. It is like sitting on that trolley in 1955 and enjoying the ride when a titanic moral issue was riding with us. All was not well in the back of the bus. It took someone with courage in the name of justice to ask the question, "Why do you all push us around?" With those words, instituted segregation began to crumble.

Racial prejudice has not been banished. It is bound up in every human heart. That is what makes it a perennial social cancer. But there is more. Our moral laziness and lack of biblical convictions continue to anesthetize Christians to the sins of the culture. Segregation went unchallenged by a previous generation of Christians. What evils are we embracing that will astound a future generation?

Half Full or Half Empty (November 6, 2005)

It has been said that an optimist believes that a glass is half full and the pessimist says it is half empty. Personalities do seem to shade off in one direction or the other. Some people can be too negative ("No, you can't go") and others are inclined to be more optimistic ("It's all right. You can go. Have a good time."). This is an over-simplification. All of us have a tendency to look on the dark side of things from time to time. But to be called a theological pessimist invites a discussion. Those of us who are dispensational premillennialists have been tagged by some as being "pessimillennialists." This usually comes from postmillennialists and others generally

opposed to dispensational theology. Some definitions are in order at this point. A dispensational premillennialist believes that a time of great tribulation will precede the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his thousand-year kingdom on earth. Included in this understanding of the end times is the belief that there will be widespread apostasy (a turning away from known truth and embracing error) in the professing church. Postmillennialists, to the contrary, think that Jesus Christ will return after the Millennium and, therefore, adopt a more optimistic view of this present age. They see the world as becoming better and better as the gospel of Christ is spread all over the world.

How does this impact one's understanding of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and the mandate to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19, 20)? The dispensational premillennialist is accused of being gloomy in his outlook on the future and allows social problems to go unaddressed. One well known evangelical has been recently quoted as saying (in reaction to Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth and the Left Behind novels), "There is no evidence that we should be anything but optimists." In order to support his plea for more optimism about the future he argues that, among other things, there is more democracy in the Middle East than there was three years ago. Not only is this contradicted by deeply rooted anti-Jewish terrorism in the Middle East, such a view fails to contend with the Bible's teaching regarding the state of the world before Israel's Messiah comes again.

Where does the Bible lead us in this matter of the nature of the last days (that time from the ascension of Christ into heaven and His coming again)? Jesus gave the signs of the end of the age in what is known as the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24 & 25). It is not a cheery picture. The Day of the Lord, beginning after the rapture of the church (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11) and including Christ's advent and His kingdom, will be a dark day indeed. Wars and rumors of wars, false prophets, famines, and earthquakes are just a few of the final groanings of a world under God's wrath (Rev. 6:17). Jesus, at the conclusion of a parable on the value of persistence in prayer, asks the question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:8). His point is that believers will be an ever-increasing minority as this age moves closer to its consummation. This is not an optimistic picture of spiritual conditions in the world before Christ returns. The Apostle Paul warns of a coming apostasy and a widespread revolt against God which prepares the way for the appearance of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3). In his two letters to Timothy Paul forecasts the later times as being filled with doctrines inspired by demonic powers and growing moral corruption (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1-9). And all of these dire warnings do not take into account what the Book of Revelation tells us about the seals, trumpets, and bowls of divine wrath.

How does the New Testament's sobering picture of the end times bear upon the commission of the church to make disciples and plant churches (Lk. 24:47, 48; Acts 1:8)? Biblical realism attaches itself to a grand optimism. Christ is coming back. The chord of hope plays sweetly in the song of the world's redemption (Rom. 8:18, 19, 23). This world is passing away, and also its lusts, but the Christian's hope is in Christ (Col. 1:15; 1 Pet. 3:15). The fact that, according to premillennialists, world peace and improving moral and spiritual conditions are not on the last days radar screen should not turn Christians into passive pessimists. The apostles of Jesus Christ carried the banner of the cross up to the gates of hell. They were not deterred by an idol-loving world. We, like they, are to be ambassadors of Christ calling the world to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

We come back full circle to the question. Are we to be theological optimists or pessimists? The church of Jesus Christ is to be realistically optimistic. We know what is in store for this world, but that is not to be an excuse for moving into gated Christian communities. The bugle call is not one of retreat, but for advance into the nations of the world doing works of mercy, loving our neighbor, and giving the invitation to worship the Son of God. The King is coming.

A Great Work to be Done (November 13, 2005)

There is a great work to be done and God has given His church the command to do it. The growth of the human population in the last half of the twentieth century was unprecedented. There are more lost people than ever before on this planet. More people were born in the last quarter of the twentieth century than in the whole history of mankind prior to 1973. One thing this means is that three out of four people have never heard with understanding the way to life in Christ. Even more tragic is the fact that half of the people of the world cannot hear the gospel because there is no one near enough to tell the good news about Jesus Christ.

What is our responsibility to a world filled with so many people without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? For an answer to this question, we must visit again the commission of Jesus Christ to His disciples, which is also a mandate for Christians in the twenty-first century. Matthew 28:19, 20 is the logical summation of the purpose of the first book of the New Testament canon. Jesus Christ is the King of the Jews, Israel's long-awaited Messiah. To go and make disciples of all the nations is also the logical summation and natural outflow of the character and plan of God. It has been said that "the apostles became missionaries not because of a commission but because Christianity is what it is and because of the indwelling Holy Spirit who is an outgoing and witnessing Spirit." In other words, these verses at the end of Matthew's Gospel, popularly known as the Great Commission, are not the reason we are compelled to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel. We as Christians are to have an evangelistic outreach mentality because of who God is and what He is doing in this world. We live, as God's children, to carry the gospel to all the nations in order that the blind may see, the deaf may hear, and the dead rise from their spiritual graves to experience life in Jesus Christ.

The commission of Christ to His church is based upon the authority given to Him by the Father. Jesus possesses divine crown rights because of His successful work of redemption. He has authority because He is King, and He is King because He is the crucified, risen, and exalted Lord. Through Jesus' authoritative teaching, His right to forgive sins, and His reception of homage due God, He asserted His crown rights. The Lord Jesus Christ in His person, work and position is the authority for Christian missions. This guarantees His absolute control of all opportunities for missionary service (Rev. 3:7; Acts 14:27). Jesus Christ holds the reign of human government in His hands. He never stands helplessly before "closed" mission doors. He opens as He pleases. He can remove the most stubborn dictator and the most determined opposition. *Jesus Christ has the keys!* The church can therefore move forward confidently to make disciples of all the nations through the baptism of new converts and indoctrination in the whole counsel of God.

What must we do then as Christ's people? Those who are raised up by the church to do cross-cultural evangelism ought to be given our vigorous and sustained support. When young people from our church want to go into the good work of global missions we need to be alongside of

them encouraging them every step of the way. This kind of partnership in world missions requires loyalty to one's church. Christians who walk away from a Bible teaching, missions-focused church and their monetary responsibilities place an extra load upon those they leave behind. The problem of disloyalty has been a besetting sin of the baby-boomer generation. The consumer mentality of the culture has put a shopping cart in the hands of countless Christian families. When a church no longer "meets one's needs" off they go to find something else. But the church-switchers must not dissuade us. We can experience more of God's enablement for generous giving to our Grace Promise plan. Our computers and the marvel of the internet highway provide the opportunity for regular contact with our missionary family. We can intercede for the persecuted church around the world and other needs that present themselves to us.

I have often been inspired by the example of John Wesley. The founder of the Methodist church was a fervent servant of Christ. Every bit of his five feet two-inch frame was consumed with a passion to spread the gospel. He would get up at 4:00 a.m. and ride seventy-eight miles on horseback to preach in the next town. One close observer of Wesley's life has said that "He (Wesley) has generally blown the gospel trumpet and rode twenty miles, before most of the professors, who despise his labours, have left their downy pillows." Wesley's zeal for Christ was indomitable. His prayer, "Lord, let me never live to be useless," was answered. He preached his last sermon at age eighty-eight in 1791, the year he died. May God inspire us as a church with Wesley-like tenacity in carrying out the Great Commission in our generation. There is a great work to be done.

Money and the Mouth (November 20, 2005)

We have all heard the expression, "Put your money where your mouth is." These words have been used to draw some into a wager or to challenge a person who professes one thing and does something else. There is a husband and wife in the Bible who did not put their money where their mouth was and, as a consequence, they were made to attend their own funeral. Ananias and Sapphira had to leave church, feet first (Acts 5:1-11). This couple promised they would give the whole amount from the sale of personal property and lied about how much of it they were giving to the church. It was highhanded hypocrisy, attempting to appear to be what they were not. We dance to the devil's tune when we put on the mask of generosity while hiding dishonesty. Think about what this means. Selfishness can masquerade in pious talk, prayers, and church attendance. It is no small thing to give lip service to the greatest story ever told and at the same time love money more than God.

God has made it abundantly clear how we are to love Him with all our money. The Book of Proverbs (application of the Law) tells us that wisdom is better than money (Prov. 3:13-15), that our money is to honor God (Prov. 3:9), that money must be acquired in God-pleasing ways (Prov. 10:4-5; 13:11; 11:1-2) and money must be handled with care (6:1-5; 27:24-27; 11:24, 25). The Gospels reveal the special attention Jesus gave to monetary matters. "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24). "Seek first His kingdom, and these things (food and clothing) shall be added to you" (Lk. 12:31). "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19). The Pharisees presented themselves as devoted to God, but Jesus knew they were lovers of money (Lk. 16:14). For this reason, the damning effect of greed was a regular topic in the Savior's sermons. The church of Jesus Christ is given explicit directions in

how to use money to support the work of God. Christians are to give systematically, regularly, proportionately, and voluntarily to their local church (1 Cor. 16:1-4). Every believer, no matter what their income, is to have a plan of grace giving. God provides for us. We manage these provisions by His wisdom and give proof of our love for God by our spending, saving, and giving.

But we must come back to the responsibility of putting our money where our mouth is. It is possible to know what the Bible teaches about money and still be sucked into the quicksand of materialism. There are sins that must be confessed and repented of if we are to be faithful managers of our money: the refusal to work and provide for our family, impulsive buying, the use of shopping to keep us happy, spending more on entertainment, pet food, and vacations than we give to our church, letting personal debt decrease the amount we give to God's work, failure to plan our giving, failure to save and plan for emergency giving, being bitter while we give generously, failure to support our local church, relying on feelings ("inner promptings") to determine how much we should give, making investments and major expenditures without praying and seeking wise counsel, allowing our possessions to become more important than people, envying those who have more than we do, pursuing get-rich-quick schemes as the answer to our money problems, lack of contentedness with what we have. Sin must be tracked down and killed or it will choke out our love for God and the generous giving habits that should characterize people who are on their way to heaven.

As we clear the debris of our own sinful patterns, there are ways we can invest for the eternal glory of God. With an eye on the future, we invest in people. One day, money will be gone, but we can have "friends for eternity." We are to take into account the many opportunities God gives us in this life. If we don't give as we should when we have very little to give, we reveal where our hearts really are. God is to be our Master not our money (Lk. 16:1-9). With these spiritual realities ensconced in our lives we can make some needed resolutions. I resolve that as a glory-bound child of God I will give generously and faithfully to my local church. I will seek the best counsel I can get regarding financial planning. I will create a discretionary fund from which I can give to emergency needs for missionaries, humanitarian concerns (disaster relief, etc.), and other gospel ministries. I will review my standard of living for the coming year and determine where there are ways to free up more money for giving. I will commit myself to eliminating interest-bearing debt that is limiting my ability to give more. I will quit robbing God by making excuses as to why I can't give what rightfully belongs to Him. I will figure out my pretax income and, if I am not already, begin to give at least 11 percent.

You may want to determine other resolutions regarding your giving. The most important thing, however, is to examine your heart, life, and checkbook to make sure that you are putting your money where your mouth is. There will come a time when we will stand before Jesus Christ and give an account to Him. Are you preparing for that final audit?

Have You Ever Been Lonely? Part 1 (December 4, 2005)

Songs abound expressing a universal experience of loneliness: "All by Myself", "Lonely Street", "I Ain't Got Nobody", "The Last Word in Lonesome Is Me." The list is almost endless. Some are of the opinion that loneliness is the number one problem in America today. Surveys have revealed vast numbers of the population who confess to chronic loneliness. In one poll 25% of

those questioned said they felt lonely or cut off from other people at some time during the preceding few weeks. Almost half of widows over fifty living in one large metropolitan area said that loneliness was their worst problem. The loneliest, researchers find, are elderly men who live alone and are infirmed. This is not surprising considering the fact that so many men enter their later years without any male friends. Singles' bars, clubs, societies, and internet chat rooms are some of the reminders of the cold presence of loneliness.

What is loneliness? We all know the feeling. It is a sense of being cut off from others. It is not primarily a matter of geography. Some of the loneliest moments can be experienced in the midst of a crowd. The feeling of isolation can actually be increased when around other people who are perceived to be happy and enjoying themselves. If they were to confess it, singles would acknowledge that feeling of "aleness" when being in church and around married couples. Christians are not exempt from problems of loneliness. The old gospel song says, "On life's pathway I am never lonely. No longer lonely, no longer lonely, for Jesus is a friend of friends to me." Few people can honestly sing that song. We are more apt to identify with the psalmist, "Look to the right and see; For there is no one who regards me; There is no escape for me; No one cares for my soul" (Psa. 142:4). Elijah was a man who knew the exhilaration of standing strong for God and the depths of loneliness and discouragement (1 Kgs. 19:4). No less a soldier of the cross than the apostle Paul had to cope with being deserted and left alone (2 Tim. 4:10, 16).

Loneliness is a painful experience, emotionally, mentally, and physically ("an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach"). Ironically, the Christmas season, traditionally a time of family reunions and festivity, can be emotionally the darkest month of the year for some. Alcohol and drugs offer empty promises of consolation through the dark seasons of isolation. Loneliness seldom visits by itself. It is often accompanied by depression, self-pity, grief, restlessness, temptation, anger, doubts about God, guilt, and anxiety. If loneliness is not seen for what it is, it can be a very destructive experience. But what really causes loneliness? It arises out of a deficient relationship with God. This can be one of two kinds. One may have no relationship with God ("But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" Isa. 57:20, 21). Loneliness is basically the result of alienation from God. We were made for companionship with Him. It was Augustine who said, "Thou has formed us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." It is also possible for the Christian to have an underdeveloped relationship with God. Those who are not growing in their knowledge of God will find loneliness to be frequently an uninvited guest. To keep oneself in the love of God through obedience to Him brings comfort and a special sense of His companionship (Jude 21; Jn. 15:9).

But loneliness arises from other circumstances in life. It was Paul Tournier who said, "Loneliness results from the spirit of our age." Our modern way of life fosters isolated people who fail to have close contact with each other. Rapid mobility, unknown to previous generations, has unintended consequences. People move, get job transfers, and leave churches in short periods of time. Death takes family and friends away. Technology gives and takes away. It can make the business environment impersonal. We talk to machines. We sit in front of a television screen, work at our computers, and sit in our cars in traffic, more often than not, cut-off from people. Even our responsibilities and commitments can contribute to a kind of loneliness. Following Jesus Christ and having strong biblical convictions can result in ridicule and rejection. It was the Master Himself who said, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated

you” (Jn. 15:18). The willingness to stand alone when necessary for the sake of the Savior is part of the Christian’s cross-bearing journey (Matt. 16:24).

The good news is that Christ’s servants are not left alone. This was the kind of encouragement Jesus gave to His disciples as He prepared them for His ascension to the Father and coming of the Holy Spirit (“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” Jn. 14:18). The resurrected Christ is the only one who can free us from the self-made prison of isolation.

Have You Ever Been Lonely? Part 2 (December 18, 2005)

There is a difference between being alone and loneliness. Being alone may be necessary, but loneliness is not good. Jesus was alone during His forty days of testing in the wilderness. Paul was alone in the desert as time of preparation for serving God. John was alone on the island of Patmos as an exile for Christ’s sake. It is possible to be alone, but not be lonely. Are you afraid to be alone? Do you need people around all the time? We need times of solitude. It has been said that “Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment.” Times alone with God are necessary to be more effective with people. Jesus modeled this for us in His intentional withdrawal from His disciples and the crowds that pursued Him (Mk. 1:35). He sought solitude and time with His heavenly Father before He chose His disciples (Lk. 6:12). The shadow of His approaching crucifixion found Jesus in the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46). We must accept the fact that some “aloneness” is unavoidable and even required. Trials will come. Disappointments will come as unwanted guests. The loss of a spouse can leave us aching with grief. The loneliness can haunt us, but it can be a blessing in disguise as we draw near to God and commune with Him in the soul-bearing prayer.

Loneliness is the opportunity to evaluate our relationship with God. If you have not come to know the presence of God through faith in Jesus Christ, then abandon the futility of your unbelief. Alienation from God because of sin is at the root of all our ills. “Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). These tender words of the Savior are an invitation to experience His everlasting presence. You don’t want to die without God and not have Him waiting for you in all His goodness. How awful to step out of time into eternity without God. Eternal loneliness. What a terrifying thought. But if you are Christ’s and know the sweetness of forgiveness, eternal life, and His joyful presence, there is comfort. Yes, the child of God can experience loneliness, but there is hope. We can lay hold of God in prayer; seek His help, and the needed wisdom for the darkness that surrounds us. Fellowship with God is a cherished reality for every believer. Companionship with the Lord. What a refuge! God the Son, our sympathetic High Priest, understands our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). Jesus on the cross was abandoned by all, even the Father (“My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?”). No one who has ever lived has tasted that kind of loneliness. When forsaken by all, we still have God. He has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

We must turn those times of a sense of forsakenness and abandonment into the occasion for self-examination. We will need to judge ourselves (Matt. 7:1, 2). Are we reaping what we have sown? If we have a pattern of staying by ourselves, running to the car immediately after church, never inviting anyone over for a meal, or becoming lost in our electronic world of television and the internet, we are slowly creating our own desert island. Get off of that island by applying the promises of God. Force feed your mind on such nutrient-rich truth as, “Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me” (Psa. 23:4); “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20); “I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you...He shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you forever” (Jn. 14:18). Let your loneliness encourage meditation and reflection. The Psalms of the Old Testament lend themselves to the warmth of the reassurance of God’s presence and care (e.g., Psa. 31; Psa. 142:4-6).

As God ministers to us, so we can assist others in their loneliness. Be sensitive to those who are lonely. We will need to identify and eliminate those qualities, actions, practices, and attitudes that promote loneliness (e.g., fear, selfishness, rigidity, perfectionism, pushiness, critical spirit). God’s school of affliction can teach us to have greater compassion and understanding of others (2 Cor. 1:3-6). Reach out to other people. Serve someone else. There are people who are dying on the inside, longing for someone to listen and care. The local church must not be a by-stander. A church ought to be a family where it is easy to build relationships. There are a host of passages in the New Testament that offer loneliness-relieving “one-anothering” (“love one another,” “encourage one another,” “build up one another,” “admonish one another,” “be kind to one another”).

The cold winds of winter tend to drive us indoors. The elderly can be left alone to live out their last years. The single person may more often than not, dine alone. The teenager can be imprisoned by self-doubt and immaturity. The cashier in the checkout line can feel cut-off from caring people. The neighbor can drive in and out of his garage isolated from the community. Our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and churches are filled with lonely people. Our debt of love to all people can be paid by caring words and deeds. Loneliness is banished by belonging, presence, and being understood. Jesus Christ does all that.

The Lion and the Lamb (December 25, 2005)

Suddenly a lion has become the star in a movie again. No. Not the movie, *The Lion King*. That story was about Simba and the circle of life. That movie represents a non-Christian worldview. The new lion star, Aslan, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is no tamed circus lion. Actually, he is quite believable as a regal, eloquent, strong, and courageous character. C. S. Lewis’s imaginative story is rich in Christian symbolism. Sin, forgiveness, and redemption lie just beneath the surface of the experiences of Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. Aslan is especially mesmerizing. A lion as a symbol of Christ is not a new idea. In the spectacular conclusion of redemption’s story the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed as “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (Rev. 5:5). The scene in which this announcement is made takes place in the court of heaven. Revelation 4 focuses the reader’s attention on the Creator Lord of the universe who sits on His throne of judgment. Revelation 5 places the spotlight on the seven-sealed scroll and the Son of God who receives it. All of human history culminates in the moment “in which the throne of heaven invests the Lion of the tribe of Judah with the legal authority to establish His dominion over the earth by advent and judgment.”

Heaven searches for someone worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll. Who has the authority to execute judgment on the earth and to bring to pass the kingdom of God on earth? No sinful human being is able to come forward and claim governing authority over the universe. Satan and his demons do not have the right to receive the kingdom of God. There is a holy hush in heaven.

This seven-sealed scroll contains the “history” of the future. No one is found worthy to open the title deed to the universe. No political figure, no emperor, no king, no Nobel Peace Prize winner, no scientist, no president, no scholar, no theologian is qualified. No one has the right to attempt to assume the prerogative of global rule other than the Lion of the tribe of Judah. This lion is Christ. He is no “lame duck” administrator seeking to salvage a failed plan. The destiny of all mankind is in His hands.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah is the only one worthy to open the scroll and break its seal (Rev. 5:5-7). The apostle John is told to stop weeping. Things are not as they seem. Judah’s Lion is the glorified Christ in His kingly authority. He is Israel’s king, the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. The political powers of Jesus’ day mocked both Him and the Jewish people with the sign, “This is Jesus the king of the Jews.” But in their jest, they unwittingly told the truth. Jesus is invested with regal authority. The lion is a symbol of power and majesty (Gen. 49:9). As a lion the Son of God is presented as the conquering Messiah who will defeat the enemies of God. His cross-work makes this possible (Rev. 3:21). That is why the lion is also a lamb. The lamb represents Christ as Savior (Rev. 5:6). The thousands of Passover lambs in Israel have found their fulfillment in the Lamb of God who was led to the slaughter to be pierced through for our transgressions. This breathtaking scene in heaven of the Lamb of God coming forward to take what is rightfully His by redemption should play upon our minds with unending delight and anticipation. “He came, and He took it (“the Book of Redemption”) out of the hand of Him who sat on the throne” (Rev. 5:7). Even though ours is a world that refuses to worship the Son of God, the blood-bought church of Christ should be living with the pulsating hope that the kingdom of Christ is coming.

This brings us back to Aslan, the Christ figure, in the land of Narnia. C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said, “I am sure you understand that Aslan is a divine figure, and anything remotely approaching the comic... would be to me simple blasphemy.” He said further, “I don’t know where the Lion came from or why He came... But once He was there, He pulled the whole story together.” It is not our purpose to exegete the thoughts of Lewis, but rather to enjoy the allusions to the person and work of Christ. The perpetual winter of Narnia without Christmas is a useful picture of our sin-cursed world. People all around us are frozen in their sin, unable to enjoy the life that comes from Christ’s saving work on the cross. It took the death of Aslan to make all things new and destroy the works of the White Witch. In the real world of Christ’s atoning death on the cross, the Lion is also a Lamb who “takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). The scene in heaven’s court prior to judgment on this world draws our eyes upon God’s Lion, Jesus Christ who is fierce and strong. He will one day compel all unbelievers to bow before Him. But before Israel’s Messiah roars in judgment, He offers His forgiveness and presence in the gift of eternal life. He is not safe, but He is good.

What is a Church? (January 8, 2006)

Here’s the church. Here’s the steeple. Open the door and here are the people. Do you remember how to use your two hands to visualize these words? The local church has seemingly always been a part of my life. My grandfather was a pastor and as long as he and my grandmother had any say in the matter, I was to be connected to a church. That meant Sunday School and at least the morning church service. Returning for the evening service was out of the question. I have memories of listening to a lot of sermons but can’t really recall anything I heard until I became a

teenager. Hard seats, heat, bugs flying around the lights (some entertainment), and adults carrying Bibles formed my early impressions of what church was. But I am sure a lot got through to me because of all the thinking I did about God, heaven, and hell. Thankfully, for most of my growing up years I did not live very far from a Bible teaching church. That, however, begs the question. What is a church? Is it a building? Is it a denomination? Is it a meeting of two or three Christians for Bible study and prayer?

The New Testament makes it very clear as to what constitutes a church. The concern here is not a definition of what theologians refer to as the universal church (all true believers everywhere beginning at the Day of Pentecost). A local church is made up of professing Christians (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1). The basis for belonging to a local church is the relationship that Christians have to one another through their relationship to Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:22-25). A church is where people who have trusted Christ as their Savior gather together because they are related to one another as a spiritual family. They will meet together with some regularity (Rom. 16:5). These meetings do not require a permanent building. The early church met in homes and rented buildings. A church will meet as often as is necessary. The first day of the week (Sunday) became the regular meeting day because the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead took place on Sunday. The idea of a Christian who would be unattached to a church is foreign to the New Testament (Heb. 10:25). A local church will have some form of organization (Phil. 1:2). Elders and deacons form the essential leadership structure. And because of the variety of spiritual gifts among believers and the tasks that have to be carried out, there will be other offices and functions in the organization of the church. A local church will observe the ordinances. New converts will be baptized as a public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). In its meetings the church will fellowship around the communion table to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ. And, finally, a local church will devote itself to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). Fellowship, worship, prayer, mutual helpfulness, encouragement, testimony, and praise grow out of the soil of truth-rich Bible teaching and preaching. The local church exists in the world for the purpose of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

But knowing what a church is does not guarantee meaningful and God-honoring participation in the life of the church. The Christian must find a church that is doctrinally sound, spiritually alive, Bible centered, Christ exalting, and missionary minded. No church is perfect, but that is no excuse for becoming a church tramp and not putting one's roots down. Finding and joining a church will mean exercising a ministry within that church. Don't be a bench warmer. Get to work. There are plenty of things that need to be done. If the ministry you are interested in doesn't exist, then speak with the pastoral staff about it. Fan the flames of your spiritual gift. Too many churches are filled with Christians who are spectators, allowing others to carry the load of service. A church needs systematic and faithful givers. One of the marks of Christian maturity is generous financial giving. The local church needs believers who have placed their personal finances under the lordship of Jesus Christ and give in proportion to their income (1 Cor. 16:1-4). How sweet is the sound of harmonious music. But sweeter still is a church where the saints are preserving "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Differences of opinion and conflict in the local church are the opportunity to exhibit the graces of the Spirit. When there are problems in the church, don't run away. Handle them God's way through peacemaking, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Be loyal to your church and discover the spiritual dividends that come as a result. The church needs lots of encouragers. Encouraging words, deeds, phone calls, keeping up with the needs of others, love, and compassion can make a church a soft spot in a hard world.

What is a church? It is God's family on this earth gathering together and spreading out in the rhythmic pattern of obedience to God's Word. It is a band of brothers and sisters in Christ who are eager to serve the living God. It is a place where forgiven sinners gather to worship the God of all grace. It is an assembly where men, women, young, old, rich and poor share their common life in Christ as they serve one another. It is a company of world-weary pilgrims who renew their strength for the journey ahead. It is a flock of God's sheep who feed upon the words of the Good Shepherd. It is a congregation of God's heralds who scatter to their communities and throughout the world as ambassadors of reconciliation.

The Critic's Choice (January 22, 2006)

A critical spirit is like cancer cells. If it is not identified and corrected it will spread and kill. A classic case study of this is seen in what it did to a large group of people. When Israel was being pursued by the Egyptian army they cried out to the Lord and criticized Moses. They blamed Moses for putting them in their predicament (Ex. 14:11-12). But this was only a preview of what would prove to be the death of the nation. After having miraculously crossed the Red Sea and escaping from Pharaoh's war chariots, all by God's mighty hand of deliverance, Israel found fault with Moses for not providing fresh water (Ex. 15:23-24). A short time later Moses was blamed for a lack of food (Ex. 16:2). Then it was back to complaining about the lack of water (Ex. 17:1-3). The wilderness was a hostile environment, but God supplied Israel with all their nutritional needs by means of a strange food called manna. It appeared on the ground every day but the Sabbath. But even this wonderful provision became the occasion for complaint (Num. 11:1). The people grew tired of their heavenly oatmeal and craved the food they had had in Egypt. Finally, the straw that broke the camel's back occurred at a place called Kadesh-barnea (Num. 14). It was there that Israel complained over the impossibility of the task of taking the land of Canaan, the place God has promised to give them. God had heard enough of complaining Israelites. An entire generation was disciplined by the Lord. For forty years they would languish in the wilderness. All who were 20 years of age and older would die except Joshua and Caleb.

This sad story provides us with the anatomy of a critical spirit. In the first place, a complaining attitude is not caused by circumstances. It surfaces in certain situations, but it is basically a problem of the heart. Israel was critical when she didn't have enough, when she thought she had too much, in the face of obstacles, and when things weren't done their way. A critical spirit demonstrates a lack of contentment, a heart not thankful for the provisions of God. It focuses on the problem, not the solution. It vents itself toward those in positions of authority and responsibility. A complaining attitude is a form of blame shifting. It will not take responsibility for itself (Num. 16:41). A critical spirit is a habit not easily broken and is infectious. It is a sign of unbelief in its refusal to live by the Word of God (Psa. 106:24-25). A critical, faultfinding disposition is an infection that will do great harm if it is not overcome by God's grace.

The place to start in starving this sinful pattern to death is to look at your record. How much of a complainer are you? Have you been told by someone else that you are very critical? Do you have a bent in that direction? There are some of us who have a very analytical kind of mind. We instinctively evaluate, trouble shoot, and are interested in how to fix what is broken. But be careful. Are we critical of all the people around us (spouse, children, employer, church, coach, teacher, neighbor, etc.)? We need to identify the contributing causes of our critical ways.

Fundamentally, we can be critical and judge others wrongly because of indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17). But there can be feeders to a complaining frame of mind such as bitterness, anger at God, pride (we think we have all the answers), and jealousy. What should we do then? We will have to judge ourselves first (Matt. 7:1; Lk. 6:37, 41; Rom. 14:10-13). If we are going to offer any evaluation of another person and their actions (sometimes this is necessary), we have to get the log out of our own eye. It is hypocritical judging that Jesus condemns. Often a critical spirit arises out of pent-up anger and an unwillingness to forgive. If we are going to pass judgment on a situation (Is it good, bad, wise, or foolish?), we will need to get the facts first. "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13). We must not render a judgment until we have heard both sides. If there is someone with whom we have a complaint, we need to go to them.

It is wise to keep a healthy distance from critical people who call themselves Christians (1 Cor. 5:11 "a reviler"). A critical spirit is like the flu. It can be passed on to others. We can lovingly confront the critical person rather than succumb to their outlook on life. How easy it is to get caught up in gripe sessions. Disgruntled people can do great damage in a workplace, a school, or a church. Learn to be a builder (Rom. 14:19). We need to train ourselves in the power of the Spirit to encourage people and look for ways to help them rather than just criticize them. Ask God for the grace to overlook small offenses and to be able to put off that hasty judgmental spirit that strikes out at people. Let the words of the psalmist be the choice of the critic, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psa. 141:3).

Irons Upon Our Heels (January 29, 2006)

Many in the older generation will remember Dagwood Bumstead. He was a cartoon character who also became the subject of a movie series. Dagwood was married to Blondie who kept him from self-destruction. The problem was that Dagwood liked to sleep late and was always late for work. He would rush through his toast and coffee for breakfast and dash out the door where his wife stood with his hat in hand. When Dagwood arrived at work he would sleep at his desk. He lived to snack and nap. The famous dagwood sandwich lives on in memory of those multi-layered sandwiches a foot high with everything in the refrigerator on them. Dagwood Bumstead was funny but the real-life problem he represented is not.

Laziness plagues us all. The dictionary says that it is that condition of not being willing to work or be active, idleness, a dislike of work. But that doesn't tell the whole story. Most of us don't think of ourselves as being lazy. We know a lazy person when we see one, but he is not us. We work. We get things done. We don't sit and watch TV all day long. But we flatter ourselves. The fact is, we are all lazy as a part of our sinful condition. It exists in each and every one of us, lurking in the caverns of our hearts at some level. It is possible to be busy and still be lazy. We can even be self-disciplined in one area of our lives, but lazy in other areas. It is necessary to understand sinfulness in order to come to grips with laziness. Sin is "any want of conformity unto or transgress of, the law of God" (Jas. 4:17). Laziness is a failing to use God's gifts or to fulfill His calling. It is a manifestation of my sinful condition. It is not doing what I am supposed to do or failing to do the best I can do. Now we may be beginning to feel uncomfortable. But there is more. Are we lazy? Did we get up this morning when we should have? Have we started something and didn't finish it? Did we receive a grade in school which did not reflect what we were able to do? Is my physical condition a poor one by choice? Do I have a habit which is

hurting me which I know I need to break? Do I take the path of least resistance when I face a problem? Do I have a savings account and am I regularly contributing to it? Is there any hope? Can we change? Can the leg-irons of laziness be broken?

If laziness is to be overcome, we must acknowledge it and the penalties it carries in life. What are some of these? It creates a limited and poor life (Prov. 6:9-10; 26:13). We say things like, "I've tried that, but it doesn't work." "We just don't have the time or the money right now." How easily these words can fall from our mouths and pave the way for doing less than we should. Laziness doesn't redeem the time (Prov. 26:14). Unfinished projects clutter our lives (Prov. 18:9; 10:26; 19:24; 24:30). Financial troubles plague us because we have not prepared for the future (Prov. 20:4). The pleasure of living the present moment comes back to haunt us. The misery and hardships of an unhappy marriage accumulate because we haven't given ourselves to the work of love (Prov. 15:19). Apathy about the things that really matter creates dependency on others (Prov. 20:4), becoming a burden on others (Rom. 12:8-11; 1 Tim. 5:13), failure to grow and mature in the Christian life (Heb. 5:11; 6:12), and can result in the greatest waste of all, eternal loss (Matt. 25:26).

We will have to pray that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened to recognize our accountability to God. The fight against the downward drag of slothfulness never ends. All Christians are responsible to God for what they do with their body, mind, and time (Rom. 12:1-2). And what is the motivation for this? The infinite mercies of God. All that God has done for us in Christ and the "expulsive power of a new affection" slays the dragon of indolence. The growth of love for God will move us to establish a routine which will make demands upon us (Prov. 6:6-11). We must search out and deal ruthlessly with the busyness that keeps us from doing what we ought to do. Does my daily routine reflect kingdom priorities? Are we developing our spiritual gifts (2 Tim. 1:6)? By the grace of God, attack the habits that need to be broken (e.g., overeating, undereating, overspending, wasteful spending, excessive television time, time consuming video games). We would do well to model our lives after genuine heroes (Heb. 6:12). The hall of faith is filled with worthy role models, as well as others in the body of Christ (Heb. 11, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley).

Christian, in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, journeyed from the City of Destruction to Mount Zion (the heavenly city). When he came to that place of the cross where the burden of sin rolled from his back into an empty tomb, he gave three leaps for joy, and went on his way singing. But his eye quickly turned to three men fast asleep, with fetters upon their heels. The name of one of these sleepers was Sloth. Christian tried to awake him and help him off with his irons. But Sloth said, "Yet a little more sleep." So, he lay down to sleep again, and Christian set out on his journey. The greatest waste of all for the unbeliever is to sleep through the opportunity to know God, then die, and suffer the pain of judgment for all eternity. For the child of God, the waste of time, money, and abilities is a sour musical note. When we see Christ will we lament that laziness kept us from having loved Him more?

How Must a Pastor Die: Some Personal Reflections (February 5, 2006)

This past week a non-stop flight took me to the land of frozen lakes in Minnesota. As we broke through a layer of clouds to land at the Minneapolis airport, a snow-covered landscape was there to greet us. The theme of the 19th Annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors was "How Must a

Pastor Die? The Cost of Caring Like Jesus.” Over fourteen hundred pastors were welcomed by the Bethlehem Baptist Church where John Piper serves as pastor. Why would pastors from all over America and various foreign countries want to go where the high temperature each day is 34 degrees and the featured speakers challenge their audience in how to die for Christ’s sake? There are very good reasons.

The three-day conference at the Hilton Hotel was preceded by a pre-conference with John Piper. It was by invitation only for a couple of hundred pastors. All attendees were asked to have read God is the Gospel by John Piper. In this book, subtitled “Meditations on God’s love as the gift of Himself,” we are reminded that the “gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It’s a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God.” Especially noteworthy is the warning of how a “radically man-centered view of love” has captured both our culture and the church. We are besieged by the trite belief that our self-esteem should be bolstered by the fact that God has made much of us, or as Piper puts it, “We are willing to be God-centered...as long as God is man-centered.” All the pastors in America must beware of the subtle nature of this error for the sake of their flocks and themselves. The gospel message is at stake.

The Keynote Speaker was Ajith Fernando, the National Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka since 1976. His topic, “How Must a Pastor Die?” was developed out of a study of Colossians 1:24-29. His home country of Sri Lanka has been torn by decades of war and was most recently hit by a tsunami. Dr. Fernando has exemplified sacrificial service for Christ for many years and has contributed much to the body of Christ through his teaching and writing ministry. The soul-strengthening from what it means to be sorrowful yet always rejoicing came from his careful handling of the Scriptures and his personal experiences in serving others. Michael Campbell, senior minister of a new multi-racial church in Jackson, Mississippi, spoke on “Sacrificing Self - The Multi-ethnic Church and the Mandate of the Gospel.” We were challenged to love all people in the gospel, no matter what their race or ethnicity. Churches are too apt to move when the racial makeup of their community changes. Pastor Campbell’s appeal was boldly simple. Don’t move.

David Sitton was our Missions Speaker. The title of his message was “Missionary Martyrs: Fools for Jesus, for the Nations.” David has worked among cannibalistic and headhunting tribes in the interior of New Guinea. His stories kept everyone on the edge of their seats, but the soul of his sermon was the privilege we have in taking the gospel to people who have never heard the name of Jesus. He called for a tenth of the pastors in attendance to go into a church planting ministry among the unreached people of this world. Many were lined up afterward to talk to him. Several of the seminary students that were sitting near me on the return flight home had already called their wives about short-term missions work this summer.

At every Pastor’s Conference John Piper presents a biography of someone in church history. This year’s message was “Always Singing One Note...a Vernacular Bible: Why William Tyndale Lived and Died.” It was superb. The strength of Piper’s preaching is that he makes you want more of God. He told of Tyndale’s life being offered as a martyr so that the English people could have the Bible in their own tongue. It was a culminating call to pastors to live and die for the sake of the gospel.

I know of no other conference for pastors that surpasses this one in reviving the heart in greater love for God and His Word. A significant part of this is the worship in song. When hundreds of pastors unite their voices by heartily singing the praises of God you are carried to the gates of heaven. But this need not be limited to preachers. Our congregational singing ought to be joyous and exuberant for the glory of God. How can we stand passively by when our God deserves the exalted language of truth in melodies that take wings and fly? I thought of some of our friends who are going through troubled waters as we sang “Be Still, My Soul.” The words, “when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last,” were a special comfort.

There is a certain spiritual reinvigoration that comes from a pastors’ conference that is well done. By “well done” is not meant a slick, well-organized, celebrity cast of speakers. When Christians gather there must be authenticity of worship and preaching from the Word that grips the heart. A number of good things can happen in such an environment. One’s spiritual eyesight can become sharper. A sense of one’s sin and the need for repentance can rise up without warning. The needs of others walk across the mind. The greatness of God’s grace and mercy overwhelm the soul. The awareness of being surrounded by fellow Christian pilgrims brings encouragement. The tide of emotions ebbs and flows. The mind dances with delight in God. This is the nature of Spirit-bathed corporate worship. It is not limited to pastors’ conferences. All of our congregational worship is to be a celebration of our great and glorious God. Do you come to church to encounter God and leave encouraged in the gospel? Settle for nothing less.

A Letter to Nikki (February 12, 2006)

Dear Nikki,

As I write, a host of memories sweep over me. I think back to your growing-up years at Berachah. Your father and mother were faithful to bring you and Shay Sunday after Sunday, month after month, year after year. I remember you quietly sitting there with those big brown eyes listening to Bible exposition (Were you really listening?). But now as I fast forward my thoughts, that picture your mother sent on the internet is fresh in my mind’s eye. It’s the one of you and Railin with the bandanas on your head. What makes that picture all the more poignant is the story it represents. Since you were first diagnosed with breast cancer wave upon wave of emotional issues have washed over you and all of us who love you. Chemotherapy and radiation treatments have now become unwanted but necessary guests. Nausea, loss of hair, and weakness have become new milestones in your life. We have heard these stories from other women and wondered how we would feel if this happened to someone we knew well. Now we know. Your battle with cancer has drawn so many of us into your suffering. God’s people have come alongside you in prayer, gifts, and help with your daily routine. Your family is bearing your burdens in extraordinary ways. As we have prayed together, the preciousness of trust in God has become even more meaningful and real.

But what is faith? How does it express itself when God’s providence frowns? Is faith merely some abstract feeling that everything is going to work out for the better? If we exercise enough faith, can we see our ailments vanish? As I recall, you were told by someone that very thing. This theologically flawed understanding of faith is offered as hope in our times of sickness and need. We are told to claim our healing. The words of Jesus (“Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says

is going to happen, it shall be granted him” Mk. 11:23) are used as heavy weapons against our supposed lack of faith.

It would be helpful if we pondered the words of our Lord in their context. The disciples of Jesus needed to understand the vital place of confidence in God, if they were to bring the greatest glory to Him. The withered fig tree provided the opportunity to teach an indispensable lesson in how to move the mountains of the seemingly impossible. Prayer is very powerful in its effect. Jesus was using the figure of a mountain to refer to mountainous difficulties (like fighting cancer). Biblical faith does not have to overcome a reluctant God but rather expresses confidence in God’s power and goodness. God wants to display His perfections by our calling on Him for the help we need. He is the “rooter-up of mountains of great difficulties.” Faith that honors God is the assurance and conviction that what God has said is true and that it is to be acted upon. This is a far cry from that cruel idea that by our faith we can create reality (“Faith in God can make my cancer go away”). This is nothing more than a mental game of having faith in faith or faith in oneself. The kind of faith Jesus was talking about is rock solid confidence in God and in His Word.

Nikki, when you pray about your cancer, ask that God’s will be done, as any of us should when we encounter obstacles in life (“That, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” 1 Jn. 5:14). God could, of course, eliminate every cancer cell in your body. But He may choose not to do this. Many years ago, I heard a wise pastor speak about our struggles “when God doesn’t come through.” He drew his thoughts from Hebrews 11 by highlighting four characteristics of faith. Sometimes faith changes our circumstances (Note the list of things in Hebrews 11 that God did as a result of faith). Sometimes faith does not change our circumstances (some “were tortured”). We should never judge God by circumstances. We have to hold firmly to the fact that God loves us even when the pain does not go away. Faith is not merely receiving from God the things we want. It is the ability to receive what God gives us. We must not build our theology from our emotions, but from the teaching of God’s Word. Bible faith always leads to ultimate victory. The victory is finding delight in God as He works out His plan in our lives for the achievement of His glory.

I certainly don’t want this to sound like a cold lecture. But, in the words of the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth” (Psa. 73:25). As the long shadows of cancer hold sway over your life, continue in your hunger for God. He wants to take you places in your trust in Him where you have not been before. Thank you for the encouragement you have been in these last several months. Your presence among your brothers and sisters in Christ in our worship services says volumes. You are telling us what you think is most important. We rejoice at what God is doing in your life and Kyle’s. As Railin is in the infancy of her journey in life, may God use you as an example of unshakeable, joyful confidence in God.

Your pastor and friend,
Howard

Why I am a Creationist (February 26, 2006)

The word “creationist” is an incendiary label in discussions about human origins. Creationists are charged with being anti-science, dogmatic fundamentalists and just a plain nuisance.

Evolutionists are credited with being the enlightened and scientific people who want to uphold the academic integrity of our educational system. The issues involved here run deep. The debate between creationists and evolutionists is not simply one of how a science class should be conducted. It is a collision of two different worldviews. If the discussion does not begin at this point critical issues will be obscured, and faulty conclusions will be drawn. Evolutionary theory believes (this is an important verb) “that all life forms on Earth, including humans, share common ancestry and developed over millions of years through the mechanisms of natural selection and random mutation.” The creationist believes that God is the Maker of all things. To be a creationist is a commitment to belief in the Triune God, a central plank in orthodox Christianity. However, to call oneself a creationist opens up another issue. For the purposes of brevity and succinctness, Christians fall into different camps of interpretation of the Bible when it comes to origins. Some believe in what is known as theistic evolution. In this view God is integrated into the evolutionary philosophy. There are others who subscribe to what is known as progressive creationism. It teaches that in the “Big Bang” origin of the universe over 16 billion years ago, death, bloodshed, and disease existed before Adam and Eve, the days of creation were long periods, and Noah’s Flood was a local event. It is my view that theistic evolution and progressive creationism qualify as lamentable creation compromises.

My intention is not to critique these interpretations of human origins, but to set forth my reasons for being a biblical creationist. I am of the conviction that God created the earth in six literal days. My first reason is a belief in the absolute trustworthiness of the Bible, that it is God’s infallible, inerrant, and all-sufficient Word. This is the claim of the Bible for itself (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). This is also the historic view of the church. Jesus Christ has given witness to the absolute authority of the Scriptures, Old Testament and New Testament (Jn. 10:35; 16:13). Either the Bible is our final authority for life and godliness, or it is not. This battle over the Bible has been fought by every generation of believers since God spoke to Adam and Eve. Satan’s “has God said” has seduced its millions. Resistance to the belief that God is our Creator will be fought on the hill of biblical authority. Any compromise here will result in unbelief strutting through a short-lived victory.

I am a creationist because the Genesis account of creation, when interpreted by a consistent literal, historical, grammatical method (the way the Bible interprets itself), is perspicuous (lucid or clear) in its teaching. It is, at best, misguided desperation to attempt to shoe-horn into the text and chronology of the Bible millions or billions of years. The days of Genesis 1 and 2 are not elastic numerals. The six-day creation week was established as a model for man’s work week (Ex. 20:11). The literal 24 hour-day-view is the clearest reading of the text. One wonders if interpretations that deny this (e.g., each day equivalent to an age) have been developed in response to the pressures of evolutionary philosophy.

I am a creationist because Jesus Christ was a creationist. He believed that the creation was God’s work (Mk. 13:19). He believed Adam and Eve were created by the hand of God (Matt. 19:4-5). It is evident from the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels that the creation record is historically true and divinely inspired. Jesus was a creationist because He did the creating (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16). Every created thing “passed through the intelligence and will of the Son of God. All nature dances to His tune by His sustaining power” (Mk. 6:39; Heb. 1:3). The miracles of Jesus Christ in the Gospels tell us much about His miracles at creation.

I am a creationist because nature has God's fingerprints all over it. The grass and the lilies of the field are the product of His design and decoration (Matt. 6:28-30). He is the Intelligent Designer and creation's complexity is a witness to the Creator's infinite knowledge and power, not chance through vast periods of time. When I look at the stars against the black velvet of the night sky for some reason my first thought is not "what a glorious accident." All nature sings of God's glory (Psa. 19:1). Sin-blinded mankind looks at the wonders of nature and worships it. And in so doing, condemns itself (Rom. 1:18-32).

I am a creationist because of the tragic alternative. Evolution says that we exist because of some cosmic accident that occurred billions of years ago. It tells us that we are a mere collection of molecules caught up in a brief, meaningless experience on this imperiled planet. Death is the end of it all, so get used to it. Glorified roadkill, that's what we are. As Richard Dawkins, the high priest of the First Church of evolutionary thought, has said, "Charles Darwin hit upon a brilliant idea that elegantly explains all of life on earth without any need to invoke the supernatural or the divine." I refuse to yield to the intellectual bullies and thought police of our age. Evolution does not stand on scientific merit. It is at its core a philosophy placing its own spin on fossils, mutating viruses, and molecular biology. We were made to worship the Creator and any attempt to deny that, no matter what the form, is idolatry.

The Power of the Tongue (March 12, 2005)

According to Einstein's special Theory of Relativity, an extremely small amount of mass will change into a large amount of energy. If all the atoms in one pound of matter were completely changed into energy, it would release as much power as would the explosion of 10 million short tons of TNT. That is power. But there is a power of another kind that can unleash stupendous consequences. It is that little piece of flesh within the mouth we know as the tongue. This relatively small member of the body has far-reaching power. It can start wars, break up marriages, and induce pain that lasts for a lifetime. But the tongue is also like a bucket that can bring up the sweet, thirst-slaking waters of godly counsel, relationship-building, and praise to God. Scriptural warnings are therefore abundant. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Prov. 18:21). "The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin" (Prov. 13:3). "So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire" (Jas. 3:5). God has given numerous road signs regarding the use of the tongue for the Christian on his journey through life.

The tongue is not to be used for lying and deception. Satan is the father of lies and is fond of those who participate with him in obscuring the truth (Gen. 3:1; Jn. 8:44). How easily we can slip into a falsehood and then go on our way without a twinge of conscience. There are various ways in which we lie. We can deliberately tell an untruth, exaggerate the truth ("you never do anything right"), create a false impression, misrepresent what someone else has said or done, or make promises that we don't keep. Our heart's cry to God should be to make us truth-tellers.

The tongue is not to be used as a substitute for action and or as an instrument of blameshifting (Gen. 3:12, 13; Prov. 14:23). Beware of that feeling that comes when you feel good about yourself because you have merely talked about a problem and have done nothing to solve the

problem. Parents, take the time to explain to your four-year-old the ugliness of blaming others for things we are responsible for.

The tongue is not to be used for slander and gossip (Ex. 20:16; Prov. 10:18). Passing along an untruth about another person is an arrow aimed at the heart. Gossip can be so delicious. We can communicate rumors and careless talk and smack our lips when we have finished, thinking that we have rendered some great service to our circle of friends. The tongue can be a deadly weapon. Reputations, confidences, and relationships can be rendered a fatal blow by words that destroy rather than build-up.

The tongue can be used to judge and criticize (Matt. 7:1-5). Have we been willing to find fault with someone else while at the same time refusing to judge our own faults? Do I attempt to change others but am not willing to change myself? Jesus hammers that type of judging that is indifferent to the condition of one's own sins. He doesn't forbid all judging. There is a time and place for determining who are spiritual dogs and pigs, but not under the cover of hypocrisy. Ridicule is a first cousin to sinful, destructive judging. Our society is awash in disrespect, insults, contempt, and mockery. Much of our entertainment is at the expense of other people, using the tongue to make fun of people we don't like. There are many other vices of the tongue, but these are enough to keep us aware of our own potential for verbal homicide.

Let us pull the shade and let the light of the power of the tongue for life flood in. By "life" is meant that whole range of social, personal, moral, and spiritual vitality that comes from God. We are to be fully alive (life as God intended it to be) on the road that we take through life (physical life). We are to praise God with our tongue (Psa. 40:9-10; Jas. 5:13). God-given joy ought to be overflowing in our conversation with others and in our congregational gatherings. When we put our feet on the floor at the beginning of each new day, it ought to be our resolve to tell of the goodness of God before others. Let the tongue be used for prayer (Jas. 5:13; Col. 4:2). Talk with God before we start talking to others. Adoration of God, confession of sin, thanksgiving for God's blessings, and supplication for our needs and those of others should dance upon our lips with fervency and frequency. Our tongues should be instruments to express the life-giving power of the gospel (1 Pet. 3:15). "O Lord, give me the opportunity to tell someone how Christ is their only hope."

One of our prayers should be the plea for greater honesty in our speech (Eph. 4:25). We are to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God. We need grace so that our tongues will be used with restraint (Prov. 17:27). This would mean tutoring ourselves in thinking carefully and wisely before we speak. Ask God to make your words calm and faith-building (Prov. 15:1) and disciplined in the keeping of confidences. A life-giving tongue is one that encourages others (Prov. 12:25). Forgiving others, offering wise counsel, and letting kindness flow from our lips is a jug of honey that will sweeten many a life. "Lord, may the power of my tongue be used to exalt your name and garnish the lives of others with the sweet savor of your precious truth."

Our Nation's Capitol (March 26, 2006)

My seventh-grade class had the opportunity to take a trip to Washington, D.C. However, my parents were not financially able to pay my way. So, I remained behind and listened to the

experiences of my returning fellow-classmates. Little did I know that my son would one day serve on our congressman's staff in the city that had eluded me in my youth. Eric's guided tour remains a treasured memory. In yet another mercy from God, fifty-three years after that seventh-grade trip I have spent a schedule-packed week in our nation's capitol. Beth and I were part of a group of forty-six who were led by Dr. Milton Wheeler, history professor at William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I know it is not polite to flaunt a vacation while others have had to remain behind (I remember the feeling), but the experience was too rich in history and lessons learned to let it slip away into the dustbin of been-there-done-that. The itinerary of the week is incidental to observations made within the context of a Christian worldview.

Freedom has been won and lost. The freedoms one used to enjoy as a tourist in Washington, D.C. have been altered by September 11, 2001. The capitol, all federal buildings, and museums require screening. Bomb sniffing canines, guards, police, and barricades have changed the ambiance of the city, symbolic of human freedom. Security is necessarily tight. Being asked to drink a swallow from my water bottle served some kind of precautionary measure and helped me to stay hydrated after standing in lines. These are small inconveniences when one considers the many freedoms that remain. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier, always an impressive sight, the ever-inspiring Iwo Jima monument, and the monuments to World War II, the Korean War, and the Viet Nam War stirred deep emotions. So many lives in this great nation of ours have been given to protect our freedom. This will always be necessary while living in a fallen world. The sacrifices made by our men and women in the armed services should never go without appropriate honor.

The United States of America is the product of God's gracious providential hand in history. It is amazing how many strategic events occurred to make possible the birth of our nation. The puritan heritage, brilliant minds shaped by a Christian worldview, and freedom-loving patriots forged the philosophy and documents which created a country unique in world history. George Washington's integrity, courage and leadership ability, Thomas Jefferson's genius with words (in three days by himself wrote the Declaration of Independence), and the collective sense of God's sovereignty over human affairs all played a vital role in constructing a government steeped in liberty and justice for all.

The law of God is etched in stone. No building in Washington, D.C. rivals the Supreme Court for the magnitude of its symbolic power. We are a nation that lives under the Constitution and law, not the tyranny of despots. "Equal justice under law" is emblazoned over the doors of this majestic building. It also does not go without notice that Moses, holding the tablets of the Decalogue, is etched in stone above the heads of the nine Supreme Court justices. It is ironic that displays of the Ten Commandments are banned from public buildings across the nation. The exception is the one that houses the highest court in the land, committed to guard our constitutional liberties. Government does not give us our rights. It is our Creator who conveys our rights. Woe to the nation that forgets this truth.

Nameless, faceless, and without a monument are many who have helped to build our great nation. Thousands of school children spilled out of chartered buses to visit our nation's monuments and museums to learn the story of who we are as a people. These young people are red, yellow, black, and white. It is the great, great, great grandchildren of slaves that evoke some special thoughts. It was upon the backs of their ancestors that our liberties were established. There is an extraordinary irony in this. While Thomas Jefferson was penning the words "all men

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” his slaves were plowing his fields, hauling his water, cutting his firewood, cooking his meals, and emptying his chamber pots. This was true throughout the thirteen colonies as slaves from Africa labored day-in and day-out making it possible for free patriots to do what had to be done for us to become the United States of America. The obvious inconsistencies and injustice of slavery, thankfully, eventually crumbled under the weight of the truths which formed our infant nation.

Time and truth often turn the vilified and unpopular into benefactors for the human race. The words of Mark Anthony in Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” come to mind, “the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” The memorial to Abraham Lincoln is a splendid monument in Washington, D.C. He is seated regally in a massive marble chair. If he were standing he would be twenty-eight feet tall. The words above his head read, “In this temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.” But in his own day he went through periods of great unpopularity and was frequently savaged by the Washington press. John Wilkes Booth was convinced that by assassinating Lincoln he would be seen as a hero in the South. As we sat in Ford’s Theatre watching the play “Shenandoah” (a story set in the time of the Civil War) where Lincoln was shot, it was haunting to look up and see that empty Presidential box appearing exactly as it did on the night of April 14, 1865. We ought not to be too impressed with opinion polls and editorials in the major newspapers. They may be only reflecting the collective ignorance of those with a certain political agenda. History has not allowed the truth to be interred with Abraham Lincoln’s bones.

There is a well disguised mugger waiting in the museum of natural history. We were greeted by Tyrannosaurus Rex as we entered one of my favorite museums. There are many of these in Washington, D.C. and one could spend weeks, if not months, going through them all in a thorough way. Children were being guided by their parents through the exhibitions of prehistoric life. In one of these, the earth’s sun was given the credit as creating the spark that brought a life-form out of the primordial soup of an ancient sea. We condescendingly view ancient man as worshiping the sun and think that we are beyond such primitive ideas. The worldview of naturalism (evolution) is the template that explains our origins. The Creator is nowhere to be found, except in the founding documents of our nation. The attribution of intelligence to “it” (chance) making the necessary adjustments for the purposes of survival is incredulous but is believed by many. The Christian worldview is under assault not only in the museums but in the culture at large. The best defense is a Christ-centered, God-exalting personal witness to authentic Christianity.

Strong Christians can become bound by the fetters of the evils of their culture. Lexington, Virginia is rich in Civil War history. Washington and Lee University, the Virginia Military Institute, the home of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, and the burial sites of Jackson and Robert E. Lee are all located within a short distance of one another. Having viewed the video, “Warriors of Honor” about “the faith and legacies of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson,” we were primed to see the memorials to these two stalwarts of the War Between the States. Both Lee and Jackson were professing Christians whose discourse, writings, and leadership gave witness to their robust Christian world and life view. The Lee Chapel on the campus of Washington and Lee University remains as a testimony to General Lee’s desire for the next generation of leaders to know God and hear His Word. Jackson was an active member of the Presbyterian Church in Lexington. He taught a Sunday School class and gave generously to God’s work. Lee and Jackson are viewed

with suspicion by many moderns, not only because of their allegiance to “lost cause,” but also because they owned slaves. The ownership of slaves by Christians of course is not unique to Southern Generals. Jonathan Edwards, pastor and theologian, also owned slaves. How do we reconcile this cultural injustice with biblical Christianity? Some historical and theological perspective is necessary. Slavery was an institutional evil, just as abortion is today. This serves as a warning to us. We can easily accept the evils that surround us as being normal and maybe even necessary. Discernment and moral courage must characterize Christian believers in any age. Self-examination is a required step in keeping us vigilant when facing the danger of being conformed to this world.

A gaze into the hideous face of evil is an encounter with the sinful heart of man. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum sits only a short distance from the Washington Monument. The architecture of the Holocaust Museum is designed to reflect that of a prison facility. Its stated mission “is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy (the Holocaust); to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.” As we entered the museum a young girl passed us leaving with tears running down her cheeks. It was a solemn and funeral-like walk through the three floors of the exhibition. Upon entering one is given an identification card with the words of Elie Wiesel on the front, “For the dead and the living we must bear witness.” Inside the card are a picture and the story of a real person who lived during the Holocaust. The account of the merciless slaughter of six million Jews in Nazi Germany moves from the rise of Nazi power to the stories of the survivors of the death camps. Sadly, in one of the mini films regarding the development of anti-Semitism in Europe was a quote from Martin Luther. He said things about the Jews he should never have said and now they come back to haunt the heirs of the Reformation. It is the distortion of the teaching of the Bible that sows the seeds of anti-Semitism. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, both Jew and Gentile. Israel’s Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only hope for a sin-darkened world.

A brief excursion through a small part of American history can be exhilarating and enlightening. The next generation needs a tour guide through the halls of history. That tour guide must be accurately informed and wise in the Word of God (How good it was to have Dr. Wheeler assist us in this endeavor). In this way the purpose of history can be realized in the words of Paul, “Now these things happened to them as an example and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). This is to be the legacy of human history. Our nation’s capital tells us stories that we need to hear.

Jesus Christ and the Red Dragon (April 2, 2006)

Dragons are frightful creatures which haunt the halls of our imagination. Stories and paintings abound that tell us of a time when valiant men fought and killed these menacing monsters of the ancient world. One particular dramatic scene by the Renaissance artist Jacopo Bellini shows a warrior with sword and shield engaged in battle with a winged reptilian adversary. Satan is symbolized in the Book of Revelation as a great, red dragon whose intent is to destroy the Virgin Mary’s child (Rev. 12:4). Though the devil makes his appearance as an angel of light he is in reality a fierce, depraved antagonist to God. The Old Testament unfolds a drama of conflict between the seed of the woman (the coming Christ-child) and the seed of the serpent (Satan)

(Gen. 3:15). Satan's desire is to establish an enduring kingdom independent of God and to do this, Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah, must be eliminated as a threat. All through the Bible Satan can be seen attempting to destroy the Lamb of God either by death or deception. We are reminded by all this that there are "hidden forces" behind the course of human events determined to get rid of Jesus Christ as the one "who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron" (Rev. 12:5; Psa. 2:9).

It was Jesus who said that the devil was a murderer from the beginning (Jn. 8:44). Cain was doing the devil's work when he killed Abel. It was Satan's desire to corrupt the line of Seth. Abraham endangered Sarah and the messianic seed by lying. Rebekah's plan to cheat Esau out of his birthright and the consequent enmity of Esau against Jacob was a threat to the promised seed of Abraham (Gen. 27). Pharaoh and Egypt's allegiance to her pantheon of gods stood as the sinister background to the murder of male children in Israel (Ex. 1:15-22). Male infanticide was but another strategy of Satan to remove the possibility of the coming of Israel's Messiah. The Amalekites' war on Israel, the Canaanite's moral and spiritual corruption of Israel, the apostasy of Israel, Saul's attacks upon David, Queen Athaliah's attempt to destroy the royal seed (2 Chron. 22:10) and Haman's attempt to slaughter the Jews (Esther 3-9) were all a part of the conflict of the ages.

The consistent attempts of the Israelites to murder their own children for sacrificial purposes was a self-inflicted, satanically inspired drive to destroy the seed of the woman. If the Messiah could not come, God's covenant with Abraham fails. Antiochus Epiphanes turned his hatred upon Israel and foreshadowed the future Antichrist's anti-Semitic campaign in the Great Tribulation (Dan. 11:21-35). Following in the footsteps of other enemies of the coming Messiah, Herod the Great declared war on all male children in Bethlehem from two years old and under, as a desperate attempt to kill any would-be rival to his dynasty (Matt. 2:16). In a further advance against the redemptive plan of God the temptation of Jesus was an all-out assault of the devil to make Jesus fail. Satan would have loved nothing better than the disqualification of Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world.

The works of the devil were rendered a mortal blow at the cross through the atoning death of Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:15). However, until his final judgment Satan is mobile and prowls about as a roaring lion. So, after the death and resurrection of the Son of God the great, red dragon had to change his mode of attack. At His ascension Jesus left the domain of the devil and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2). Since he could not prevent the sin and death-slaying work of God, Satan would seek to deceive the nations regarding Jesus Christ. Jesus and the apostles predicted that this would happen (Matt. 24:11, 24; 1 Tim. 4:1). Satan is a liar and sponsors all maligning witness against the person of Christ. At the dawn of the church age a religious philosophy that eventually came to be known as Gnosticism arose (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge"). This movement exalted knowledge and enlightenment as the key to saving oneself. Its dualistic philosophy, which views all matter as evil and the immaterial world of the spirit as good, promised salvation by the understanding of secret or esoteric knowledge. It was an early form of this false teaching that John attacks in his first epistle. Some were teaching that Christ's spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism and ascended at the cross before he died. Others claimed that because God could not live in a human body, Jesus was only a phantom. This ancient heresy has been refurbished and sold as the "real truth" which has been suppressed by the church for two thousand years. At least this is what The Da Vinci Code would have you to believe. Yes, of course, the book is a novel (fiction), but it is the kind of fiction that, for many,

the wish is the father of the thought. If only the Jesus of the Bible can be discredited, then we are off the hook. The author of this bestselling book (over 40 million copies in hard back) uses the word “fact” at the beginning of his action-packed page-turner to highlight some of the historical framework upon which his story hangs. The fact remains that the premise of this “intelligent thriller” is as flimsy as a ship’s sail made of tissue paper. The book, like such a ship, cannot weather the winds of reality. The truth about the Son of God is found in the infallible, inerrant Word of God, the Bible, not in the mythologies of the Gnostic libraries.

Satan is no match for the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ our Savior reigns supreme. That old red dragon can hiss, posture, attack, and deceive, but the seed of the woman has crushed the serpent’s head at the cross. Jesus’ deity was not the result of a vote. He is God the Son who has enjoyed eternal fellowship with the Father. So, we say to The Da Vinci Code, sit down and shut up. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Da Vinci Code: A Double-Fiction (April 16, 2006)

The speed at which news travels in our modern world is head-spinning. The novel, The Da Vinci Code, by Dan Brown is one example of how quickly books and movies can dominate our cultural experience. Its intriguing plot, well-written prose, mass-media attention, and the controversy it has inspired have combined to make this book a best-seller. Undoubtedly, the movie with Tom Hanks playing a lead role will bring in the millions, both in attendance and money. By the second page of Brown’s fast-moving story the reader is hooked. Through increasing circles of suspense, surprising turns in the plot, and real-life locations, the audience can think they are reading a true story.

However, before one gets caught-up in the adventures of Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, there is a play on the mind of the reader that can be dangerous. The author has placed the word “fact” in bold print regarding two organizations that are said to exist. One could be fooled into thinking that there is a line of truth being developed and forget that it is a work of fiction. The truth of the matter is, as has been noted elsewhere, the document that places Leonardo Da Vinci as a member of the Priory of Sion has been proved to be a forgery. But more serious is the attempt to re-write history and reinterpret Christianity according to a neo-pagan template. In order to keep the historical accuracy of biblical truth in sharp focus a number of facts need to be established.

Is the Da Vinci Code fact or fiction? It is fiction. And not only that, it is double-fiction. By definition a novel is an imaginary literary work. Dan Brown’s story didn’t happen and it could not happen. Why? Many of the ideas and claims of the characters in the story are outside the boundaries of truth. For example, Jesus was not a mere mortal. He did not marry Mary Magdalene. The Bible is not the creation of man. The emperor Constantine did not “collate” the Bible. Mary Magdalene and Jesus did not have a child. The Gnostic gospels do not have the same authority as the Bible. There is no “Holy Grail.” If one wishes to believe these things, they are certainly free to do so, but believing the moon is made of green cheese doesn’t make it so. The authority on which one bases his or her beliefs is subject to challenge and can be contrasted with the authority of the Bible. That is the fundamental issue. The double-fiction of The Da

Vinci Code is the nature of literary style, namely prose fiction (the fault does not lie there), and the theological fiction its author puts into the mouths of its principle characters.

Did man create the Bible? No. The fictional character Sir Leigh Teabing makes the claim that “the Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” Human beings did not put the Bible together. The reason the Bible is the Bible is because of the essential nature of each of its sixty-six books. The words of Scripture are God’s and God does not make mistakes. God the Holy Spirit guided each human author to write exactly what God wanted to be said (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21). This not only guarantees its inerrancy, but also its final authority. No, “the Bible did not fall magically from the clouds” as Teabing observes. It was written over a period of 1600 years, and yet has a supernatural, internal consistency of truth. Jesus Christ Himself believed in the inerrancy and authority of Scripture (Matt. 22:29, 43-45; Jn. 10:33-36; 15:26, 27; 16:13). Both the Old and New Testaments rest on the authority of Jesus Christ. One cannot be consistent and speak of Jesus as a great prophet and at the same time deny the trustworthiness of the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word and has weathered the assaults of its critics through the centuries.

Was the deity of Jesus determined at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.? No. Jesus Christ is full deity as He said that he was. Again, Teabing makes a false claim when he says, “Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man, nonetheless. A mortal.” This is completely fallacious. The Bible reveals Jesus Christ as claiming His own deity (Jn. 5:13; 8:57-58; 10:30). His apostles believed Him to be the Son of God (2 Pet. 1:1; 3:18; Rom. 9:5; Col. 1:19). If Jesus were not God in human flesh (without human sin), then He was a fraud. We have no Savior to save us from our sins. The apostles gave their lives for a deceiver. And there is no Christianity. Constantine did not turn Jesus into a deity. The early church councils did not make Jesus God by a vote. The Council of Nicaea rejected the heretical teachings of Arius, who taught that Jesus was of a different essence or substance from the Father. The vote of the gathered bishops against Arius’ views was 298 to 2. The bishops were merely acknowledging what was claimed by Jesus and believed by the apostles. Jesus has always been God, was God during His incarnation, and will never cease to be God (Jn. 1:1; Phil. 2:6-11).

Did Jesus marry Mary Magdalene and father a child by her? No. This is a complete fabrication. The fictional historian Teabing states that “the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record.” Teabing is further convinced that Leonardo Da Vinci painted Mary Magdalene into his famous portrait of “The Last Supper” at the right hand of Jesus. Granted that John, who was reclining on Jesus at the Passover meal (Jn. 13:23), is pictured as somewhat effeminate looking, but that proves nothing. The true spiritual head of the church is Jesus Christ, not Mary Magdalene (Eph. 5:23). Dan Brown has adopted the Mary Magdalene of historical revisionists for his conspiracy theory, not the Mary Magdalene of the Bible. The Mary Magdalene of the four Gospels of the New Testament bears no resemblance to the one constructed from various apocryphal works, medieval legends, modern conspiracy theories, and the writings of feminist scholars. In the flawed logic of Teabing (Dan Brown’s articulate heretic), Jesus must have been married because at least one of the Bible’s gospels would have explained why he remained a bachelor. The fact that the New Testament is silent about the marital status of Jesus thunders with meaning. The purpose for which the Lord Jesus Christ came to earth was best accomplished through the single-focused nature of his life, namely, death and resurrection. For further discussion concerning the question “was Jesus married?” see Darrell Bock’s Breaking the Da Vinci Code.

Was there a conspiracy to cover up the truth about Jesus and Mary Magdalene? Absolutely not. Conspiracy theories are seductive. They become easy explanations for the things we want to believe. Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code taps into a wish that fallen man cherishes.

"Christianity is not what it seems. It is the Big Lie. Jesus Christ was a very religious man but not God. There isn't only one way to heaven as Jesus taught." These kinds of thoughts and opinions are confirmed for many when a popular novel and movie come along like The Da Vinci Code. Conspiracy theories have to be based on historical facts. Brown substitutes unsubstantiated ideas such as the Gnostic "unaltered gospels" for the biblical text of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. He postulates the true worship of the Divine Feminine as having been suppressed by scheming male leadership in the early church. He wants a neo-gnostic, moral and theological impostor to replace historic, biblical Christianity. Dan Brown's book will eventually be the stuff of used book sales and long forgotten cultural trivia. The truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ will continue to offer the only hope for a sin-cursed world.

Is there a conspiracy whose plot must be exposed? The real conspiracy is the one that Satan sponsors and propagates which is the attempt to build a kingdom without God. Adam's fallen race participates in this plot by refusing to worship the Son of God. But there is a way out of the domain of darkness. Sin's grip can be broken. The way into the kingdom of God's beloved Son is through repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:8-9). "The quest for the Holy Grail is the quest to kneel" not before the idols of this world, but to confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The Leaves Have Fallen (April 23, 2006)

Springtime may not seem the appropriate season to think of falling leaves. But the thought goes beyond the seasonal cycle to that of life and death. In the spring of the year all of nature invites us to enjoy the rebirth of the seeming deadness of winter. Trees leaf out in varying shades of green. Azaleas bloom in radiant splendor. Dogwoods are adorned in white-like bridal dresses. The impatiens are asking the pansies to step aside. The fescue and centipede grasses are preparing for their summer cuttings. The breezes are softer. The daylight is longer. However, all this will fade into the lengthening shadows of fall. God said it would be this way, "while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." These words to Noah define nature's boundaries. But attached to this "life and death" cycle is the story of the fall of man. All of nature is in death's grip. All of God's creatures die. The perpetual perfect environment of the Garden of Eden gave way to sin's curse upon creation.

It doesn't take the falling leaves of summer's death to open our hearts to winter's grief. We have to bid farewell to loved ones and friends, never to see them again in this life. In recent months a daughter has been left with only the memories of her father. A son will no longer talk with his father. A brother read Psalm 23, prayed, and told his brother good-bye. Death leaves grief in its wake. The grief of winter sets in when our fathers and brothers leave us to finish our course in this life without them. Pam Newton, Ed Sherwood, and Bill Thorn know about those cold winds that blow over the hills and valleys of our memories.

Grief is an internal pain almost indescribable. A sea of thoughts and emotions inundate one's life. It is a jolt, disorientation, confusion, disbelief, helplessness, depression, sadness, love, guilt, loneliness, unpredictable tears, weariness, and shock. Grief ravages us physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. You can know it is coming, but you can't prevent it. Nor should you try to prevent it. Grief, a grace from God, is a response to any kind of loss (a broken relationship, loss of a job, a move, etc.). But death can be especially cruel. Mary and Martha were beside themselves with misery over the loss of their brother Lazarus. They believed the resurrection would ultimately remedy their grief, but this truth did not keep them from weeping. Christians grieve. God has appointed grief as a natural and beneficial consequence of man's fallen condition. God Himself grieves. He grieves over the sins of lost humanity and those of His children (Gen. 6:6; Psa. 78:40; Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30). Christians don't grieve in the same manner as non-Christians do. The difference is hope. The apostle Paul comforted the believers in the Thessalonian church with the assurance that there is hope in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Yes, the believer will grieve, but not as the unbeliever who has no hope. Grief is immersed in a sea of hopelessness for non-Christians because of the absence of Jesus Christ in their lives. In Christ there is the forgiveness of sin, eternal life and joy. Death is not loss but gain for those who belong to Christ (Phil. 1:21). The cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ have cut the roots of grief because He became a man of sorrows and became acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). His entire life was filled with pain and suffering. He even grieved over the grief-stricken (Jn. 11:35).

Where is the hope that banishes despairing grief? When Jesus came to Lazarus' funeral, He found a sobbing and grief-stricken family. He was grieved and angered by what He encountered. Death, the enemy, the child of sin, had done its vile work. A brother had been ripped from joyful family gatherings. So, what did the Son of Man do? He stepped toward the tomb of Lazarus as the "champion who prepares for conflict." He cried aloud for all to hear, "Lazarus, come forth." Tear-stained faces gave way to joy-filled amazement as a four-day-dead Lazarus emerged from his tomb. A word from Christ had brought instant life. The violent tyranny of death had been overcome. This was a sign of things to come. The leaf of life that had fallen to the ground had been restored to the splendor of a hope-filled spring. Death is no match for the Lord Jesus Christ. In His own death, death was defeated. The empty tomb of Jesus guarantees the Christian's participation in the resurrection of life. It makes possible a life of abiding hope.

To my friends, Pam, Ed, and Bill, who grieve in this season when all nature sings the song of spring, find your comfort in our Champion, the Savior. All who die with a faith fixed upon Christ and the precious gift of eternal life in Him are but leaves that have fallen momentarily. Those who die in Christ go to be with Him to wait for that great resurrection morning. For us who remain to finish out our earthly purpose God gives the grace to transform death's loss to eternal gain. We who grieve must remember that all genuine comfort comes from the God of all comfort (Lam. 2:32-33). Grief is a favorable time to draw near to God, to talk to God, to learn from God. It is the opportunity for Christ to be exalted. It is a time to bear our souls before God and delight in His mercy and be consoled.

Thank you to one of our own for the following hope-drenched words you have written in the early morning of your grief.

Thoughts at Sunrise

A cold chill blows across the hill
 Light's first glimmer in the eastern sky.
 The earth stirs from its slumbering still.
 Dark's hold loosed, morning draws nigh.

A young boy's hand upon a plow
 Dreaming of life beyond the farm.
 Leaving home he fulfilled his vow
 With great hopes and high aims armed.

Too soon his time has gone
 His race run, his course done.
 He gave us a lasting offer
 Family, friends, and helping others.

Late in life to the Lord he drew
 Not seeking honor or his due.
 The richest blessing he received –
 God's forgiveness on him bestowed.

Mountain shapes now with shining crowns,
 Trees and fields come full in view
 The warming light on golden ground,
 The promise of life renewed.

Flowers cover that special place,
 Their beauty tells of future grace.
 An earth-worn temple just laid to rest
 Will rise in glory at the Lord's return.

Ed Sherwood

Together for the Gospel (May 7, 2006)

I cannot remember the first time I ever heard the word “gospel.” But one thing I do remember. The gospel was a part of my thinking very early in life. The gospel is everything. As has been aptly stated elsewhere, “The Gospel is the Good News of the grace of God that has provided His only-begotten Son to redeem us, return us to God, and rescue us from the terrors of hell.” Jesus Christ died and rose from the grave to save sinners (“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” 1 Tim. 1:15). There were Christians in my family and my small social world from the beginning. Thank God. We Christians are gospel people. We ought to be living it, breathing it, eating it, sleeping it, drinking it, talking about it, hearing it, and making it known everywhere.

“Together for the Gospel” was the conference theme for thousands of pastors who gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, April 26-28. Its declared purpose was “to re-center us all on this most

glorious and essential message” (i.e., the Gospel). This conference goal was accomplished through messages from various speakers (Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, C. J. Mahaney, Albert Mohler, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul). Included in this recommitment to gospel declaration was a series of eighteen articles affirming what it means to be “brothers united in one great cause – to stand together for the Gospel.” We were all challenged to lead our churches in “bearing faithful witness to the glory of God and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and to stand boldly against all those compromises of the Gospel that have “led to the preaching of false gospels, the seduction of many minds and movements, and the weakening of the church’s Gospel witness.”

The Bible is about the Gospel and the Gospel is all about Jesus Christ, His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-8). It is the “power of God” for our salvation from the wrath of God (Rom. 1:16). It saves us from God, for God. It is deliverance from the power of sin and death and the judgment of God which is upon “all ungodliness and unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). We can say that the Gospel is basically effective to produce the results God wants. That is the idea of power. It is a force with all God’s omnipotence behind it revealing God’s righteousness. As sinners we need God’s righteousness for, we have none of our own. The Gospel gives the hell-deserving, sin-plagued, condemned unbeliever a righteousness from God (i.e., it puts me in right standing before God). Article XIII in the document “Together for the Gospel” states, “We affirm that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers by God’s decree alone, and that this righteousness, imputed to the believer through faith alone, is the only righteousness that saves.”

No quarter can be given any other Gospel than the one of Scripture. Actually, according to the apostle Paul, there is no other Gospel. When a false gospel is encountered it cannot be treated as an equal to the true Gospel. We must affirm that, “Any teaching that minimizes, denies, or confuses justification by faith alone can be considered true to the Gospel.” There is only one way to be saved from the penalty, power, and presence of sin and that is through Jesus Christ. No religion, no matter how appealing, how historical, or how popular, can be considered God-honoring if it rejects the centrality of the substitutionary character of Christ’s atonement for sin. A witches’ brew of salvation by sacraments, therapy as a substitute for theology, and neo-Gnostic, self-enlightenment has duped the masses. What is particularly disturbing in our day is not just the presence of “other gospels” but the way in which the gospel is being compromised in professing evangelical churches. Many have “suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith” (1 Tim. 1:19), due to the so-called “health and wealth” gospel, ministry as business management, and self-fulfillment in the place of true spirituality. It was Dr. Albert Mohler, in his magnificent address on culture and the gospel message, who characterized our contemporary culture as being obsessed with self-fulfillment (“am I well”), self-sufficiency, self-definition (we redefine humanity, marriage, etc.), self-absorption, self-transcendence (enamored with “spirituality”), self-enhancement (extending the life), and self-security (we think we are safe). This is a way of reminding us how the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:3).

The Gospel is not an elastic message. The Bible has clearly revealed the good news. God made the world and created us to serve Him. We rebelled against Him and have broken His holy law. For this act of treason we are under God’s judgment. But while we were helpless and hopeless, God sent His Son into the world. Jesus, the God-man, was perfectly obedient under God’s rule and died in our place. Christ took the punishment that we deserved in His death on the cross and brought us forgiveness. To prove this Jesus rose from the grave, conquered death, and now gives

us new life and everlasting joy. This gift belongs to those who rely on Jesus' death and resurrection and nothing else (Rom. 3:10-12; Heb. 9:27; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1:3; Jn. 3:16).

We must not and dare not be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When Paul wrote these words to the Roman church (Rom. 1:16), Rome was contemptuous of the gospel. It was a place of intellectual snobbery. The apostle could anticipate the reaction the Gospel would receive in "the capital of the world." But if we are ashamed of the Gospel, we are ashamed of Christ. That is unacceptable for Christians. There are millions throughout the world who have no clue whatsoever as to what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. That is where we come in. Let us resolve to be together for the Gospel.

The Strong Woman (May 14, 2006)

I have the greatest of admiration and thanks to God for the strong women in my life. But the word "strong" bears some explanation. By strong I do not mean physical muscles. I refer rather to spiritual and character muscle. A woman after God's own heart is one who has mental, moral, and spiritual strength. Such strength is measured by a woman's capacity to impact the lives of others for the glory of God. By God's mercy He has brought certain women into my life who have impacted me significantly. My two grandmothers, each of whom was a believer in Jesus Christ taught me valuable life lessons. It was my mother's mother who led my father's mother to Christ. My grandmother Morris was a faithful evangelist. If you sat next to her on the trolley, you more than likely would hear a lot about God's wondrous grace in Jesus Christ. When Jehovah Witnesses came to the door, she grabbed up her Bible and with great eagerness shared the story of redemption in God's eternal Son. On one occasion when it was evident that the two Watchtower representatives were unwilling to listen to the gospel any further, she stomped her foot twice on the porch and told them she was shaking the dust off her feet because of their unbelief (Acts 13:51).

My mother is another kind of story about strength (they now call such people strong-willed). She worked her way through a lot of difficult times in her life and struggled with anger against certain men who failed her. I think I saw her beginning to yield to God's superior strength in the last years of her life. Disappointment in some professing Christians had jaundiced my mother toward church. It took a lot of stamina to raise five sons. One of the sweetest, strongest Christian women I have ever known was my mother-in-law. She accepted me, loved the Bible, and loved God. She was kind, smiled a lot, and was always interested in what sermons I was preaching. I miss her. Mrs. McClendon gave me a daughter which I have not deserved. My dear wife, Beth, has shown me the graces of the Spirit in incalculable ways. She is a brick. That's my ultimate accolade for a strong Christian woman. God has given me a "Mrs. Far-Above-Rubies" as my life's companion. I am blessed. Then there is my precious, strong, Bible-loving and God-honoring daughter, Miriam. She sat through hundreds of my sermons, loves me, and continues to ask me theological and Scriptural questions. I talk to her almost every day and have received countless encouragements from her generosity, love for people, and witness for Christ. She has shown her three children the way to faith in Christ. The song in her voice is a mercy to me from God. I thank God for my daughter-in-law, Cheryl, who has brought further strength into the circle of women around me. Her infectious evangelistic spirit and the Bible instruction she gives to my three grandsons give witness to her strong confidence in God and His Word.

There is no greater portrait of a strong woman than is found in Proverbs 31:10-31. In this acrostic poem (each verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet) the godly and effective wife is described in memorable language. The strong woman is invaluable to her husband (31:11, 12, 23, 28). He can trust her and gives her all the freedom she needs to make decisions. She doesn't try to manipulate him by emotions and threats. There is not another man in her soul and she delights in being her husband's helper, unselfishly and cooperatively. She makes her husband look good. The strong woman contributes to the welfare of her children (31:15, 21, 27). They are well-fed and properly clothed. They are treated as valuable possessions and not as some penalty of pregnancy. She teaches them and makes all the necessary sacrifices for them. What a pleasure it was to have recently listened to some of the small children in our church tell of their trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sin. It was evident that some fathers and mothers have been investing time in the lives of their sons and daughters. Where would many of us be if it had not been for the Bible-truth that was woven into our lives by faithful, God-loving women? I think of the gospel witness given to me in my earliest years by my grandmothers and my Aunt Betty who, though in her middle eighties now, continues to walk through life by the light of God's promises.

The strong woman is a wise household manager (31:18, 27). No moss grows under her feet. She has goals and works at planning for rainy days, ice storms, and hard times. She is a wise shopper and has good sense about money. A credit card is not a ticket to debt but to wise living. I was impressed how my Aunt Betty was always ready for emergencies, whether clean-up from eating in the car or injuries from playing in the woods at her house. The strong woman is sensitive to the needs of others (v. 20). She is not so wrapped up in her family that she forgets about people on the outside. Material things are not allowed to seduce her into thinking they are more precious than serving Christ. My grandmother Morris was concerned about the ice man who was making his deliveries with floppy, worn-out shoes. So, she found a pair of my grandfather's shoes and gave them to him. He carried that big block of ice on his burlap-covered shoulder a bit easier because of her kindness.

The strong woman gives appropriate attention to herself (v. 17). She cares for her body because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Her figure and food are not allowed to become idols of the heart. She dresses for her husband, not to attract the lustful gazes of other men. The strong woman submits to God's infinite wisdom (31:26, 30). She lives by the truth that "the fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted" (Prov. 29:25). Therefore, the godly woman is not controlled and driven by her fears but by her steady, quiet confidence in a loving, sovereign God. Who then is a strong woman? She is one who knows the Lord Jesus Christ as her Redeemer. She is in the pursuit of loving God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. She has a ravenous appetite for the Word of God. And she sees herself as God's servant for His glory. How blessed are those men who have the treasure of strong women written into the story of their lives.

The Art of Living with a Husband (May 21, 2006)

It is not as easy as it looks. A wife's commitment to her husband begins with vows but after that it is a skill to be learned and there are promises to be kept. By skill I don't mean manipulation and a superficial kind of accommodation to some rigid rules. Biblical wisdom is skillful living. It is living life God's way. So, in that sense a marital relationship is an art form (i.e., the practical application of a skill). It is the extraordinary opportunity for two Christians to live out the drama

of redemption. There is a story that must be told, the greatest story ever told. The Son of God died on a cross so that sinners could have eternal life. Marriage is a stage upon which that wonderful truth can be lived before the world, namely, losing oneself that the other may find his or herself. I would like to offer some brush strokes to wives who wish to be instruments in the Redeemer's hand.

Give your husband encouragement. Acknowledge his hard work, his skills, his efforts on behalf of you and the children. Are there things that he is probably doing wrong? Yes, but don't make them the center of your attention. Your husband needs to know that you are for him, not against him. Encouraging one another plays a major role in helping our fellow Christians to grow in Christ (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:25). Wives, when was the last time you expressed appreciation to your husband for something good he has done?

Don't allow your disappointments in your husband to make you bitter and cynical. Do we fail one another? Yes, we do. It shouldn't be that way, but it happens. But there is a way God wants us to work through our dashed expectations. Develop and maintain a frame of mind that takes disappointments and turns them into change in heart and life. Anger can be a poison if it is focused on the wrong thing. "Be angry and sin not" (Eph. 4:26). We should be angry at sin. It does awful things to the one we love. Wives, you must forgive your husband when he has sinned against you (Eph. 4:31, 32). If you don't, you lose the opportunity to display the cross of Christ in the story of the gospel.

Determine to be joyful and maintain a sense of humor. Learn to laugh. You might want to try whistling in the kitchen. Help him to lighten-up. My wife's laughter is one of those little joys that brighten my moments. Don't forget. It is the joy of the Lord that is our strength (Neh. 8:10). Delighting in God creates strong, confident, discerning, and energetic marriage-builders. The joy of the Lord yields the sweet fruit of endurance. If you want a long-lasting marriage, then know what it is to see your satisfaction in God spill over into all of your life.

Talk to your husband about your concerns over the drift of your marriage. Don't keep everything to yourself. If you allow everything to stay bottled-up inside of you, something is going to break. Your husband needs information if he is to make the right decisions. Some call this "confronting." However, that could conjure up thoughts of a verbal fight. That's not what you are after. Wives, you will want to find the opportunity to ask some questions. Is his work taking precedence over you and the children? Is he getting his time-off breaks for fun, but you aren't? Are you spending enough time together? We husbands need coaching in how to experience companionship.

Be conscientious about your appearance. Keep yourself attractive within the bounds of modesty, but don't save your best appearance for those outside the home. What may be comfortable to you may not be very appealing to your husband. *Don't allow your children to take precedence over your husband.* Does he know that he is important to you? *Let your husband do some of the talking.* Are you the one who is always carrying the conversation? Don't talk over him, down to him, at him, and around him. Women do tend to be more verbal than men, but your husband needs to be a part of the conversation. *Ask your husband questions.* Some wives are naturally better at this than others, but it is never too late to learn new and good habits. Questions about his interests, hobbies, his work, his day, his aspirations, sports, the things he likes, and the things he doesn't like. You can become more a part of his world this way. And he will learn how to ask

you questions. *Keep a sense of your forgiveness.* A grace attitude is a disarming force. Self-righteousness and focusing on your religious accomplishments can create a partly cloudy to cloudy condition in your marriage. Both wife and husband are sinners in need of great amounts of God's grace.

Keep yourself accountable if you work outside the home. There are temptations associated with the workplace. Is it creating a loss of time with your husband? Is your affection and energy placed more on your work than upon life's partner? *Have a plan for responding biblically to your husband's vices and failures.* As Christians we are called upon to assist one another in going on to maturity. Intercessory prayer and a lot of wisdom are needed in response to your husband's selfishness, procrastination, lack of communication, lack of spiritual discipline, and temper. Seek out an older wiser woman. Don't live your life as a doormat and think that is submission. *Don't let another man into your soul.* Watch your fantasies. If you are starved for some romance, that can easily become an unlocked door to your heart. Many women have discovered the hard way that the "other man" is a mirage. He is there but he is not there. He is not as he appears. *Choose not to be a complainer and a whiner.* This will make you very unattractive and it manifests a lack of satisfaction with God. *Turn sorrow and suffering into something valuable.* Don't waste your suffering. Ask God to give you sure-footedness through times of difficulty (Hab. 3:19). Let Him turn those irritations into pearls. We can become our greatest adversary when pain knocks at our door. *Let your children see what God wants them to be.* Those little ones are going to be daddies and mommas one day. They will need to know how to love, how to submit, how to handle adversity, and what it means to be a joyful Christian. Don't put a stumbling block in their way. Does all this mean that the wife bears the weight of marital responsibilities alone? No. The husband has his "artwork" to do as well. But the wife who desires to paint a portrait of Christ's redemptive beauty in her marriage can be an artist for the glory of God.

Summer Connections (June 11, 2006)

God has given Berachah Bible Church some special opportunities for advancing the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have two of our young people who have grown up in Berachah who will be serving with us this summer. Avery Clay is assisting in the church office and Patrick Work is working on the church staff. In addition to these duties, Avery and Patrick are a part of the Bosnia short-term mission's trip in July. Chris Bosson, a recent graduate from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, will join our staff in an intern position for two months. He desires to begin the PhD program at Southern Seminary in the fall. Both Patrick and Chris want to be mentored for future service in God's work. And, by the way, they are looking for some jobs (e.g., breaking rocks, yard work, washing windows) this summer to help with gas money, meals, etc. Also, the Pass family has returned from Novosibirsk, Siberia where Frank has been teaching in the seminary. He will be helping us with our Bible Institute program which resumes in September. For part of the summer and fall the Heinz family is going to be a part of our church life. They are home for a short furlough from their church-planting work in Almaty, Kazakhstan. They need our encouragement in Christ.

The church exists to bring one another to maturity in Christ Jesus and to take the gospel to the entire world. We can have a vital role in developing the next generation for this good work. What is required of us to do this? First, count yourself as part of the equipping team at Berachah.

Have someone into your home for a meal. Get your whole family involved in doing this. Don't let your vacation time disconnect you from all that is going on at Berachah in the next several months. The shorter summer break due to the resumption of school in August has tended to create an accelerated vacation mood. But be careful. We can lose touch with what is happening in our church family. It may seem as if the Sunday evening service is in the middle of the afternoon. Wednesday evenings can go by us without a thought that something very important is taking place as God's people are meeting to pray. There are trips we must take, guests to entertain, and vacations to be enjoyed before school begins. But at the same time there are connections in our church life that have to be maintained. There are visitors to be greeted, prayer requests that need to be known, fellow-believers who need encouragement, childcare that needs attention, and worship to be experienced. Many of us know what it is like for our airline departure time to be late and then miss our connecting flight. There we are stranded. Other arrangements have to be made. The same is true when we miss our Sundays at church. Other arrangements are necessary if we are to sustain our meaningful involvement in the church to which we have committed ourselves. We can check our e-mail, call a friend and catch-up, ask for church bulletins to be placed in your mailbox (and read them), and use any other creative measures to stay connected.

As we think about staying connected, our Vacation Bible School will be held the week of June 26-30. Workers are always needed for this ministry of gospel proclamation to the children in our communities. John Scherer has come out of "retirement" to serve as our VBS Director. And we must not forget the unseen but important care of our 2s and 3s during the evening service. There is still some Sunday evenings in need of volunteers. Our summer Care Group meetings will be at the church on Wednesday evenings at 7:00 p.m. We will be giving ourselves to prayer in a variety of ways. There is no more important work than adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication unto the Lord God of the universe. The sweet days of summer are upon us. Stay in touch.

Mammograms, Biopsies, and God (June 25, 2006)

The early days of our youthful marriage were sweet, hopeful, and filled with mutual commitment to a life of serving God. Our wedding vows, administered by my grandfather, told us that there would be sickness and health. For the most part Beth and I have had good health. There has been some sickness (fevers, nausea, the flu, root canals, and an assortment of sport's injuries, mostly mine. Beth says they are all mine.). The physical trials associated with pregnancy and childbirth (miscarriages and a hysterectomy) were Beth's to bear. But now after forty-two years of witnessing together the sparks of trouble flying upward, an invisible danger has been found in Beth's body. I say invisible because the cancer has not been visible to us. There have been no symptoms; no fever, no discomfort, no lumps, no discernable pain. However, what had gone unnoticed by us was detected by a routine mammogram and verified by a biopsy. Beth has *ductal carcinoma in situ*. It is a form of breast cancer. We feel as if we are surrounded by a family of cancer victims. So many women we know have been and are fighting their own battles with breast cancer: lumpectomies, mastectomies, radiation treatments, and various medications. There is also no shortage of information about how to beat breast cancer. Everything from radical surgeries to dietary strategies is prescribed. One thing that has become evident is that without God in the picture the battle against cancer is frequently portrayed with a kind of bravado (e.g., "I beat breast cancer"). No human being "beats" cancer or any other disease. It is only by the

grace and mercy of God that any of us live another minute. A muscular mental state does not defeat cancer and death. However, we are thankful that early detection and treatment makes a higher cure rate possible.

Christians and non-Christians get cancer. We all live with physical bodies that bear the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. But in addition to this, are there any truths that should shape the way one thinks about living with cancer? The Christian faith brings a host of truths to the experience of human mortality. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the water-shed marking the continental spiritual divide between the hope-filled life of the Christian and those who are outside of Christ. What then should characterize the believer in Jesus Christ in response to pain and suffering? There is no good reason to be angry with God. Why would a child of God turn on God who is infinitely wise and loving in all His ways? This is not to deny that there will be bouts of disappointment and discouragement, but such emotional dust storms are not to be trusted. Affliction is not the whole story. There is something on a far grander scale that ought to put anger in its place. Jonah became angry at God because he was not pleased with God's way of handling the menacing Ninevites. Jonah wanted them eliminated as a threat to Israel, but God's wisdom called for mercy. If only Jonah had loved the Assyrian people as God did. The desire for healing is not anger. Paul wanted his thorn in the flesh removed. So, he asked God three times for relief. God said no and yes. No, Paul was not to be granted freedom from his pain. Yes, Paul would display the perfections of God through his affliction.

The personal experience of cancer is not a denial of God's love and wisdom. He "does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men" (Lam. 3:33). God's compassions never fail. Fear is always eager to invade our thoughts and alter our actions. But it must be met head-on with the hand-to-hand combat of Bible truth versus sinful deceptions. We are not to fear evil (the evils of suffering and death), for the Lord is with us (Psa. 23:4). Jesus Christ is our Shepherd, alongside of us, to escort us through the valley of the shadow of death. Beth and I are not strangers to the uncertainties of life, but the Lord has given us countless comforts. We draw comfort from the assurance that there is never a situation that the Lord is not aware of and knows what He is doing (Heb. 13:5). We are comforted by the possibilities of ministry to others (2 Cor. 1:4). We are comforted by the work of the Holy Spirit within us to give us overflowing joy. God's Word never fails to comfort us with abundant promises. The love and tenderness of our family is God's mercy to us. The concern and prayers of so many of our fellow-believers is a reminder of God's grace in the lives of others. Our hope in Christ keeps us reminded that we are heaven-bound.

Where will this battle with cancer take us? We have no way of knowing. We are not afraid of death. Its sting has been removed. But Beth and I want more years to serve our God together. There is much to be done and we long for joy-filled, hope-inspired fruitful labor in our days that are yet unwritten. Early detection through mammograms, biopsies, and surgery is a mercy from God. But at the same time, we know that microscopic cancer cells can go to other places in the human body. We have no guarantees. The song of our heart is found in the words of Margaret Clarkson's hymn, "Sovereign Lord!"

O Father, You are Sovereign,

The Lord of human pain,
Transmuting earthly sorrows
To gold of heavenly gain,

All evil overruling,
 As none but Conqueror could,
 Your love pursues its purpose –
 Our souls' eternal good.

Proud as a Peacock (July 16, 2006)

The male peacock unfurls its feathered plume in a dazzling display of color. He does this as he parades pompously in front of the female peacock. Whether he is proud is undetermined, but his dazzling display of color has given us the expression “proud as a peacock.” There is a morally legitimate use of the word proud as, for example, when we derive pleasure from a job well done. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God (“and God saw that it was good,” Gen. 1). However, there is a pride that has made a home in every human heart. And it is not pretty. It is that attitude which views oneself as the center of the universe. Our culture has placed it on the pedestal of virtue. Embarrassingly, we find it everywhere. It thumps its chest in songs like “I did it my way.” Athletes flaunt it when they dance in the end zone (forgetting how they got there). We hear it in such statements as “We can define our own existence.” “You owe it to yourself.” “I deserve better than this.” “You must learn to love yourself.” Public radio airs a program entitled “the infinite mind” (without any disclaimer). Self-congratulatory pride has received revered status in certain psychological and educational schools of thought. Self-esteem, self-love, self-fulfillment, self-actualization have become the goal of the self-consumed. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. has observed “that, in much of contemporary American culture aggressive self-regard is no longer viewed with alarm.” Feeling good about oneself has replaced the discipline of personal achievement through hard work.

It was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who being full of himself boastfully said, “Is this not Babylon the great, which I have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” Babylon, indeed, was a magnificent city, but Nebuchadnezzar was taking credit where credit was not due. He had a lesson to learn in humility. God is absolutely sovereign. After seven years of divinely imposed insanity, Nebuchadnezzar immersed with a different view of himself and God. He acknowledged God as “the Most High” and the one who deserves praise (Dan. 4:34). Sinful pride afflicts not only kings, but all of us. It has a home in every human heart. It entered the human race through Adam and Eve’s foolish choice to listen to Satan rather than God. Satan, himself a pathological liar, deceived Eve into thinking that independence from God is the way to happiness. She preferred her own ideas, thoughts and opinions over God’s truth. Pride is unbelief. It is the refusal to listen to God. It loves oneself more than God. Adam, Eve, and Nebuchadnezzar committed the sin of displacing God with themselves. Each of us, sinners that we are, is infected with a virus of the heart that distorts the world of spiritual realities. We are inclined by nature to replace the infinite mind of God and His wisdom with our own finite, sin-blinded thinking. That is why pride is a “species of unbelief.” The proud person disregards the authority of the Word of God and in so doing tells God to go away. Such arrogance is the root of every act of distrust toward God which is the mother of all self-deception.

Pride, like a Pandora’s box, unleashes armies of human ills (Pandora is Greek mythology’s distorted memory of Eve’s deception). It is the source of strife and wars (Prov. 28:25). It refuses to take advice and submit to authority. It abuses people, ignites anger, is ungrateful, boasts, is

self-righteous, and leads to self-destruction (Prov. 16:5; 18:12). Pride is intoxication with one's self-importance. Haman built the scaffold for his own execution out of pride (Esther 5-7). Satan doomed himself to eternal torment through pride (Isa. 14:12-15; 1 Tim. 3:6; Rev. 20:10).

God hates pride and resists proud people (Prov. 8:13; 16:5; Jas. 4:6). The dragon of pride must be slain if we are to live as humble people. When we boast in our wisdom and despise the sin-forgiving cross-work of Christ, eternal life will remain unattainable. That is why the sword of the Spirit, God's holy Word as the instrument of the gospel message, is the only weapon that can kill Christ-rejecting pride. Repentance and faith in Jesus Christ through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit is the gate to everlasting life. In the new birth the heart kneels before a holy, righteous, and loving God and casts away all confidence in self for salvation.

As the Christian journeys on toward heaven there is a battle to be fought with pride every step of the way. Pride will carry on its insurgency mission in the heart. It no longer rules, but it remains a formidable foe. Our sense of self-sufficiency, our prayerlessness, and desire to be served rather than to serve tell us that sinful pride dies a slow death. Pride is the fuel of spiritual lukewarmness. The Laodicean church is a prime example (Rev. 3:16-18). Laodicea was a self-reliant, wealthy city and, as so often happens, the sins of the culture become the sins of the church. Spiritual indifference, a spiritual malaise, was sapping the zeal and spiritual energy of the Laodicean believers. They were proud of their wealth and comforts. We too can become self-satisfied because our church parking lots are full, the offerings are good, and our pastor's books are selling well. Christian leaders can marquee their titles and academic credentials. Personality cults, tolerance of immorality and false teaching are the marks of vain-glory, not humility before God (1 Cor. 1:10-4:21). The male peacock displays his colors because that is his nature to do so. He is only a bird. But God has made us to worship Him. Let us make much of Him and less of ourselves.

What About Israel? Part 1 (July 23, 2006)

Who is Israel? The Israel of the Old Testament Scriptures was a nation comprised of the physical descendents of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. Today, Israel is a nation in the Middle East founded on May 14, 1948, as a homeland for Jews from all parts of the world. Its capital is Jerusalem, and its official languages are Hebrew and Arabic. In 1897 Theodor Herzl announced the purpose of the Zionist movement "to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law." That early dream was realized in the establishment of Israel as a nation.

Who are the Jews? The Jews are descendents of Abraham through his son Isaac. The word "Jew" is derived from the name "Judah", a son of Jacob and a tribe of Israel. Both a common faith and a common history have helped to hold the Jewish people together. Over four thousand years ago God called Abraham out of idol-worshiping Ur of the Chaldeans (modern Iraq). He was told that he would be the father of a great nation and that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). That nation was Israel who was to be a witness to all the nations of God's salvation and the channel through whom the Savior of the world would come. The impact of the Jewish people upon civilization has been phenomenal. The Old Testament came to us through Israel. Jesus Christ was born a Jew. The twelve apostles were Jews, and the church was born in the womb of Judaism.

Should Christians support Israel in the conflict in the Middle East? Any nation that is attacked by another nation has a moral right to defend itself (Rom. 13:1-7). So, certainly in that sense Israel should be supported as it goes to war against those who would launch a military offensive against her. We would say the same if America were attacked as it was on September 11, 2001. The basis of this support of Israel, however, is not on Israel's theocratic mandate in the Old Testament (Deut. 20). Today God is not Israel's "commander-in-chief" as He was when Israel functioned under the Mosaic Covenant. The nation of Israel does not exist today as the kind of nation she was when called to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Christians may differ on how Israel goes about defending herself against Islamic totalitarianism, but all should agree that a democracy, like Israel, in the Middle East is a good thing.

Is Israel's nationhood a fulfillment of Bible prophecy? Another question is also involved here, namely, "Does Israel have a biblical claim to the land of Palestine?" There are evangelical Christians who say that Israel has a right to the land she now possesses because of the land promises delineated under God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18-21). Israel's presence in Palestine is biblically significant but is not the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. The promises in Scripture regarding the regathering of Israel await their fulfillment when Israel believes at the time of the return of the Messiah (Ezek. 36:14, Amos 9:15, a Zech. 10:8). At the present time Israel is experiencing a "partial hardening . . . until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). Some Jews are being saved, but most of Israel refuses to accept Jesus as their Messiah. But one day at the completion of God's program with the Gentiles "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). Ethnic Israel has a future, and it will be realized when Jesus Christ returns to earth in the splendor of His Second Coming. The nation as a whole will turn to her Messiah and believe in Him (Zech. 12:10). In summary, it can be said that Israel has the right to exist as a nation in Palestine like any nation does under internationally recognized legal rights. But there is no biblical claim to the possession of the Promised Land today. Christians are divided over how to interpret the Old Testament promises regarding Israel's future restoration. Some say that these promises no longer apply to ethnic Israel but must be "spiritualized" and understood as applying to the church in this age. Many others believe that Israel does have a future as promised in the Abrahamic Covenant, Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. A consistent literal hermeneutic (i.e. the art and science of interpreting the Bible) points to a literal fulfillment of the land promises in the Old Testament in the "golden-age" of an earthly millennial kingdom.

Why are so many nations of the world set against the nation of Israel? The reasons are probably as varied as the individual nations. But one very real possibility is the ugly specter of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is hostility toward or persecution of Jews because they are Jews. Haman's attempted plot to destroy all the Jews in Persia is an early example of hatred of Israel (Esth. 3:6; 9:24). Satan has attempted to eliminate the Jewish people throughout their history. He wanted to keep the Messiah from being born and now wants to keep Israel from being in a position to experience the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the coming kingdom (Rev. 12:1-6). Islamic Jihadists are committed to driving Israel out of her place in Palestine and have drawn many into their virulent anti-Semitism. It has been correctly observed that "the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany became the anti-Zionist propaganda of the Arab cause" ([A Historical Survey of Anti-Semitism](#), Richard E. Gade). One example of this is found in a ninth-grade textbook paid for and published by Saudi Arabia which says, "The hour of judgment will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them." All this is not to say that Israel is above criticism. She has no divine carte blanche to do whatever she wishes. But the way in which the

United Nations so often censures Israel while ignoring atrocities committed against her raises deep suspicions.

What About Israel? Part 2 (July 30, 2006)

Has the church inherited the land promises given to Israel in the Old Testament? There are some Christians (Amillennialists and Postmillennialists) who believe that because of Israel's disobedience and rejection of the Messiah that she has forfeited her national land promises. The church, according to this view, is seen as replacing Israel, as the true Israel. The land promises are spiritualized and now belong to the church. Interestingly, those who espouse replacement theology interpret the curses upon Israel literally but spiritualize the land promises. But such a claim as this cannot be substantiated from the biblical text. In the seventy-three citations of "Israel" in the New Testament the meaning is always ethnic Israel. The key verse used by replacement theologians, in their attempt to make the church spiritual Israel, is Galatians 6:16 ("and upon the Israel of God"). But this passage is best understood as referring to Christian Jews who realize they are no longer in the age of the Law and have not submitted to legalism. Those who believe that the church has inherited Israel's Land promise have to rely on a spiritualization of the biblical text. Passages from the Old Testament that describe in detail Israel's promised national restoration (Hosea 14; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 7:11-20) are turned into "symbols" and "types." For example, The Reformation Study Bible comments on Amos 9:15 regarding the statement, "the land I have given them," that "The physical Promised Land is but a type of the New Israel's life in Christ; it points forward to the heavenly Jerusalem." This kind of interpretation (in my judgment, a hermeneutical virus) has the effect of turning the Old Testament into a riddle. The prophets of the Old Testament and their original audiences would not have had a clue as to what was really being promised Israel. The Abrahamic Covenant guarantees permanent ownership of the promised land to Israel. This does not mean, however, that Israel is guaranteed continual occupancy of the land. A converted Israel ("all Israel will be saved," Rom. 11:26) under the rule of the Messiah will renew her divine right to possess the land of Canaan.

What will be the sequence of events for the nation of Israel prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? In the first quarter of the Tribulation the Jewish Temple will be rebuilt and Israel will exist in Palestine as a nation. There will be some kind of security guarantee that will make this possible, perhaps through the covenant made with the Antichrist (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 11:1). In the middle of the seven-year Tribulation period the Antichrist will invade Jerusalem and will desecrate the Temple (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Revelation 13:11-15). An intense period of Anti-Semitism will plague Israel as many Jews are persecuted and killed. But many Jews will flee Jerusalem as the Antichrist launches an attack against the city. For a brief time, Jewish forces will hold the city, but just when total destruction seems imminent, Jesus the Messiah will return. The remnant of Israel will be rescued, the nations will be judged, and Jesus Christ will begin His millennial rule in Jerusalem (Zechariah 12:4, 9; 14:2; Revelation 19:11-21). There are many other details to this Second Coming scenario, but from this brief outline we can see that the nation of Israel will be in the middle of international conflict during the coming Tribulation. We may also assume that the events preceding Christ's return will cast their shadows back upon that time leading up to the rapture of the Christ and the appearance of the Antichrist. It is possible to see a kind of a dress-rehearsal for these things in current events. Israel is paying a great price at the present time to secure the safety of her citizens and protection of her borders. It seems that

Israel has little support in the community of nations. Actually, there are those who want Israel to be destroyed. The world deceives itself into thinking it can create a lasting peace through diplomatic efforts and political alliances.

How should Christians pray about the conflict in the Middle East? Petition should be made to God “on behalf of all men, for kings, and all who are in authority” (I Timothy 2:1-2). We pray because God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” A climate of peace creates better circumstances for the spread of the gospel. There is much evangelistic gain to be made when the nations are not at war with one another. So, we should pray for peace of the kind that can exist in some measure before the Prince of Peace comes to give us lasting, justice-satisfying, truth-believing, Christ-exalting peace. Pray for the Jewish and Arab Christians that live in the Middle East. They are there and are enduring much suffering. They need boldness for gospel witness, harmony among themselves, and encouragement from their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

As we pray, we must think of how our own sins have contributed to the development of Islamic terrorism. Why has not the church of Jesus Christ sent thousands of self-denying, cross-bearing, Christ-exalting missionaries to the Muslim people everywhere? Pray that God will send revival to his church and raise up a world-impacting host of gospel-proclaiming Christians. When God revealed to Daniel that a new era in His dealings with the Jew was beginning, he had to be reminded that there is an invisible war taking place (Daniel 10). Daniel’s longing to know Israel’s future required a glimpse into the hand-to-hand combat being waged in the heavenly places. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood Michael the archangel and had delayed the answer to Daniel’s prayer. He was also told that the prince of Greece would come (Daniel 11:20). The prince of Persia and the prince of Greece are evil angels who wage warfare on behalf of these earthly kingdoms. Do we not see the implications of this? There are demonic powers at work to influence and energize nations against God and His people (Eph. 6:10). Prevailing prayer is our God-given weapon against Satan’s ongoing plan to deceive the nations and establish his own enduring kingdom. Let us pray for all men everywhere including the salvation of the Jewish people and her enemies (Rom. 10:1).

Martha’s Kitchen (August 6, 2006)

Love and discipline. It sounds like two weather fronts colliding. Our culture does not ordinarily link discipline to love. After all, as the popular thinking goes, love is something outside of one’s control. Is it not a feeling, an impulse that carries us along like the incoming tide? Discipline. Isn’t that what soldiers and athletes need if they are going to win battles and compete successfully? The resolution of these seemingly contrary virtues is found in the heart and life of the Savior of the world. It was God’s love for a fallen world that makes salvation from sin possible (Jn. 3:16). This love was no mere warm feeling. It revealed itself in the action of giving the perfect life of the Son of God for sinful people. Discipline is a choice that is made in the eternal best interest of hell-bound sinners. The same can be said regarding God’s particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.” Jesus prayed, “I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou has given Me to do” (Jn. 17:5). The sufficient and efficient atoning work of Christ on the cross was accomplished through sacrificial, discipline-guided love. It is by this sublime model that we who are the children of God (“born ones of God,” 1 Jn. 3:1) know how to wed love and discipline in our personal lives. Because we love God we will make

decisions that carry out our love for God and one another. Love fuels the exercise of discipline. The way in which we order our lives, establish our priorities, and make our decisions is through a love-driven process. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is foundational for all day-to-day living.

The life of the Christian who is committed to God and his local church is filled with a multitude of opportunities and responsibilities. There are those who remain content with being pew-warmers, but those who don't want to waste their lives look for ways to serve God. Here is the rub. We love God and discipline ourselves to show that love, but where do we draw the line in how much we do? A church that is alive with people eager to fulfill the Great Commission of Christ will have a lot of things that need to be done. We must keep the following principles in mind as we serve in the life of our church family.

Time is a valuable gift. It must be used wisely. Pray for wisdom which is practicing the skill of living life God's way. We can't rely on our natural instincts, personality, or upbringing. God's Word has to inform us, not what our natural habits may dictate. *A husband and wife must work together* in the "unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Signing up for child-care, class attendance, etc. must not be done at the expense of the other spouse. Pray about it. Discuss it and come to a mutual agreement. A decision made by one marriage partner is going to impact the other. Are you asking him or her to make a sacrifice without consent? *There should be seasonal and time-of-life considerations.* Certain times of the year are especially busy (e.g., Thanksgiving to Christmas). Plan ahead and do what you can to shrink the surprise gap. Are you newly married? It is best not to get overly committed during the first year of marriage. Do you have a quiver full of small children? Don't try to live like you are single. There will be things you can do after the children are older and more independent. *The physical condition of various family members may alter scheduling commitments.* Poor health will dictate some limitations. Don't assume everyone in the family has the same energy level that you do. Those who are on medication or who have to deal with chronic pain must be mercifully considered if you are attempting to plan their life for them.

Sacrifices for Christ's sake will be a part of our decision making and commitments made. Are we willing to relinquish our rights for the sake of others (e.g., free time on Sunday afternoon or evening)? Teaching a Sunday School class for a quarter will mean some study time during the week. Helping with a youth outing as a chaperon may mean a little less sleep to be replaced by the rewards of encouraging young people to follow Christ. *Personal sabbaticals are necessary in the routine of life.* We need rest, a day off, and some diversion in the midst of the demands of life. Some people can emotionally and physically "crash and burn" due to a lack of relaxation and physical restoration. *Our spiritual gifts require use if they are to be developed.* If you have the gift of helps, are you helping? If you have the gift of administration, are you involved in organizing some area of church life? We don't have to know what our spiritual gift is before we start to serve. Start serving and it will become evident as to how Christ has equipped you for ministry in the body of Christ. Do not take on responsibilities out of a sense of guilt or as an attempt to escape from other commitments. *Beware of performance-based Christianity.* We can't make God love us more, if we do more. You will not prosper financially and be healthy simply because you do something special for the church. A volunteer spirit can become contaminated by legalism. God cannot be bought or bribed by our good works.

Don't over commit and miss the more important things. This is called the “Martha syndrome.” Jesus had to remind Martha of the importance of spending time with Him (Lk. 10:38-42). She had become irritated and grumpy because she thought Mary, her sister, was taking advantage of her. The Lord and His Word must be given priority, even our loving service for the Savior. Our zeal for good deeds must not crowd out our worship time, hearing God’s Word alongside our church family. Helping to set-up and clean-up for the fellowship time after the morning service and having guests in our homes are necessary but must not become a “Martha’s kitchen.” Everyone must pull his or her own load. Yes, we are to each bear our own burdens (Gal. 6:5), but we simultaneously are to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). One way this can be fulfilled is by taking part in child-care so others can worship and pray with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Singles and empty nesters are not exempt from the congregational vows to work with parents in bringing up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

Learn the biblical skill of balancing life’s demands. There are circles of priorities that every believer has to know. God is to be at the center of our life. Then through a series of concentric circles with God at the core of all things, “He can potentially touch each and every area of me as a person (self, world, family, church, work, government) ... This takes priorities off a list and wraps them around a life (God).” Balancing Life’s Demands, J. Grant Howard. Wisdom is acquired over months and years of learning how to apply the Scriptures to every area of life. Its rewards are sweet.

Don't assume a responsibility and then complain about it (Phil. 2:14). Complaint is a symptom of dissatisfaction with God. Israel griped at every difficulty she encountered when leaving Egypt and moving through the wilderness. This eventually led to the chastening of the Lord and an entire generation’s forfeiture of the joy of entering the Promised Land (Ex. 17:2; Num. 14:16). Problem-solving discussions are helpful, but grumbling is a malignancy that fosters discouragement and joyless Christian living. Deny it a place at the table of your thoughts.

If we really love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength we will want to serve Him in our local church. But there is a trap into which we may fall. Teaching, sitting with the 2- and 3-year-olds, serving on the youth committee or missions team, helping with AWANA, attending the Bible Institute, and the host of other good works must not become infected with a “worried and bothered” attitude. We all have our own “Martha’s kitchen.” But don’t banish the “good part” which is hearing and obeying Christ’s Word.

Worlds Apart (August 13, 2006)

I recently received the following statement made by a youth worker. He said, “I have ministered to my kids every week for a year, and I’ve come to this conclusion: we use the same words as our young people, but they mean totally different things. Words like truth, tolerance, respect, sin, the Holy Spirit, moral judgments, and salvation have a completely different meaning to my kids than they do to me. We were working from two different premises, and I didn’t even know it. I’m convinced unless I can get my kids to rethink these most basic Christian concepts, I’ll never make it to square one with them.” The article, in a comment on these words, went on to say, “Families and churches may present the truth of Christ to our youth, but most kids will interpret such presentations through the distorted prisms they have adopted from the culture around them.” These “distorted prisms” are the multiple non-Christian worldviews that have gathered

around our cultural table. At one time Christianity sat at the privileged right hand of our culture and generally controlled worldview presuppositions and societal institutions. This is no longer true. Nihilism, Eastern pantheistic monism, naturalism, the New Age, and postmodernism have flowed into our collective interpretation of reality to create one grand stew of moral relativism and incoherent sensibilities.

It would be to our advantage as Christians to visit again the basic tenets of Christian Theism. These have been ably presented by James W. Sire in [The Universe Next Door](#). This very useful “basic worldview catalog” sets forth “the essence of each worldview in a minimum number of succinct propositions.” The following propositions need to be pondered and impressed upon the young people for whom we as a church are responsible. This is not a statement of faith. That is a different matter and also must be given adequate attention in another place.

1. “God is infinite and personal (triune, transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good.)” This concept is foundational to everything. Keep in mind, in a world apart, the naturalist believes that “matter exists eternally and is all there is. God does not exist.” The church of Jesus Christ must make much of God. Ignorance of the character of God is the mother of a million heresies. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the Old Testament is the constant attention given to the perfections of the Creator of the universe (Ex. 3:14; 34:6, 7; Deut. 6:4). And it is because of who He is that He rules sovereignly over all His creatures (“nothing is beyond God’s ultimate interest, control and authority”).
2. “God created the cosmos *ex nihilo* to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system.” The universe is not the result of chance through time (Isa. 45:18-19). Naturalism says, “The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.” The reason we live in an orderly and understandable world is because God made it. And He governs it. He is not like some disc jockey who lets the music play while he does other things. This world will not destroy itself through global warming. Humans can make significant changes in their environment but do not ultimately determine its course.
3. “Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity.” When this truth is denied and humans are placed in the zoo alongside of apes as our next of kin, there will be frightful consequences. If all we are is a collection of molecules, then why not experiment with embryos and manage behavior by the drug recipes. Christianity is the champion of the dignity of human life (Gen. 1:26-27).
4. “Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them.” How do we know what we know? Knowledge is possible because God made our brains and the natural world we observe. But we are dependent upon our Maker to reveal to us what we need to know. He has done this by general revelation (the created order) and special revelation (the Scriptures). The ultimate revelation of God to us is Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2-3). Life is not meaningless because God is there and has spoken. Those who refuse to listen to Him consign themselves to the dank dungeon of despair. For those who came of age during the sixties and seventies the dismal lament of John Lennon’s “Nowhere Man” was intoxicating to many (“Doesn’t have a point of view, knows not where he’s going to, isn’t he

a bit like you and me?”). God exposes the lie of existentialism (“existence precedes essence”) by His powerful and clear Word to us in the Bible and in Christ.

5. “Human beings were created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to be capable of restoration; through the work of Christ, God redeemed humanity and began the process of restoring people to goodness, though any given person may choose to reject that redemption.” Our world is broken and so are we. We don’t think right. We can’t get along with other people and our imagination creates idols. How did all this happen? Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God hijacked the beginning of a good story and turned it into a tragic drama. Sin slithered into the plot line and rendered man incapable of properly relating to his Creator. But God came to the rescue and provided a Savior in whom redemption is found. The road to eternal damnation is not the only one out of town. There is the narrow way of eternal life in Jesus Christ.
6. “For each person death is either the gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill human aspirations.” The secular humanist, however, assures us that “death is extinction of personality and individuality.” When humanity is treated to a steady diet of such an outlook, the grave will have to be decorated with deceptions to make it palatable. One is left with such funeral bromides as “he (the deceased) lives on in you,” and “she abides forever in our memories.” No amount of sentimental language can alter the reality of human immortality. The fictions of reincarnation and personal extinction leave the grief stricken with hopelessness (1 Thess. 4:13). God has spoken boldly in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (“Death is swallowed up in victory.” 1 Cor. 15:54). Death has been defanged through the physical resurrection of Christ. Therefore, where sin is pardoned, death has no sting. The hungry jaws of hell can be avoided through faith in Christ.
7. “Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good (holy and loving).” The Christian worldview is not ambiguous regarding good and evil, right and wrong, and truth and error (Isa. 5:20; Psa. 119:68). Christian theism and other worldviews are worlds apart with regard to the foundation of values and virtues. We either see ethical issues through the lens of God as the measure of good or through the lens of human reason. Without a belief in God anything is possible, and this is being demonstrated in the continued cultural decline. The lack of moral clarity is evident in discussions about premarital and extramarital sex, euthanasia, stem cell research, and abortion, to name a few.
8. “History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for humanity.” Christian theism asserts that history is a story written by God. Human history began in the Garden of Eden and will end at the Great White Throne Judgment at the end of Christ’s kingdom on earth. Our modern world would have us believe that there is no metanarrative (the big story that explains everything) and insists that we have only the stories of individual cultures which are nothing other than power-plays and attempts to control others. David Wells in his excellent work, *Above All Earthly Powers*, summarizes this postmodern rebellion by saying, “There is now no narrative which connects together the events of life into a single form of meaning. From a world that was once centered, we now have one that is decentered (p. 79).” Christians, we have much work to do. The church and the home must be truth-centers that show the next generation to think through the biblical paradigm of history and the glorious purposes of God.

This has been an all too brief summary of the tenets of Christian theism. As you can see, such a worldview is worlds apart from all other interpretations of reality. We who are Christ's people, the church, must take our task seriously and prepare our young people for that "other world" of the high school and college campus. We are responsible for teaching the truth revealed in God's holy, infallible, and inerrant Word.

The Gates of Heaven (August 20, 2006)

Have you ever come to a street or neighborhood, hoping to drive on through and look at the homes, but were greeted by locked gates? A pass code was necessary, and you didn't possess it. There is a sense of rejection when our entrance is denied to a place we would like to enter. In a well-known book entitled The Pilgrim's Progress there is a fascinating scene that describes a man named Christian and his companion, Hopeful. Christian had been on a long journey from the city in which he was born and grew up known as the City of Destruction. There was a river to be crossed in order for Christian and Hopeful to enter the Celestial City, the heavenly Jerusalem. Upon fording the river (which represents death in the story), they came to the gate of the great city. The King of the city commanded that the gate be opened for the two weary pilgrims. The gate swung open, and the men went into the city that "shone like the sun" and whose "streets also were paved with gold." Of course, all this is a picture of what happens when a Christian dies and goes into the presence of Jesus Christ, the King of Glory.

The man named Christian traveled along the highway of life to finally enter into his eternal rest. It is a vivid reminder of the necessity of preparing for our own death. No one is prepared to live until they are prepared to die. Why is this so? To answer that question, we must know the story that God has told us in the only book He has ever written, the Bible.

God, the ruler of the world, created Adam and Eve to live in a paradise known as the Garden of Eden. If they had obeyed God, they could have enjoyed all the splendor of a perfect creation (Gen. 1:27, 28). But a tragedy of universal proportions took place. Adam and Eve disobeyed by eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had rejected God's rule and as a result plunged, not only themselves, but also all of creation into the curse of death. They had sinned by rebelling against their Creator (Rom. 3:10-12). We, like they, are guilty of the same sin. We don't want God to rule over us. We resist the idea of living life His way. We are determined to do things our way. And because of this, we pay a severe penalty, namely, the judgment of God. The price for rejecting God's rule over our lives is everlasting punishment in hell separated from God's goodness forever (Heb. 9:27).

But there is hope (remember Hopeful?). God has done something extraordinary. He loves us so much that He sent His Son, the man Jesus Christ, to die on a cross. Rebels against God deserve death, but Jesus Christ suffered the punishment of God against sin so that we can be forgiven and receive eternal life. The Son of God died as a substitute for rebels so that we might enjoy God's presence and rule forever (1 Pet. 3:18). Jesus Christ endured the full measure of God's wrath against sin so that we can be pardoned for all our sin against God. However, this would not have been possible had Jesus Christ not been raised from the dead. After He died on the cross, Jesus was placed in a tomb. But on the third day of His death, He came to life again. Death had been defeated. Sin had been punished. Because of who Christ is and what He has done, we can delight

in fellowship with God forever and ever. One day Jesus is coming back to this world as its Judge. All will be judged forever who have been unwilling to believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (Jn. 3:18).

The gates of heaven are closed to all those who do not have the pass code, which is trust in Jesus' death and resurrection (Jn. 3:36). When that time comes and the deep, dark river of death faces you, will you have made preparation to enter into heaven? Everyone who dies does not enter the gated city of heaven. It is an awful thing to die and suffer unendingly in that place God has prepared for the devil and His angels (Matt. 25:41). Would you not want to have the eternal pleasure of living in the paradise of God's presence, the place where He will wipe away every tear, where there will no longer be any death, or mourning, or crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4)?

What must be done in order to enter God's gated city when you die? First, acknowledge that you are a sinner by having rebelled against His rule and that you deserve to be punished. Second, submit to the rule of God over your life by putting your trust in Christ who died for you and rose from the grave. You may want to use the following prayer as you talk to God. Repeating these words will not save you, but they can help to put your desire for God's salvation in Christ into words.

“Dear God, I know that I have rebelled against your rule. I know that I am a sinner. Because of my sin I deserve to be punished. I need your forgiveness. Thank you for sending Christ to die for me so that I may be forgiven. Thank you that He was raised from the dead to give me eternal life. I now put my trust in Christ to be my Savior. In Jesus' name, amen.”

What happens next? You will want to start reading your Bible and praying regularly. You may want to begin reading the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John. Write down the things you learn about Christ. Find a church where the Bible is taught and where you can begin to grow as a Christian. The Christian life is a journey, a battle, and a joy. It takes time to mature in your Christian faith and become more like Christ. It is a battle. There will be a lot of combat against sin in your life. There are sinful habits that will have to be broken (like anger, lust, selfishness and many others). Tell others about your faith in Christ. Be prepared for pain and suffering. God will use trials in your life to change your heart and life. The Christian life is a joy because the better you come to know God, the more will be your delight in God.

The Little Pharisee Within (August 27, 2006)

Television commercials are quite clever. One advertising trick is to get the potential consumer to think of germs and fungi as ugly little creatures that live throughout the body. It depends on the medication being sold where they have set up housekeeping. The ads are effective or they wouldn't be using them. The invisible is made visible with an accompanying personality. It might also help us to think of some sinful patterns in this way. Anyone who has read the Gospels of the New Testament knows something about the Pharisees. For one thing, as a group, they were treated more severely in Jesus' teaching than any other. One can almost feel the heat from the rebuke of the Pharisees given by Jesus in Matthew 23. Among other things, they are called blind guides and hypocrites. They are said to be murderers of the prophets and are likened to snakes. This is strong stuff. What made the Pharisees public enemy number one according to

Jesus? Before that question can be answered, we will have to recognize a sobering thought. There is a little Pharisee living inside each of us.

As a patriotic reaction to the encroachment of Hellenism within Judaism, the Pharisees developed sometime between 140 B.C. and 130 B.C. They were strong advocates of observance of the Mosaic Law and separation from the influences of pagan Greek culture. In order to ensure greater loyalty to the law, the Pharisees led the way in developing a system of oral tradition in order to make the law workable in a Greco-Roman world. Their intentions were laudable but quickly created a legalistic system that suffocated mercy and grace within the nation's spiritual life. A system of oral law began to supersede the true intent of God's law for Israel. Ritualistic externalism developed within the ranks of the Pharisees. Prayer and giving were done for show. Sabbath observance became encumbered with an endless list of "laws," such as making it unlawful to carry food from one house to the next, boiling an egg, fixing a leaky water barrel, or having to saddle one's donkey the day before the Sabbath. These kinds of things were judged as work on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were theologically orthodox within the parameters of Old Testament Judaism but were hypocritical and bitterly opposed Jesus. They were constantly looking for ways to kill Jesus (Lk. 4:28-30; Jn. 5:16; 8:37). He denounced their standard of righteousness, ostentatious worship, pride, and emphasis on externals while ignoring issues of the heart (Matt. 5:20; 23:5, 6; 9:12; 12:2). It was because the Pharisees had many doctrinal resemblances to that of Jesus that they were rebuked so strongly. The differences were far greater than the similarities and for this reason Jesus declared that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

The Christian might be wondering at this point "how could there possibly be a 'little Pharisee' dwelling within? Weren't they hostile to all that Jesus preached?" There lurks in every heart an inclination, a disposition if you will, to exalt outward conformity to rules over justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). We can fall into this pattern easily. We can make rules more important than people. We can overlook our own rudeness and sins in our zeal to judge others for what we perceive to be their wrongdoing. Legalism is a very slippery thing. We can say we are against it and even condemn it, while at same time be guilty of it. This is because it comes in different disguises. It can be thinking that makes actions meritorious and the adoption of a bargaining attitude toward God ("If I do this, God has to do that"). It can place acts over and above Scripture with the effect of adhering to man-made dos and don'ts as a way of attempting to please God (Matt. 15:1-9). True righteousness ends up being trivialized. For example, rules can be developed that govern dating, clothes, and music and made the measure of who is really committed to God. But being harsh, unmerciful, and judgmental can be excused in the name of a zeal for righteousness. Or someone can think "if I go to the evening service at church instead of watching the ball game, God will bless me this week." God can never be bought by our behavior. We cannot indebt Him to us because of our performance.

Legalism, that mindset that attempts to use labors done for God to pry favor from God or to escape punishment, is a truth-obscuring and joy-killing monster. It takes our attention off loving service offered to Christ and places it on grim efforts. It brings about conflict and harshness in relationships. The reason for this is that legalism creates an elitist mentality where conformity is demanded and failure is not tolerated (Gal. 5:15, 26). Living in a college dorm with legalists well-distributed around you can be like living in a concentration camp. They are like undercover policemen ready to turn you in for the least little thing. Churches can become joyless places when self-appointed, self-righteous legalists spy out your liberty in Christ (Gal. 2:4; 5:15). You

see, legalism is selective in the matters it chooses to promote. It will take parts of God's law but ignore the rest. It is never consistent. An interesting feature of legalism is not what it forbids, but what it overlooks (Gal. 5:3). The legalist feeds on the idea that he is holding up the high standards of God, when in actuality it is a lower standard. The hoops that he jumps through are doable (a checklist of achievable deeds), but the weightier matters of the law like mercy and loving your enemies are left standing out in the cold.

Where is that little Pharisee? He can rear his ugly little head in our hearts in a minute when a married couple pride themselves in never having been divorced, but yet slice one another to pieces with their tongue, when we feel satisfied for having read our Bible through in a year, but refuse to get involved in the life of an unwed mother in the neighborhood, when we fill our lives with church activities, moral conformity, and great causes, but are unwilling to be reconciled to an offended brother or sister in Christ. Let us make that little Pharisee an unwelcome guest.

Totaled (September 3, 2006)

Our 1986 gray Chevrolet Caprice had served us well. It had been Beth's father's car and was given to us when he died. Beth traveled back and forth to Nashville for four years to visit her mother who had had a stroke and was dying with cancer. We were sentimentally attached to what had been a reliable vehicle. One windy March day a tall pine fell across the rear of the car. It was declared as "totaled" by the insurance company. It was considered beyond repair. We watched rather sadly as the wrecker came and towed "old gray" out of our lives. But it was just a car. Something far more serious has happened to the human race. It all started with a tree thousands of years ago. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and plunged themselves and all their descendants into the dark abyss of sin and separation from God. Man became unable to please God. We as Adam's children are not able, by any strength of our own, to turn ourselves to God, or even prepare ourselves to turn to God. This is what the apostle Paul declares in Romans 3:10-12; "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God."

There was once a television commercial which focused on a lamentable condition where a disabled person pleaded, "I have fallen, and I can't get up." This is the condition of every human being. All humanity is dead in trespasses and sin and is totally unable to save himself (Eph. 2:1-2). But this is not all. Man's total being is affected by sin as well. Body, soul, spirit, heart, intellect, conscience, will, and affections have all been wrecked by sin. In our natural selves, we humans can do no good which can satisfy God. Any effort to gain God's favor by our righteousness is like monopoly money (It doesn't work in the real world). We lack spiritual perception. Like a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that is not there, we don't see things as they really are. Our wills are set against God. We are very religious, but we don't want God. Our hearts are deceitful (Jer. 17:9). How easily we can make ourselves believe what is not true. Even our affections are contaminated by sin. Instead of being sad and broken over our sin, we wallow in sorrow and pout when we don't get what we want. And the greatest disaster of all is that by nature we are subject to God's wrath (Eph. 2:3).

This is all not very flattering and runs against man's view of himself as innately good. But this does not change the fact that man hates God and, without the restraints of God's government over the world, would go from bad to worse. We should be thankful for human government, the

presence of Christians in our world, and conscience which work together to restrain sin and its effects. All this is not to say that mankind can't do good to his fellow man. Doctors, nurses, firemen, police, hospice workers, philanthropists, and countless other people do merciful and helpful things for their fellow human beings. This is because we are made in the image of God, and even though that image has been disfigured by sin, we can be kind, merciful, and generous. But no amount of human good can get anyone to heaven. A canoe is best used on rivers and lakes (calm waters), but it is not suitable to cross the ocean. So, it is with our goodness. It can get us through life and benefit others, but it can't make us acceptable to God.

All men are sinners and are in open rebellion against God, but that doesn't mean everyone is as bad as they can become or that all have made the same progress in sinning. It has been correctly said that we are not as bad as we can be, but we are as bad off as we can be. It is also not true that we don't know what we ought to do (Rom. 2:14-15). The human conscience, though unreliable because of sin, can like a broken clock be right at least twice a day. Neither does the Bible teach that unsaved people commit every form of sin. That we are by nature depraved and have taken up arms against God does not mean that we indulge in every form of sin or that we take any sin to the greatest possible extent (e.g., all have hated, but not all have murdered).

Where does all this not-so-good news about the nature of man lead us? If there is to be any movement toward God, any delight in His holiness, and any submission to His authority, God must do the drawing (Jn. 6:44, 65 "No one can come to Me, unless the Father, who sent Me draws Him . . . no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father."). Man the sinner must have divine enablement to be saved. The Holy Spirit must show the unbeliever his need for the gospel (Jn. 16:8-11). He does this "by revealing sin, directing the way to righteousness, and warning of impending judgment" (Robert A. Pyne). But this is still not enough. The Holy Spirit must carry out the divine work of calling (Rom. 8:30). Faith is commanded of the sinner (Jn. 3:16). The Spirit of God makes that possible (Matt. 11:27; Acts 16:14). At that same moment of time when the sinner believes on the Lord Jesus Christ he is regenerated (born again, Jn. 3:3; Tit. 3:5). New life is imparted by the Holy Spirit. All this takes place in a fraction of a second. It is a miraculous work of God. Out of the tomb of spiritual death comes a new creature in Christ. For it was He who said, "He who believes has eternal life" (Jn. 6:47).

Dear reader, have you come to know Christ and the eternal life that He gives? If you have not, why would you read on as if this were merely a piece of theological information that doesn't apply to you? Why would you go on with the smell of death all about you? If you die in your sins there will be an eternity to pay for having refused God's gracious offer of life in Christ. The payment for your sins was made on the cross of Jesus Christ. He suffered God's wrath for you and was raised from the dead so that death's claims upon you might be broken. From the wreckage of being totally unable to enjoy fellowship with God, you can be transformed to be what God made you to be, a worshiper of Him.

The Invited and the Chosen (September 17, 2006)

Weddings are wonderful events. A marriage is celebrated. Family and friends of the bride and groom are introduced to one another. The hopes and dreams of matrimonial bliss are anticipated. Married couples have the opportunity to be reminded of their own wedding vows made once

upon a time. But in order to join in on all the festivities you have to be invited. Jesus used an invitation to a wedding as a critical point of truth in a parable He told a few days before His crucifixion. It was a story about a king who made arrangements for the marriage of his son. Invitations were extended to many to come and enjoy the festivities, but they refused to come. It was an insult. So, others were invited, and they accepted the offer. Jesus then famously concluded the parable with the words, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:1-14). But what did He mean? He was teaching the truth that God issues a general invitation for sinners to receive His salvation, but comparatively speaking only a few accept it. And those few are the ones who have been chosen by God to enter into His kingdom.

The biblical doctrine of election has, unfortunately, been a stumbling block to many Christians. Many think that it is not fair for God to choose who will be saved. So, in order to create what they believe to be a theologically level playing field, they teach that God elects on the basis of faith. This is done by interpreting Scripture verses that connect foreknowledge to election to mean that God in eternity past saw who was going to believe on Christ and chose them (Rom. 8:29; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). But this is a failure to understand the significance of "foreknow." To say that God "foreknew" is not foreseeing that certain people will produce faith by their own self-determining power and therefore be chosen by God. The real truth is that the election of the believer by God harmonizes with the foreknowledge of God ("who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God") which means to set His favor upon certain ones. It is something to the effect of "whom he fore-loved in a special way." There are many Bible texts that demonstrate this use of the word "know" (Amos 3:2; Gal. 4:9; Matt. 7:23; Rom. 11:1-2). The sinner's belief is not the basis of God's election. That would place man at the center of the redemptive story rather than God's sovereignty.

Election is unconditional because it is not based on any condition required of man before God chooses him. God's choice was His own sovereign decision made in eternity past to grant salvation with all its accompanying blessings and obligations (Eph. 1:4-7; Jn. 17:2; 2 Thess. 2:13). Why did God do this? The answer is locked away in God's secret counsel. But we know this much. Our election in Christ is unmerited (by grace alone). It is Jesus Christ who is the ground and cause and guarantee of the election of every saint of God (2 Tim. 1:9). Rejoice in this, dear believer. Let this wonderful truth be like honey on your spiritual tastebuds. Savor it and praise God. But know this. The unconditional election of the believer will demonstrate itself through the fruit born in a changed life (1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:10). Christ's sheep will hear His voice and follow Him (Jn. 10:27). It is not enough to merely give lip service to being a Christian. If you are one of the elect of God you will bear fruit, somehow, sometime. It is God's Spirit who will make this possible. It is amazing grace all the way from election to glorification (Rom. 8:29-30).

A critic of the truth of unconditional election may say that it violates human responsibility. Or that it is unfair. Both of these objections flounder on the shoals of the perfections of God. When we say that "God is unfair in electing some and not others," we imply that we want justice. Well, if it is justice that we want, then who would then be saved? No one could escape the everlasting flames of judgment. Who are we to assume that God has to do what we think is fair? Does election contradict human responsibility? The Bible teaches both the truth of God's sovereignty in election and human responsibility to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. In some sense it is paradoxical (a statement that seems to say two opposite things). God's Word is no less true or trustworthy because of such seeming contradictions. There is the paradox of prayer (if God has

already sovereignly determined the outcome of all things, then why pray? Lk. 18:1; Isa. 46:10). Christ's death is a study in divine paradox. Did God kill Christ, or did the Jews, or the Romans, or humanity in general (Acts 2:23)? God willed the death of His Son and godless men put Him to death. Is this a contradiction? It is not.

The problem is with our finite minds. This humbles us, as it should. We must leave the inscrutable in the hands of an infinitely wise God. Romans 9 settles the case for the justification of God in His rights as the Potter over the clay ("does not the potter (God) have a right over the clay (sinful, fallen humanity), to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?"). We do not know enough to question God. In explaining the massive unbelief of the Jewish people regarding Jesus Christ, Paul declares that God has not failed (9:6-14). God is free to do as He wishes. He chooses whom He will choose. God has selected some out of the nation of Israel for salvation ("I will have mercy on whom I have mercy"). And to all this, the only appropriate response is, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33).

Someone may say, "What if I am not one of the elect? Is there any hope for me?" The invitation has been extended. God says, "Whoever believes may in Him have eternal life," "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved," "Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest," and "Come. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." If you, my friend, want the joy of God's forgiveness in Christ, rely on Jesus' death and resurrection. Then read Acts 13:48, which says, "and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." There is an R.S.V.P. (please answer) with God's invitation. Those who respond, by God's grace, will give proof they are among the chosen.

That God has chosen some for salvation out of a sea of lost humanity is a call to God-exalting worship. It is the foundation for our comfort, encouragement, and stability through pain and suffering (Rom. 8:28). It ought to move us to carry the gospel to all men everywhere (Jn. 10:16). Oh Christian, do you not want to be God's instrument in bringing His "other sheep" to Himself? This glorious goal drove David Livingstone to the distant regions of Africa with the gospel of Christ. Upon his tomb in Westminster Abbey is the inscription, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also will I bring." We are responsible for carrying the invitation to the wedding feast of God's coming kingdom. It is God's work to see that the chosen answer the invitation.

Deep and Wide (October 1, 2006)

A recent river ride in a canoe reminded me of the atonement of Jesus Christ. How, you might ask. The river flowed widely and beautifully through the countryside. The water was clear and ran beneath trees colored with hints of fall foliage. The deep places in the river offered some of the smoother water. This view of God's creation was a delight to the eyes. The atonement of Jesus Christ (the cross-work of Christ with a special focus upon Christ's substitutionary death for our sins) is a river of redemptive truth that flows through the Bible. Its head waters are found in the Garden of Eden (more precisely in eternity past) and run to God's kingdom on earth where

the glorified crucified Christ will reign. Beyond this is that eternal kingdom bathed in the glory of God.

The wideness of the atoning work of Christ is seen in its universal, all-sufficient provision of redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation (2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:19). The message of Christianity is that the death of Christ paid sin's ransom price, thereby satisfying God's wrath against sin. This results in a peace treaty with God. Sinful man can have complete harmony with an infinitely holy God. Through His Son the forgiveness of sin, a satisfactory sacrifice for sin, and a reconciled relationship to Him have been provided by God. All this comes through faith alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone. The offer of this good news is also wide. The Scriptures say, "Come. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Rev. 22:17). The call to look and live is found in that grand "whosoever" of John 3:16. As all those snake-bitten Israelites were told to look upon the bronze serpent if they wanted to live. So are all sinners told to look to the saving work of Christ on the cross and find the healing of eternal life. Why has this wonderful provision been made? Because of God's universal love ("God so loved the world."). But all Christians are not in agreement about the universal nature of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Certain questions are raised; "Did Christ die to make all men savable, or did He die to only save the elect?" "Was the death of Jesus intended to secure salvation for a limited number or was the death of Jesus intended to provide salvation for everyone?"

Among evangelical, Bible-believing Christians there are those who believe in a "limited atonement." Actually, they would prefer to call it a "definite atonement" or "particular redemption." Those who are so persuaded teach that Christ died only for the elect (those chosen from eternity past by God to be saved) and did not die for those who will eventually perish in hell. The "limited redemptionist" bristles at the thought that Christ's death made salvation *possible* for all humans. It is asserted that Christ's coming was to render certain the salvation of the elect of God. Their argument is based upon Scripture texts that say, regarding Christ's death, that it was "For the transgression of *my people*" (Isa. 53:8), "because he will save *his people* from their sins" (Matt. 1:21), "The good shepherd lays down his life for *the sheep*" (Jn. 10:11), and "Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up *for her*" (Eph. 5:25). It is also claimed that "Christ did not 'pay the penalty of sin' for those who reject Him, because if He did then they would not have to pay it themselves in hell." The river of Christ's atoning work is viewed as not wide in its provision, but only deep in its intent, namely, to secure salvation for the elect.

Some responses to the "limited redemptionist" viewpoint are necessary. In the first place it is true that there are biblical passages that speak of Christ dying for "His people," "His church," and "His sheep." All the elect rejoice in the depth of Christ's salvation-securing, cross-work for them. But in none of these verses does it say that Christ died *only* for the elect. But what of the objection that if Christ died for the non-elect then they have to pay for their sins twice, once on the cross and then in hell? Did Christ pay for Pharaoh's sin who was already in hell? If so, the argument goes, then it is a double-payment. But such logic misses a biblical truth. Pharaoh (and all those who die without salvation in Christ) is lost, not because Christ did not die for him, but because he refused God's offer of forgiveness. No unbeliever has his sins paid for twice (once by Christ on the cross and once by himself in an eternal hell). The payment that Christ made on his behalf never actually became his. Faith is necessary for salvation. The elect are not saved apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. One frequently hears the particular redemptionist assert that "Jesus did not come merely to make salvation possible, but actually to save his people." But if

Christ's death actually saved those for whom He died, then why is faith necessary? People are lost because they reject the Christ who died for them.

It is best to conclude that God unconditionally elected some to salvation which Christ secured with an all-sufficient atonement. Yes, the atonement of Christ is limited in some aspects. It does not extend to angels, and it does not save all the lost. Yes, the atonement of Christ is unlimited in some respects. It focuses upon the whole human race in its suitability. Christ died to provide a basis of salvation for all men. The "whosoever" of the New Testament are not empty invitations. When the apostle John says that Jesus Christ "is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2) no amount of hermeneutical weaseling can alter the universal intent of this claim. The fact that in some instances words like "all," "whosoever," and "world" are limited cannot be used to limit them in passages that have to do with Christ's work on the cross. Was John the Baptist really saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the elect" (Jn. 1:29)? This in no way diminishes the depth of Christ's death to provide for and save His people. The unfathomable nature of redemption accomplished and applied for the sins of those chosen before the foundation of the world is to the praise of the glory of God's grace. But at the same time there is a wideness in Christ's redemptive work that means we have a gospel for all the unsaved. People are not lost because Christ did not die for them. People are lost because they reject the Christ who died for them. Anyone who is saved must believe (Jn. 3:36). We can tell the unconverted that God loves them. All men everywhere are called to repentance. Deep and wide. That is the measure of God's love in Christ's work on the Cross.

Prayer Warriors or Prayer Wimps? (October 15, 2006)

I have a problem. I can't find the word "wimp" in a dictionary or thesaurus. My dictionary is a bit old. So perhaps that is the problem. We have come to understand a wimp as someone who is weak and whiny. A wimp is the opposite of strong and resolute. It is the kind of person who gives up easily. What is a warrior? That is easier. The dictionary says, "a fighting man; soldier." Why bring all this up? When I was a young Christian, I remember certain believers being referred to as "prayer warriors." My first thought was that they spent a lot of time in prayer. But for some reason the prayer warriors were usually older women. I assumed they had more time than anyone else to pray often and for extended times. Time, observation, knowledge of the Scriptures, experience, and maturity have given me a much better grasp of the concept of a prayer warrior. Allow me.

Apparently, the disciples of Jesus thought of themselves as wimps when it came to prayer. They had observed Jesus praying and asked Him to teach them to pray. The instruction that Jesus gave has provided us with a model for praying. We know it as the Lord's Prayer. But it is more accurate to see it as a pathway of thought that is to guide the Christian in his praying. For our immediate purposes we will focus on the opening petitions. At the very outset we are to go to God as our Father with the desire that His glory be exalted. God's reputation is to be our primary concern in all our praying. Prayer is not some placebo designed to make us feel better. Neither is it a means of fixing everything that is wrong with us and the world. God-seeking prayer is centered upon God. Our first concern in prayer should be the display of God's holy magnificence. We must want God to be seen for all that He is in our own lives and in the lives of others. It should be emblazoned upon our minds that true prayer is primarily concerned with

God's global purposes. Do we long for the world to come to know God for all that He is? He is love, just, all-powerful, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.

Our prayers should express the desire for people everywhere to bow in submission to God's rule ("Thy kingdom come"). God's universal kingdom is already a reality. So that is not what we ask for. This aspect of God's rule has always existed (Psa. 10:16 "The Lord is King forever and ever"). It is the kingdom over which the Messiah will rule on this earth that is to be the object of our petition. It will come when Christ returns to earth (Rev. 11:15; Rev. 22:20). So, we are actually praying for Christ to come the second time. Every time we worship at the communion table, we are anticipating the coming kingdom ("Truly I say to you, I shall never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God," Mk. 14:25). Tied closely with the plea for the coming of Christ's kingdom is the petition for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are to want God's moral will to be done on this earth. It is the will of God that He be worshiped by blood-bought people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Matt. 28:18-20; Rev. 5:9). When Christ rules on this planet evil will be routed and put to flight. Until then our own wills should be submitted to God. It is to be as Amy Carmichael wrote, "And shall I pray Thee change Thy will, my Father, until it be according unto mine? But, no, Lord, no, that never shall be, rather I pray Thee blend my human will with Thine." It is the will of God that His blood-bought worshipers delight in, think about, study, pursue, and obey His will (Psa. 40:8; Rom. 12:1-2).

Is this where you are in your praying? If it is God's will that His blood-bought elect go to the ends of the earth to call His other sheep to Jesus Christ (Jn. 10:16), then we must be praying for the lost. The only way into the coming kingdom is through faith in Christ. Are you praying evangelistically? God has ordained prayer as the means of drawing His sheep to Himself (Rom. 10:1). Do you know the names of the people on your street? Are you praying for their salvation? Are you praying for the members of your family, including cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts, and uncles? And we must not forget those people who appear in the daily news who are going through great sorrows and difficulties. We must be casting the prayer-net as far as we can. Perhaps it will help to think of it this way. Let's enter into some personal resolutions. I resolve that I will pray that the eyes of my own heart may be enlightened to see the world as ready for the harvest but waiting for harvesters (Jn. 4:35). I resolve to pray for my church family and its involvement in the Great Commission of Christ. I resolve that I will pray for the persecuted church every week, if not every day. If we commit ourselves to this kind of consistent praying, we will have a fight on our hands. My physical body will resist. My schedule will conspire against me. The world will sneer at me. And we certainly won't escape Satan's anti-prayer fire power (Eph. 6:16). But will you stand with me and declare that by God's grace we will be prayer warriors and not prayer wimps?

A Window on Missions - A Room with a View (November 12, 2006)

We stood on the third floor of the Hope Center in Gorazde, Bosnia. The room and balcony are not finished yet, but the view is spectacular. Standing there one can look down on the Drina River gently making its way to the Black Sea. Over beyond the river are the lush green mountains with touches of fall colors looking down on the Drina valley. It was a room with a view. However, the Hope Center, which is near completion, was not built to serve as a Bosnian

tourist resort. It functions as a place where a variety of activities are to be conducted to build relationships and create good will in the surrounding predominately Muslim community. Steve Reitz has been pouring all his energy into the construction of a place where the message of hope in Jesus Christ will be made known.

The view from the window at the Hope Center also serves as a useful reminder of how missionary work is done. One window through which we may look frames the presence of a missionary family. That family is Steve and Kim Reitz and their three children, Lauren, Jenna, and Rebecca. They serve with Crossworld in the war-torn city of Gorazde (see May, 2007 Berachah World Missions Calendar). There is no substitute for the traditional missionary who goes and stays in a place for the long haul. It has been reported that it takes an average of ten years for a missionary to learn a language and gain an elementary grasp of the culture. There are exceptions and variations involved, but the point is that church planting and other effective cross-cultural ministries require spiritually strong, biblically wise, culturally savvy, God-pursuing, and faithful servants of Christ who live among the people and pay the necessary price for establishing an enduring work of God. One of the concerns expressed by mission leaders today is the reluctance of young people to make a long-term commitment to a particular place. Too many would-be missionaries lack a commitment to staying in one location for the time it takes to lay a foundation and maximize effectiveness. It takes time to break up the ground, plant the seed, water the crop, and wait for the harvest. And sometimes the harvest may not even come for a generation or longer.

Another window reveals the value of short-term missionaries. This may at first seem to be a contradiction to what has already been said regarding the need for long-term commitment. The key concept here is teamwork. Those who come alongside of the resident missionaries and fit into their plans can be an asset. One immediate benefit is the training that can be received. This is happening in Gorazde. Steve and Kim Reitz have taken about seven young ladies under their wings, and they are all serving together in an admirable way. Each has a different kind of giftedness but one thing they have in common is a zeal for God and His gospel. One of these young ladies will be going to another Muslim country within a year. Another team member may be going back to her native country of Brazil for missionary work there. So, actually, “short-term missionary” is probably not the best way to describe those who have a relatively brief stay in a place like Gorazde. They are there for a limited time but are meaningfully involved in gospel work. These young women are making a difference for Christ as they are being equipped for service wherever the Lord directs them.

There has been some debate about the value of mission’s teams that go out from their local church to various fields for short periods of time. These have become quite popular in the last fifteen or twenty years. Some see this as not the best use of time or money. The complaint is that the money it takes to finance such trips could be put to better use in supporting those who have committed themselves to missions as a lifework. This is a legitimate concern, and every church should carefully examine its priorities and not let this happen. However, there are benefits involved in short-term teams. Again, the work in Bosnia is an example of how this can work. Through well-planned activities a team of disciplined, culturally sensitive, and caring Christians can complement the gospel witness that is already taking place. Friendships have been forged between the visitors from the States and local Muslim families. The walls of suspicion and prejudice are being broken down and are giving way to opportunities to show Christ’s love.

Gorazde has suffered through a horrific war. Thousands of innocent people were killed and wounded. Many of the homes and public buildings have been replaced or repaired but a host of resentments, fears, and mistrust lie just beneath the surface. Sadly, the Muslims in Bosnia have been given a grotesque picture of Christianity. Men, women, and children were slaughtered by the Serbs “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” To speak of Jesus, the Bible, and church can give a cold chill to a Muslim who lost a family member in the war. Only the love of Christ as seen in the kindnesses of His people can provide a window through which non-Christians can look and see the real meaning of the Cross. Yes, windows work both ways. Through them we can look out on a landscape upon which ambassadors of the message of reconciliation in Christ are offering their lives for the kingdom. And at the same time those who are outside of Christ can look through the same window and want to come inside and discover the God we worship.

A Call to Care (November 19, 2006)

The call to Christ is a call to world missions. And the call to world missions is the task of the local church which serves as a basecamp for the missionaries it sends and supports. Who are these people we call missionaries? Missionaries are Christians who have prepared themselves for cross-cultural gospel work and carry out that work under the watch-care of their local church. Missionaries are like everybody else. They deal with personal health issues. They have different natural and spiritual gifts. They struggle as they experience heart and life change through the power of the Holy Spirit. They laugh, grieve, get lonely, have conflicts with their fellow Christians, and require encouragement like the rest of us. But in another sense, they are not like everybody else. They have to adjust to different cultures. Material things have to be pushed to the edges of life. Good-byes are an all too frequent part of their relationships. Missionaries need every ounce of love that everyone else is to receive in the body of Christ. How then can the church that sends out these foot-soldiers of the cross engage in a ministry of care for its missionaries?

Missionary care begins in the hearts of God-loving, Bible-thinking, and Christ-centered people (Matt. 22:37-40; Phil. 1:8; 1 Jn. 3:16-18). The church is to be filled with gospel-people who look at the world from the standpoint of God’s redemptive purpose in the world. These same gospel-people know how relationships should be nurtured (love, time, attention) and focus their energy upon the exaltation of Christ. Missionaries must have a home church that sees the big picture of why the church exists in this world and how Christ’s love is to be demonstrated. This is the spring from which all missionary care flows.

Missionary care embraces the ministry of hospitality as the expression of Christ’s love for His church (1 Jn. 4:7-10; Rom. 12:10, 13). The church must be a place that is brimming with warm hospitality. American culture has some potentially harmful characteristics. Isolation, individualism, and busyness can suffocate the love that is to drive the missionary programs of the church. Love motivates the gifts of the Spirit within the congregation to help one another bear the burdens of life (Gal. 6:2). An uncaring church is a contradiction in terms. Hospitality is the fruit of brotherly love and gives witness to a watching world that we are Christ’s disciples.

Missionary care enlists all the members of the congregation (Heb. 10:24). There is to be no “missions club” in the church. Some may think that missions is a spiritual gift or “missions is

just not my thing.” This is not acceptable. Missions is what we are about as Christians. We must all be involved in some way. Our church must work at keeping God’s global plan before us in all that we do (sermons, missions reports, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, etc.). This is one of the values of well-planned missions trips. Those who have participated in these can attest to their life-altering nature. You gain a new perspective and appreciation for what is involved in a missionary’s life and the overwhelming needs outside of our American bubble. The pastor must set the example and take his wife with him on missions trips. We are all in danger of creating a small world for ourselves with little or no real knowledge of what missionary work is really like.

Missionary care refuses to relinquish responsibility for its missionaries to mission’s agencies or any other outside organization (Eph. 4:11-16). Mission Boards perform a useful service to the local church. They can assist with missions strategy, networking, and the administrative details required to send and keep a missionary on the field. It is wise for the church to build a working relationship with the missions agencies under which their missionaries serve. This will involve good communication, visiting the mission agency’s home office, being thoroughly familiar with its doctrinal statement, and how it views the meaning of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). A mission agency that does not consult with the sending church of one of its missionaries when personal problems arise is working contrary to biblical principles.

Missionary care necessitates the full attention and participation of the pastoral staff (Heb. 13:17). The elders of the church must know their missionaries. As shepherds of the flock that will mean communication with their missions family. They will pray for their missionaries, provide spiritual nourishment for them, talk to them, listen to them, ask questions, counsel them as necessary, and will not “out-source” missions to the missions committee. It is wise for one of the elders to be a “missions pastor.” In this role he will have special oversight of the way his church does missions. The support level of the various missionaries will need to be monitored. When special needs arise (e.g., an automobile when a missionary comes home on furlough) the missions elder, working with the missions committee, will be a caregiver.

Missionary care requires a church that is engaged in a grace giving approach to finances (2 Cor. 8 & 9). Generosity is a work of God’s Spirit. Every member of the congregation must be committed to biblical giving. If the Holy Spirit is working in lives and the church is maturing in Christ, then good giving habits will characterize an increasing number of giving units (families, singles, children) in the church. The idea of grace giving is that God enables believers to give to support the work of missions. Getting missionaries to the field and keeping them there is a major financial undertaking. If we really believe that we are to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven and not on earth, the church’s missions budget will reflect it.

Missionary care happens as missionaries are viewed as an extension of the church (1 Cor. 12:27). Thinking that portrays the relationship between the church and its missionaries as one of “us and them” betrays the truth of the oneness of believers in Christ. Biblical “one-anothering” that takes place in the congregation will by necessity fold its missionaries into the life of the church. For this to happen, missionaries should be looked upon as global staff members and held to the same biblical standards as are the other leaders in the church (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1). One way to experience the missionary as an extension of the church is to have some of its own members become missionaries. This will help to create a church-wide engagement with their plans and needs. It will also go a long way in bonding the missionary and the congregation in the work of the gospel.

Missionary care values meaningful and regular communication with the missionaries its church supports (Phil. 1:3-5; Rom. 16:3ff.). There is no end to the communication network potential through modern technology. Phone calls and emails open up a whole new world of connectedness. There is no excuse for not having fresh prayer requests from missionaries and staying on top of the issues that need the attention of the leadership. A missionary's picture on the refrigerator is a good thing. But it should not replace the more personal lines of communication.

Missionary care takes place most effectively when the caregivers visit the springs of the heart (Prov. 4:23). The issues of life flow from the heart. For this reason, missionaries need "full-coverage" care. They fight the same battles we all fight (temptations, anger, worry, fear, etc.). They go to hard places where there is often little or no stimulating body-life. Unbiblical and spiritually toxic teaching can infect their fellow missionaries. Missionaries will often carry the extra baggage of a painful past (divorced parents, sexual abuse, etc.). The pitfalls of immorality and marital conflict can sabotage church planting efforts. Returning home from the mission field presents a special set of challenges to work-wearied missionaries. Culture shock, material needs, decisions regarding the education of children, the indifference of people, and loss of financial support reveal what is in the heart. And, for that reason, wise and loving attention to issues of the heart must not be overlooked.

Missionary care gives special attention to intercessory prayer for missionaries (Eph. 6:18). The very nature of missionary activity is invisible warfare (Eph. 6:10-20; 2 Cor. 10:4). The missionary, as well as all of his fellow servants, fights battles on three fronts; the world, the flesh, and the devil. There is much that can be done by those who intercede for their missionaries. Enlistment of other missionaries, financial provision, strategy, conversions, revivals, health and strength, government bureaucracies can all be significantly impacted when God is sought through our prayers. The church must mobilize its forces and devote itself to private prayers, group prayers, and pulpit prayers for the sake of world evangelization.

Money and the Mouth (November 16, 2006)

We have all heard the expression, "Put your money where your mouth is." These words have been used to draw some into a wager or to challenge a person who professes one thing and does something else. There is a husband and wife in the Bible who did not put their money where their mouth was and as a consequence, they were made to attend their own funeral. Ananias and Sapphira had to leave church, feet first (Acts 5:1-11). This couple promised they would give the whole amount from the sale of personal property and lied about how much of it they were giving to the church. It was high-handed hypocrisy, attempting to appear to be what they were not. We dance to the devil's tune when we put on the mask of generosity while hiding dishonesty. Think about what this means. Selfishness can masquerade in pious talk, prayers, and church attendance. It is no small thing to give lip service to the greatest story ever told and at the same time love money more than God.

God has made it abundantly clear how we are to love Him with all our money. The Book of Proverbs (application of the Law) tells us that wisdom is better than money (Prov. 3:13-15), that our money is to honor God (Prov.3:9), that money must be acquired in God-pleasing ways (Prov.

10:4-5; 13:11; 11:1-2) and money must be handled with care (6:1-5; 27:24-27; 11:24, 25). The Gospels reveal the special attention Jesus gave to monetary matters. “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). “Seek first His kingdom, and these things (food and clothing) shall be added to you” (Lk. 12:31). “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19). The Pharisees presented themselves as devoted to God, but Jesus knew they were lovers of money (Lk. 16:14). For this reason, the damning effect of greed was a regular topic in the Savior’s sermons. The church of Jesus Christ is given explicit directions in how to use money to support the work of God. Christians are to give systematically, regularly, proportionately, and voluntarily to their local church (1 Cor. 16:1-4). Every believer, no matter what their income, is to have a plan of grace giving. God provides for us. We manage these provisions by His wisdom and give proof of our love for God by our spending, saving, and giving.

But we must come back to the responsibility of putting our money where our mouth is. It is possible to know what the Bible teaches about money and still be sucked into the quicksand of materialism. There are sins that must be confessed and repented of if we are to be faithful managers of our money: the refusal to work and provide for our family, impulsive buying, the use of shopping to keep us happy, spending more on entertainment, pet food, and vacations than we give to our church, letting personal debt decrease the amount we give to God’s work, failure to plan our giving, failure to save and plan for emergency giving, being bitter while we give generously, failure to support our local church, relying on feelings (“inner promptings”) to determine how much we should give, making investments and major expenditures without praying and seeking wise counsel, allowing our possessions to become more important than people, envying those who have more than we do, pursuing get-rich-quick schemes as the answer to our money problems, lack of contentedness with what we have. Sin must be tracked down and killed or it will choke out our love for God and the generous giving habits that should characterize people who are on their way to heaven.

As we clear the debris of our own sinful patterns, there are ways we can invest for the eternal glory of God. With an eye on the future, we invest in people. One day, money will be gone, but we can have “friends for eternity.” We are to take into account the many opportunities God gives us in this life. If we don’t give as we should when we have very little to give, we reveal where our hearts really are. God is to be our Master not our money (Lk. 16:1-9). With these spiritual realities ensconced in our lives we can make some needed resolutions. I resolve that as a glory-bound child of God I will give generously and faithfully to my local church. I will seek the best counsel I can get regarding financial planning. I will create a discretionary fund from which I can give to emergency needs for missionaries, humanitarian concerns (disaster relief, etc.), and other gospel ministries. I will review my standard of living for the coming year and determine where there are ways to free up more money for giving. I will commit myself to eliminating interest-bearing debt that is limiting my ability to give more. I will quit robbing God by making excuses as to why I can’t give what rightfully belongs to Him. I will figure out my pretax income and, if I am not already, begin to give at least 11 percent.

You may want to determine other resolutions regarding your giving. The most important thing, however, is to examine your heart, life, and checkbook to make sure that you are putting your money where your mouth is. There will come a time when we stand before Jesus Christ and give an account to Him. Are you preparing for that final audit?

The Simplified Life (December 3, 2006)

The Christmas season is not an easy time of year. Gift buying and busier-than-usual schedules can take a lot of the joy out of what ought to be a time of special delight in the “mystery of godliness.” God has revealed His perfect righteousness in Jesus Christ. Because of the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life, heaven’s gates are not barred to us. The glories of this wonderful message can, however, become obscured by our harried and hurried lifestyle. But something can be done about this. Our culture defies us. It has a dark side. Arrogance, shallow relationships, materialism, and a quest for entertainment can play the tune by which we dance. A simplified life is the determination to dance to the different tune of biblical truth.

When Martha was scurrying around her kitchen and complaining about her sister Mary’s lack of involvement, Jesus said that Mary had chosen “the good part.” This helps us. A simplified life is one of measuring our schedule and making our plans according to the invisible rather than the visible (Lk. 10:42; 2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7). Jesus did not correct Martha because of her work ethic. He rebuked her because her work ethic dominated her. She let it keep her from doing the most important thing at that moment. Mary made the right choice. Martha did not. Likewise, we who are Christians can consign our heart’s desires to less important things and can buy into our culture’s mode of thinking. A simplified life is a life of worshiping God. The heart that overflows in glad obedience to the infinite worth of God is a simplified life. It finds time to commune with God and His Word and prayer. Relationships are important, real, and meaningful. We have time for people, conversations, and mercy. How easily we can become dominated by the lust for privacy, comfort, and entertainment.

It has been said that “the ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary, so the necessary can speak” (Hans Hauffman). What is the necessary? It is to love God and one’s neighbor. This is the sharpened focus of a life that has meaning. Simplifying one’s life is a journey guided by the compass of God’s Word (Matt. 4:4). Redeeming the time is purchased by the currency of God’s commandments. The simplified life means staying in close and meaningful contact with family and friends. Be hospitable and kind. Encourage others with the warmth of your home and generosity. Life’s demands should not be dictated by our energy, the demands of others, or the values of American culture (1 Jn. 2:15-17). Be content with what you have. Don’t let your possessions be your master. Make them serve you. Remove the things that clutter your schedule with non-essentials such as television, movies, excessive newspaper and magazine reading. If you have sons, don’t let them spend endless hours playing video games. Give them designated times for this on the weekend. And there is the ubiquitous computer. The internet and email will have to be taken in hand and not be allowed to occupy time that’s needed for soul nourishment. Self-discipline must become a way of life, not an elective. Pray for it. It is a grace of the Spirit and flows from the spring of a heart enthralled with God (Gal. 5:23). Self-mastery is one of the prime achievements in life. Don’t be satisfied without it. You will also want to declare war on the habit of procrastination. It is a thief of time. Make a list of the things you have been putting off. Arrange them in order of importance and then get to work and enjoy the God-given sense of relief. There are sub-floor issues that will have to be looked at. Beneath the habit of procrastination is very often found over commitment. We are trying to do too many things. Plan your schedule before others plan it for you. But beware of the self-help and success books which tell you how to get more out of your time. Packing more into your time in order to produce more is not the way to pursue a simplified life. Is more what we want?

The life that is in biblical order insists upon the preparation for and the experience of worship with God's people. There is not a better reminder of what is most important in life than worship which is in spirit and in truth. It is not a good sign when meeting with God's people for praise, prayer, and the preaching of God's Word has been pushed to the margins of your life. We can get life out of perspective. That is why it is necessary from time to time to break away from our routine to rest, renew, and reevaluate our lives. A life unexamined is a life unfulfilled. The kind of life for which God has made us is one that seeks His glory above all else. I recommend taking your Bible, a good book ([Don't Waste Your Life](#) by John Piper), and a worship and praise CD. Establish and guard a private time with God each day. There is a no more fundamentally important routine than meeting with God on a regular basis for time in the Word and prayer. Refuse to let life crowd out such a time.

A.W. Tozer saw many years ago where modern life was leading the multitudes. His words are worth pondering. "Modern civilization is so complex as to make the devotional life all but impossible. It wears us out by multiplying distractions and beats us down by destroying our solitude, where otherwise we might drink and renew our strength before going out to face the world again...The need for solitude and quietness was never greater than it is today. What the world will do about it is their problem. Apparently, the masses want it the way it is and the majority of Christians are so completely conformed to this present age that they, too, want things the way they are. They may be annoyed a bit by the clamor and by the goldfish bowl existence they live, but apparently, they are not annoyed enough to do anything about it. However, there are a few of God's children who have had enough. They want to relearn the ways of solitude and simplicity and gain the infinite riches of the interior life." Is there something you can do this week to take a step toward simplifying your life? Let Solomon's counsel keep us company, "This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes" (Eccles. 7:29).

Amazed Angels (December 10, 2006)

Every Christmas a lot of angels show up. It's not that they aren't around the rest of the year, but in the Christmas season they make their appearance on the top of Christmas trees, in store windows, on the roofs of houses, in television shows, in movies (remember Clarence in "It's a Wonderful Life?"), and in countless nativity scenes. The recently released movie, "The Nativity Story," reminds us of the key role angels played in the birth of Jesus Christ. Angels as God's messengers make frequent appearances in the Bible and undoubtedly are running errands throughout the invisible world. I have never sighted an angel that I know of. But I know they must be there. The prophet Elisha and his aide-de-camp were surrounded in the city of Dothan by an angry Syrian army. Reassurance of God's protection was given lest knee-knocking fear take over. The eyes of the attendant were opened, and he saw the mountain "full of horses and chariots of fire all round Elisha." This threw an entirely different light on everything. This episode is in the Bible for our benefit as a vivid reminder that things are never as they may seem. Angels are a part of the Lord of host's army to accomplish His purposes in the grand drama of redemption.

Of special interest at the Christmas season is the angelic activity in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. An angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias while he was carrying out his priestly duties in the temple of Jerusalem (Lk. 1:11). The angel told him that his wife, Elizabeth,

would bear a son. He was to be no ordinary son. His name was to be John (a.k.a. John the Baptist) who would be the prophetic forerunner of Israel's Messiah. This angel later identifies himself as Gabriel. This was the same Gabriel who appeared to Daniel to communicate vital truth regarding God's plan for the nation of Israel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21). Later Gabriel was sent to the city of Nazareth to visit a young Jewish girl named Mary. No greater message was ever delivered to a human being than was given to her. This teenage girl was to be the mother of Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior (Lk. 1:32, 33). Mary doesn't seem to flinch ("be it done to me according to your word") in the face of the stupendous fact that she would become pregnant without a sexual relationship with a man and give birth to the Christ-child. Joseph, who was to be married to Mary, also receives an angelic visitor (Matt. 1:20-23). The angel gave Joseph a much-needed explanation of Mary's pregnancy and confirms this astounding development by quoting Isaiah 7:14 (Angels know Scripture). Joseph didn't hesitate to do what God had commanded. Both parents of Jesus demonstrated the admirable quality of readiness to obey God.

We meet angels again once Jesus has been born. The now famous "shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night" were frightened when an angel suddenly stood before them and encouraged them to be calm. They were told that "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" had been born and He could be found in Bethlehem. At that moment a sound and light show of an army of angels appeared in the night sky singing praise to God for His marvelous provision. This angelic choir is noteworthy for several reasons. These very angels had experienced the joyous presence of Christ's glory from the time of their creation (Isa. 6:1-4; Jn. 12:41; 17:5). The incarnation of the Son of God with its promise of hope for lost sinners was something to sing about. What is to be done about man's fall and the infinite chasm between sinful man and a holy God? Angels are fascinated as they see the wisdom of God displayed on the stage of human history (Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 3:16). The apostle Peter tells us that God's angels are captivated by the wonder of seeing totally depraved human beings who can be made to live lives that glorify God (1 Pet. 1:12). It causes angels to break out in exuberant delight when one sinner repents (Lk. 15:10).

The angels that joined in a celestial chorus of adoration in the night sky outside of Bethlehem said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." This was an appeal to all creation to praise God and celebrate the peace brought to earth in the gift bound up in the infant born to Mary. Reconciliation between God and man is possible to all those who experience God's favor (Rom. 5:1). How could the angels not have been overwhelmed with the magnitude of God's love and His provision of a Savior? What else could they do but pour out praise?

Angels played an important role in the Christmas event. Their message to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds is about the greatness of God's Messiah and His kingdom (Lk. 1:32-33). They remind us that there are spiritual beings in the unseen world. Angels are examples to us in their continual worship and obedience to God. They exist to bring glory to God (Psa. 103:20). Angels must certainly be embarrassed at how humans make more of them than they do the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not to worship angels, pray to them, or seek their counsel (Col. 2:18). Instead, we are to rejoice in the assignments that God has delegated to them (e.g., bringing answers to prayers, Acts 12:5-7; observing our service and suffering for God, 1 Cor. 4:9; watching over and protecting Christians, Psa. 34:7; 91:11, 12; rejoicing at our salvation, Lk. 15:10; watching the ministry of the local church, 1 Cor. 11:10; 1 Tim. 21; Rev. 1:20; and caring for the believer at death, Lk.

9:22; Jude 9). Angels are absolutely amazed at what God is doing in this world. Are we equally amazed at His grace? Are we ready to do His bidding? Are we joyfully adoring Him?

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Part 1 (December 17, 2006)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has suffered much. Certainly, she suffered in her life. But she has been mistreated in a variety of other ways. The biblical Mary is hardly recognizable due to the man-made traditions that have become attached to her. Some have declared out of the thin air of human speculation that Mary was “preserved free from all stain of human sin.” In other words, Mary is not to be viewed as a sinner like the rest of fallen humanity. The reasoning is that since she was instrumental in victory over Satan she could not have been under Satan’s dominion (not a sinner). The theological abuse of Mary gets even worse for it is claimed that, “So also one can scarcely draw near to the Son except through his mother.” Mary would be more than embarrassed at such a remake of her honored role as the mother of Jesus.

God has given us a portrait of truth in the life of Mary. The same Spirit who brought about the conception of the Christ child in the womb of Mary has given us the record of the ways of God in her life. This offers us a way of marveling at the wonders of God’s grace in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. God’s grace to Mary is evident in the beginning of the story of redemption. God said that it would be through her that judgment would come upon Satan (Gen. 3:15). She was to have a vital role in the conflict between God and Satan by giving birth to the one who would deliver a final and fatal death blow to Satan. According to Old Testament prophesy and the confirming announcement by the angel Gabriel Jesus was to be conceived in Mary’s womb by the Holy Spirit (Isa. 7:14; Lk. 1:31). In the infinite wisdom of God and by His omnipotence He chose for the eternal second person of the Trinity to take on Himself humanity without a human father. The miraculous birth of Jesus Christ is a witness to His uniqueness. Only God incarnate could be the Savior of sinners (Heb. 2:9, 14, 15). Mary had not done anything to deserve such a role in redemptive history. Her honor was due to God’s grace (“Hail, favored One!”). All the glory goes to God, not Mary. Elizabeth’s song focuses upon adoration of God for what He had done for Mary (Lk. 1:42-45). This is not to diminish the fact that Mary was honored by being chosen to give birth to the Messiah. But Mary’s blessedness depended entirely on her son and his greatness. To refer to Mary as the “mother of God” can easily be misunderstood. Mary was not the mother of the divine nature of Jesus. Her DNA contributed to the humanity of Jesus, but she did conceive God in her womb.

At this point we can draw a refreshing drink of cold water from the well of truth regarding Mary. Though our circumstances certainly differ from those of Mary we can know that God has a sovereign plan for our lives and will accomplish it through Jesus Christ. Be assured, Christian, that the days of our lives are written in God’s book (Psa. 139:16). Each of us has a role to fulfill in the drama of redemption. Mary’s role was most unusual, but by the indwelling presence of Christ in the believer and the power of the Holy Spirit Christ is incarnated through us. The conception of spiritual life within us by the Spirit’s work of regeneration is a miracle. Rejoice ye pure in heart. And keep this in mind as well. Like Mary, God comes to us and uses us not because of who and what we are, but because of who and what He is. He did not choose us because He saw us believing or because we merited His favor in some way. We deserve the opposite of what we receive, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9).

Mary willingly submitted to God's will for her role in the dear Savior's birth (Lk. 1:38, 46-55). Imagine the shock involved in receiving the news that she was to be the mother of Israel's long-awaited Messiah. It is understandable that Mary was a bit perplexed as to the method of fulfillment ("How can this be since I am a virgin?"). But as the angel explained what God was going to do, she was submissive and humbled by it all. She knew that people would misunderstand her pregnancy and was aware of her lowly social position. But Mary believed God and was willing to accept the embarrassment, suspicion, and the pain necessary to bring into the world the One who would "reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Lk. 1:33). As God's instrument of hope for a lost world, Mary is an example of a response of obedience to God's will. This truth is the hallmark of every disciple of Jesus Christ ("If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" Matt. 16:24.). Mary became the model for how a disciple of the One who was in her womb should live. Are we equally willing to embrace selfless living, a loose attachment to things, and fearless obedience for the glory of Christ?

Some have showered upon Mary such titles as the Queen of the Apostles, Queen of Heaven, Queen of the Angels, the Door of Paradise, Mother of Mercy, and Mother of Grace. But all this can easily betray one fact, namely, that Mary needed a Savior like all the rest of sinful humanity (Lk. 1:46, 47; Jn. 2:4). She was not free from sin but was God's chosen vessel to bear Jesus "who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). "The Mother of Grace" was one of those who needed to be saved from sin. Mary was not exempted from fallenness (Rom. 3:23). The universality of sin is the result of God's judgment upon the race because of Adam's transgression. Our only hope for forgiveness comes through Christ who bore our guilt on the cross. Reader, have you experienced God's forgiveness in Christ? Christ was "made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). He bore the curse of God which was due us because of our sins. Sin is an offense to God and we can never hope to live in His presence unless our guilt is pardoned. Do you know that pardon? Come as you are to God and receive what He alone can give you. Right now, rely on Jesus' death and resurrection. Then you can enjoy the sweetness of God's forgiveness and the pleasure of eternal life.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Part 2 (December 24, 2006)

In the last seconds of a football game the quarterback drops back to pass. All his receivers race downfield to the end zone. In a desperation throw the hope is for a touchdown. This is called a "Hail Mary." Mary, the mother of Jesus, would not be pleased that any prayer would be addressed to her. The very last time Mary is mentioned in the Bible is in Acts 1:14 where she is found with others devoting herself to prayer. This is as it should have been, for Jesus said that the time would come when Mary, as with all believers, can and should call on Jesus in prayer (Jn. 14:13, 14). There was a time when Mary had to learn that her son would no longer submit to her requests. This occurred when Jesus gently but firmly told his mother that the wine problem at Cana of Galilee was something that the will of His Father would resolve ("Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come" Jn. 2:4.). Mary would have to lose her son in order to find Him as Savior. Mary does not receive any prayers. She is fully occupied with worshiping her son, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Mary's name does not appear in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11, but she certainly qualifies as one who lived a life of faith. Her initial responses to the news about her pregnancy are an example of how we should all respond to God's will. It is evident that this teenage Jewish girl knew the Old Testament Scriptures and had a good enough grasp of the plan of God to be able to understand the significance of her "holy offspring." Did she fully understand Simeon's reference to the uniqueness of her child who would pierce her soul like a sword (Lk. 2:35)? Probably not, but she pondered the meaning of God's revelation and learned more about her son, Israel's Messiah, as he journeyed to the cross and was raised from the dead (Lk. 2:19). Like the rest of Jesus' disciples, the eyes of her mind would need to be opened to understand the Scriptures and rejoice in God's Redeemer (Lk. 24:45). Mary conducted her life according to what God had revealed to her and thereby has distinguished herself as a woman of faith. But her faith allowed room for perplexity and growth in understanding. A deepening experience of grasping the significance of what God has said is consistent with trust in God. This forces a question upon us. What is limiting us from seeing the implications of what we hear from God's Word? Has the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought a spiritual transformation to your life? Are you born again? The Holy Spirit opens the spiritual eyes of those who belong to Christ (1 Cor. 2:14).

There is another misconception about Mary that needs attention. It is taught that Mary lived under a vow of perpetual virginity after the birth of Jesus. There is no Scripture to support this assumption. Actually, the contrary is true. It is said that Joseph "kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son" (Matt. 1:25). Joseph and Mary lived a normal life as husband and wife and bore other children (Mk. 6:3). There would have been no spiritual or moral advantages for Mary to have remained a virgin in marriage. Sadly, an unbiblical asceticism crept into the early church as it regarded celibacy as an ethically higher state than sexual relations.

The sword that Simeon predicted would pierce Mary's soul was felt most deeply when her son, Jesus Christ, was nailed to the cross. Mary suffered pain so that Jesus might bear the pain of God's judgment on sin (Lk. 2:35; 23:48, 49; Jn. 19:26, 27). Morning sickness, labor pains, a lifetime of a misunderstood pregnancy, and a rejected ministry all culminated at the crucifixion. As Mary stood in the shadow of the cross, Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, felt compassion for her. The care of Mary was delegated to the disciple whom Jesus loved. This disciple, probably John, would take Jesus' place and assume the duties of a son. As we think back over Mary's life up to the hour of her son's death her own cross comes to mind. Mary's sorrow became her cross. To follow Jesus means that the disciple must take up his cross and follow Him. In Mary's case she saw her own son, the Son of God, rejected and crucified. She stumbled and encountered difficulties by virtue of Jesus' mission on earth (Lk. 8:21; 11:27-28; 12:51-53). Her son's suffering and rejection weighed heavily upon her heart. But is this not the way of all who, by doing the will of God, are Jesus' mother and brothers (Lk. 8:21). Our identification with Christ is a call to suffering for Christ. There is no easy way to live the Christian life. As Christ's people we, like Mary, fight the world's hostility to the gospel message. Yes, Mary was blessed for bearing Israel's Messiah, but the greater blessing is for all those who obey God's Word (Lk. 11:28).

What was Mary's life like beyond the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus? Mary reappears with the eleven disciples of Jesus as they waited in prayer for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). She took her place among those who became "charter members" of the body of Christ. The one who had given birth to Jesus' physical body became a part of His spiritual body, the church. Some insult Mary by calling her the "mother of the church." Christ alone is the "head

of the body, the church, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything" (Col. 1:18). A further joy to Mary was the delight of seeing her children come to faith in Christ (1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14). Mary's need for the power of the Holy Spirit mirrors each Christian's need for that same power if there is to be bold witness for Christ. We can also draw encouragement from the eventual conversion of Jesus' half-brothers. Do you have family members who resist the hope-filled gospel of Jesus Christ? They may yet believe.

Mary is "blessed among women" because of the sovereign choice of God, her belief in the word of God and her firstborn, "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." However, Mary's maternal relationship to Jesus is surpassed by those who put their trust in Jesus (Lk. 8:18-21; 11:27-28). Her physical relation to Jesus did not give her any advantage over those who are related to Him through redemption. Spiritual ties are closer than blood ties. Mary takes her place with other blood-bought, born-again children of God. Would you like to be counted as a relative of Jesus Christ? Jesus said, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it." Hearers and doers of the Word of God are Jesus' family. If you have heard the gospel and believed in Christ, then you are in His family. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is your sister in Christ whom we will all join in singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

Berachah 2007 (January 17, 2007)

A handheld GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) has worked its way into the comings and goings of our modern world. Several years ago, while some of us were working our way down the Mulchatna River in Alaska, a GPS device proved to be useful. We could see where we had been, where we were going, and, most importantly, where we were. GPSs have found their way into automobiles, boats, and wherever hunters hunt. Perhaps we could think about our coming year at Berachah from the standpoint of a GPS.

Let's begin with the more obvious. Something is happening on our property. The construction site is a promise of a new building. It will contain a fellowship hall and classrooms. And do we ever need the classroom space. Thankfully, God has provided over \$600,000, but more funds will be needed. Keep praying and giving. Our builder is working hard at getting the building finished as soon as possible. Let us remain patient and joyful. And speaking of money the Lord has provided us with the most generous Grace Promise commitment in our church's history. Over \$195,000 has been pledged for world missions for 2007. Rejoice in God's provision through the generosity of His people. Pray for the Missions committee as they work on the budget for the coming year. This will be done at the Sunday, January 21 dinner meeting. There are already some special opportunities for world mission's work this year. For the past week Frank Pass has been in Novosibirsk, Siberia teaching a course on Romans 1-8 in the seminary. We have been praying for traveling mercies for Frank since he set out on his trip with a cold and headed for what can be one of the coldest places on this planet. In February Beth and I plan to go to Iasi, Romania (pronounced Yash) where I will be teaching the "Peacemaker" course in the Bible Institute where Karl Kosobucki serves with Crossworld. Later this year we also plan to visit the Heinz family in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Preparations are already being made for another Bosnia team mission's trip June 25 to July 6. Chuck and Jan Bennett left this past week for another special time of ministry in Costa Rica. Steve and Kim Reitz are with us for several weeks while on a brief furlough from their work with Crossworld in Bosnia. This is a lot of

coming and going, but it represents one of many reasons God has for our existence as Christians in this world.

The Pine Mountain Chalets will be the location of the Ladies Retreat January 25-27. Rachael Sherwood, wife of John Sherwood the international director for Crossworld, will be the featured speaker. There is great value in the women of our church sharing time together worshiping God, renewing relationships, and visiting the springs of the heart with the living and powerful Word of God. The ladies will be prepared to begin their Bible Study on Tuesdays beginning February 6. Our church is rich in women who love God and have an appetite for His written revelation. Such a treasure enriches the entirety of our church life and fills homes with Christ's presence.

On April 13-15 Trevor Craigen, professor of theology at The Master's Seminary, will be our annual Bible Conference speaker. Dr. Craigen will be speaking on "The Nation of Israel in the Plan of God." Make your plans now to hear these messages. There are hundreds of doctrinal themes in the Scriptures. That is why we are always mining the truth-rich sixty-six books of the Bible to strengthen our faith and sharpen our perspective. Justin will be alternating between Sunday mornings and Sunday nights with his series on the Gospel of Matthew. I will be doing a five-part series on the Book of Job beginning Sunday, January 28. A special four-week Sunday School class will begin on February 4 on "Creativity in Preaching and Teaching." This will be a study in how to take the truth of Scripture and deliver it to the minds and hearts of the hearers. For those men who are able to squeeze a Monday morning Bible study into their schedule (see Sunday's bulletin for time and location) you will find encouragement and an excellent way to begin each new week. We are finishing up I John and soon begin a study of the Ten Commandments. The Elders are continuing their search for an additional staff member. Please pray that we will find the man who is most suitable for work with the youth, worship, and the wearing of other "hats" as well.

As we set out on our journey through the coming year there are social, cultural, and political winds that will be blowing. Stem cell research (Is it right to destroy an embryo for the purpose of experimentation?), the war in Iraq (Should we abandon Iraq and let radical Islam take over?), Sunday blue laws (Does it really take another day to buy all the alcohol you want?), the economy (slower growth but not recession?), the airline industry (Does Delta want to shift to the west?), health care (whose responsibility is it to provide health insurance?). These are a few of the issues that will dominate the headlines. Christians should not stick their heads in the sand and ignore the moral and ethical implications of such matters. Part of our purpose as a local church is to instruct our young people in a Christian world and life view. James Sire in his book, The Universe Next Door, tells us that "Refusing to adopt an explicit worldview (a set of presuppositions which we hold about the basic makeup of our world)... We are caught. So long as we live, we will live either the examined or the unexamined life.... The examined life is better." If we are to be salt and light in this world our Christianity is to be lived out in humble and loving wisdom.

We have the year 2007 before us. Let's not waste our time. There is a lot of good work to be done. Some of us may go on to heaven this year. But most of us probably will not. Redeem the time you saints of God. Christ is with us. We have His word on it.

A Healthy Church (January 21, 2006)

The physical health of our population is a major concern in the media and in popular culture. Diets, nutrition, and exercise occupy our national attention. This is all well and good. We should all aspire to take care of the only body we will have in this life. But is not the spiritual health of the church of Jesus Christ a greater concern to Christians? It ought to be. There are metaphors that help us to understand what it means for the church to be healthy. Christians are nourished on the words of the faith (1 Tim. 4:6). Sound teaching is of paramount importance if a church is to function as it should (2 Tim. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 1:9). When the Bible is taught as it should be and lived out in daily life, the result will be a properly functioning church, i.e., a healthy church. My prayer for Berachah Bible Church is that it will possess strength and vigor in all that it is and does. But, specifically, what would this kind of church look like?

A healthy church is driven by a deep desire to please God and live under the authority of His Word in all its work. A well-fed church is one that is served generous portions of the whole counsel of God. It is like eating nutritious food. All the spiritual vitamins and minerals needed are found in Genesis to Revelation. Therefore, Bible exposition is vital to a healthy church. We must hear the Bible taught regularly. The congregation must sit down at the table of truth and eat what is put before them. Are you doing this? Do you bring your Bible to church? Do you take notes? Do you pray in preparation for the sermon? Do you discuss it with your family? Are you living it and passing it on? The daily Bible reading schedule provided for our church is another way of eating right. Do you have a consistent time of reading and studying the Bible or are you attempting to get by on spiritual “twinkies?”

A healthy church is made up of believers in Christ who are growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ. As newborn babies we are to crave the milk of the Word so that we will grow (1 Pet. 2:2-5). Each of us must take personal responsibility for spiritual maturity. This requires both dependence and discipline. If there is going to be God-honoring change in our lives, there must be dependence upon the Holy Spirit. It takes time, ample amounts of Bible truth, suffering, soul searching, and repentance to experience heart and life change. Are you able to trust God more today than you did a year ago? Does suffering make you angry at God or does it draw you nearer to God? What about that temper? Is your self-control evident to the people who know you best?

A healthy church develops godly leadership. The organization of the church is actually rather simple. There are two primary offices, elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13). God has established the office of elder in the local church to rule, pastor/shepherd, guard the truth, feed the flock, and exercise general spiritual oversight over the congregation. Deacons are to serve the church by assisting the elders in the care of the flock. They do whatever kinds of service are delegated to them. One is not the varsity and the other the junior varsity. They are complementary team members working together for the spiritual good of the sheep. Aspiring for leadership in the church is a worthy goal.

A healthy church meets regularly in order to worship, to become spiritually equipped, and to stimulate encouragement (Heb. 10:25). We meet primarily on Sundays in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It can be a very full day if one attends both the morning and evening services. We don't exist merely to meet but coming together for corporate worship is vital to the well-being of the church. There is a kind of legalism that measures commitment to God by how much time one spends at church. That is wrong. Holiness of life does not come by

merely spending time at church, but by transformation that takes place in the heart. However, there is another problem. There are those who treat the church like a grocery store. They drop in from time to time to get what they think they need and then disappear into the traffic of life. May God deliver us from that cavalier attitude that treats the church thoughtlessly by minimal involvement in the household of God.

A healthy church will meet in order to observe the ordinances given by Christ. New converts will want to be baptized as a public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ. This is an occasion of stupendous importance for it communicates a repudiation of the idols of the culture and identification with the Lord of the church. In its meetings the church will fellowship around the communion table to celebrate the redemptive work of Christ. The bread and the cup symbolize the significance of the forgiving power of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

A healthy church will exercise the ministry of systematic, faithful, and generous giving (1 Cor. 16:1-4). It is the responsibility of every believer to set aside part of their income for the support of the church they attend. It is to be proportionate to the way one is prospering. No percentage is mandated. The church has bills to pay, a staff to support, ministries to fund, and missionaries to support. Therefore, our giving is not to be sporadic, impulsive, and seasonal. It is to be a joyful offering for the glory of God.

A healthy church burns with zeal to spread the gospel throughout the world (Matt. 28:19-20). The church exists in this world to evangelize the nations. As a band of brothers and sisters in Christ we are to look for ways to penetrate our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Are you praying for the salvation of your neighbors? When was the last time you shared the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ with an unsaved person? At the same time world missions is essential to our health as a church. Raising up and sending out our own people to cross cultural boundaries must ever be our passion.

A healthy church is composed of believers who are spiritually gifted and who joyfully serve the living God (1 Pet. 4:10). A spiritual gift is a God-given ability to serve the body of Christ in some special way. God in His sovereign wisdom has distributed all the necessary gifts among us. There are no ungifted Christians. You say, what is my gift? The best answer is to start serving and see what happens. Others may recognize your gift before you do. Develop your spiritual gift. Fan it into a flame. If you have the gift of teaching, fill up on what the Bible teaches and look for opportunities to pass it on to others. If you have the gift of mercy, you will see who needs comfort and care. There is much to do. Sunday school, the nursery, the youth ministry, the missions team, women's ministry, worship in music, and a host of other service roles are available. Don't fail to show up.

A healthy church is committed to purity of doctrine and life (1 Cor. 5:1-11; 1 Tim. 6:3). Jesus Christ as the Head of the church holds us responsible for what we believe and how we conduct ourselves as Christians. There is foundational truth upon which Christianity rests. That truth must never be compromised. Do you know what those core truths are? Know them. Teach them. Live them. Tolerance has become the darling virtue of our culture. But it is a spiritual virus when we look the other way while doctrinal error wants to take a seat in the church. And it is equally imperative that the church not ignore the church member who continues in unrepentant disobedience to God's Word. We must discipline ourselves. If we do not, then we must be disciplined by the church.

A healthy church will breathe and walk by earnest prayer (Eph. 6:18). The church of Jesus Christ gives witness to its dependence on God as it seeks Him in prayer (1 Tim. 2:1ff.). Prayer should saturate all of our meetings and we must be incessant in it in our personal lives. Do you get up in the morning and seek God in prayer? It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who guided a guest to the basement and showed him the source of power in his church. It was scores of people on their knees praying. No finer compliment can be given a church than to call it a praying church.

A healthy church will work hard at maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Christ's church is to be comprised of peacemakers. "Blessed are the peacemakers." All churches have conflict, but the church that is functioning in a biblical manner handles conflict God's way. The Scriptures do not leave us to ourselves when it comes to clashes between believers. There is Christ-centered protocol. It is the responsibility of the leadership and every member of the congregation to put obedience to God's Word above all other allegiances. A church with biblical blood flowing in its veins practices the truth that love for one another is a powerful argument for the Christian faith. Are you running away from problems and differences with fellow believers? Are there people to whom you will not speak? Jesus prayed for unity among believers, then died for it. Let's do what is necessary to reflect that.

Lord, we pray that you would infuse our church with spiritual health so that we will have the strength and endurance to bear the weight of the world and walk the road into your heavenly presence.

The View from Romania (March 11, 2007)

On Thursday, February 15, after a one-day delay due to a winter storm, Beth and I flew to Iasi, Romania by way of Vienna. When we arrived in Iasi Karl, Justin, Annie, Lydia, and Ellie Kosobucki were there to meet us. This always makes for a soft landing. Happy faces helping us with our luggage in a foreign land made us feel right at home. Karl and Jo Ann Kosobucki have served with Crossworld in Romania since 1992. On Saturday Beth spoke to thirty ladies from different churches on "How to Conduct Women's Bible Study." Later she met with a small group of about ten leaders on the same subject, and on Wednesday she spoke to ladies from the Gypsy community. It was a rewarding time seeing Christian women eager to enter into a serious study of God's Word. On Sunday morning we attended the Filiocalia church where I spoke on the Book of Job through our translator, Marcela. It was a delight to look into faces intent upon hearing the eternal Word of Truth. That has always been one of the fringe benefits of preaching the Bible. Only God knows the degree to which the implanted Word is being received with humility.

On Sunday afternoon I began teaching the Peacemaker course. On Monday through Wednesday from 1:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. the biblical truths regarding unity, conflict, forgiveness, confession, and repentance were opened up to the students. This is all at the very heart of the gospel and vital to relationships that glorify God. Questions were asked, issues were discussed, and time was spent with students who wanted to experience reconciled relationships. Thank you, our Berachah family, for your generous support of world missions which makes ministry like this possible.

Going into another culture, moving among fellow believers, and listening to their concerns is like taking an elevator to the twentieth floor of a building. One can gain a better view of a city. Here are some observations from the view of things in Romania. They are not new perspectives but needed reminders. The world is smaller than it was in 1950. The nations and cultures that cover this planet all seem to exist more closely to one another. The influence of one culture upon another can happen so quickly. Western culture spilling out through movies and the entertainment media is noticeable everywhere. The hedonism and materialism of Europe and America is everywhere to be found. It is somewhat embarrassing to see how Hollywood has packaged and promoted its worldview and spread it over the world. Lust, violence, and cynicism is an evil kind of cross-cultural “evangelism.” The virtues of the America that you appreciate are not necessarily those that are disseminated by the entertainment world.

Our missionaries need encouragement, our presence, our prayers, and our financial support. Pressures upon missionaries abound. Not only are they dealing with all the day-to-day demands of family life, but they also have to contend with the many adjustments that come with adapting to life in another culture. Learning a new language only represents the different ways other people think and live. Customs, food, social expectations, politics, and religious convictions present a labyrinth of living patterns that must be learned. Jo Ann Kosobucki home schools their four children and is also vitally involved in the lives of Romanian believers. The next generation of Christian workers in Romania is being equipped in the Bethlehem Bible Institute which Karl oversees. Pray for the Kosobuckis as they labor faithfully seven time zones away.

The sins of the culture become the sins of the church. This well-known proverb aptly captures the trap into which we can so easily fall. In America Christians become oblivious to the pursuit of pleasure and wealth that fuels much of our economy. A very mild form of culture shock awaits those who leave the U.S.A. cultural bubble. Upon returning you notice the ubiquitous T.V. advertisements charmingly calling for the enjoyment of the good life. Romania was ruled by communist ideology for half a century and authoritarianism and corruption in government remain along with a poor economy. Many churches are afflicted with leaders who feel they must control everything and legalism rules in the place of vibrant body-life. This is a recipe for the death of a church. Wherever the church of Jesus Christ is found it has a fight on its hands. Will it succumb to the world’s values or live by the all-sufficient Word of God?

The influence of American Christianity is a mixed blessing. Because of our wealth and freedom, we have contributions we can make to our brothers and sisters in Christ in less prosperous countries. We must see ourselves as helpers, potential givers, and encouragers alongside of the church in Romania. We don’t necessarily know how to do things because we are Americans. Instead, we should see ourselves as servants. In this role we help serve the body of Christ wherever it is found. But at the same time there are lamentable features of American evangelicalism which have infiltrated the church in Romania. We transfer our weaknesses. The “health and wealth” gospel is preached in the homes of Romanians through satellite television. A psychologized Christianity has made its way into the thinking of Romanian Christians. After one of Beth’s teaching sessions in which was stressed the effectiveness of Scripture clearly taught, one of the ladies asked what she considered to be an important question, namely, “what is the most important need of a woman? We are studying needs tonight.” There is more to this question than this present writing can explore, but it reflects a common theme in churches in America, i.e., that there are certain psychological needs that each of us have, and these needs must be

identified and met. This kind of thinking is not the product of biblical thought and invites a self-focus that is pernicious in its effects.

A final view from Romania has to do with the unity of the church. There are some details I am not at liberty to discuss (names, etc.), but there have been some challenges to the unity of the missionary team in Iasi. False teaching undermines the unity of the Spirit. Thankfully, the doctrinal error that was being taught by a missionary was identified and dealt with. There were also relational tensions that developed between some of the missionaries and the national church. These circumstances entered into my acceptance of the invitation to go and teach the Peacemaker course. May God protect Berachah from the evil one who is always looking for an opportunity to get his foot in the door of our body-life. Sin, whether in the form of false teaching or bad behavior, is an infection that compromises the health of the church in any culture.

How Safe Are Our Students? (April 22, 2007)

The bold front-page headline of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Wednesday forced a question upon us. In the wake of “the deadliest shooting rampage in modern U.S. history” our nation is stunned and searching for answers to the question, “How safe are our students?” Is there any way such a diabolical deed can be prevented? But there is another question that clamors for attention. “Why did the 23-year-old gunman do it?” Is it the violent entertainment culture? Is it the lack of stricter gun-control? Do we need metal detectors on high school and college campuses? Should not mentally troubled students be profiled? Have college age young people become reluctant to identify and confront aberrant and dangerous behavior?

Hundreds of grieving parents will be gathering in sorrowful funeral services within the coming week. There is no greater pain than having one’s son or daughter precede them in death. The school year was coming to an end. Graduation was not far away, and families were looking forward to the rituals and celebration of the commencement season. Faculty members and underclassmen will not be alive to continue their work of teaching, research, and educational pursuits. The curtain of death has dropped. Aspirations and hopes for the future have been felled by a killer’s bullets. What will be said at the memorial services? Too often the suffering of the bereaved is accompanied by blows struck at the truth about life and death. The Protestant spokesman at the Tuesday convocation on the Virginia Tech campus failed to declare the unique Christian message of Christ’s triumph over death. Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism had their moments for condolences as shaped by their own beliefs. The Christian message was nowhere to be heard. Hopefully, there will be Bible believing pastors who will stand in the gap and say words of healing and hope at this troublous time.

Yet in all of this there remains that nagging question about the safety of our students. School shootings have a way of exposing our society’s deficiency in moral clarity. Listen carefully and you will hear some very unsettling nonsense as various world and life views attempt to grapple with the reality of evil. A criminologist was interviewed on a major cable network and wanted us to believe that the way to understand a mass murderer is in terms of “sickness.” Did the murderer of thirty-two people have a brain tumor? Was there a chemical imbalance? It has become quite fashionable to speak of people who do really bad things as sick. But this kind of language only makes the suffering worse. If someone is merely sick (having a disease) or is so-called mentally ill, then are they responsible for their actions? We can’t quite seem to bring ourselves to admit

that people do wrong things because they choose to, and they choose to because they want to. Something is wrong with the human heart. It was one of the prophets of ancient Israel who said that “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:10). If we say that the doer of evil is sick in the prophet’s sense of the word, then we are on to something. The heart of man is deceitful and incurably ill. It is infected by the disease of sin. We sin because we are sinners, the whole lot of us, not just mass murderers and serial killers. A society that insists on avoiding this fact is deceiving itself as it marches on to its own moral disintegration.

Some moral clarity can be found in what has been called the ugliest story in the Bible. It is found in Judges 19-21. It is a gruesome episode of immorality, rape, and murder. The reason it is recorded is to demonstrate the degree to which Israel, God’s covenant people in the Old Testament, had slipped into moral anarchy. A nation’s descent into moral decay occurs when God’s moral law is set aside and replaced by consensus morality (the opinion of the majority of the people). The Christian worldview says that there is an absolute moral standard by which all moral standards are measured. There is a standard of right and wrong that is determined, not by the tyranny of the 51% but by God’s moral law. How safe are our students? They are not safe to the degree that moral decay continues unabated in our society. But in the story of murder and mayhem in the Book of Judges are two glimmers of light that can help us. Even though Israel had lost much of its moral conscience there was still room for some moral outrage. The tribes of Israel came together to make war against the perpetrators of wickedness. This is not to suggest that Christians should engage in violence in order to correct moral ills. Such a method was acceptable within a theocracy. Our nation is not a theocracy, but God is sovereign over the battle against moral evil and can raise up men and women who will say enough is enough. The weapons “we fight with are not the weapons of the world. They have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4, 5).

We cannot do anything to guarantee that evil will not be visited upon high school and college campuses or any public gathering places. Until the weight of sin is removed from this world there will be more Columbines, Virginia Techs, and New York Trade Towers. This doesn’t mean that we do not work at prevention. But there are underlying conditions in our nation and in our world that will lead to other mass killings, suicide bombers, and wars. When everyone does what is right in his own eyes moral chaos will only expand exponentially. Only if the God of the Bible is our refuge is there any safe place. In that unrivaled psalm of trust, Psalm 91, we are assured that “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” God is the Christian’s shelter. His all-wise, loving hand guards the gate to all the circumstances of our lives. Can awful things happen to a child of God? They can. There are other psalms that help us with the frown of God’s providence. We know this. Nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:28). We are to know that “it’s all right, even when everything is all wrong.” The truly tragic thing is that those whose lives are ended by a crazed killer’s bullet and have not experienced God’s forgiveness through reliance on Jesus’ death and resurrection will never be safe.

The Making of a Mother (May 13, 2007)

Are mothers born or made? In some sense mothers are born. God has created women to bear children with the included necessary psychological and emotional “wiring” to nurture and rear children. This of course does not mean that all women will be mothers or that all mothers will be good mothers. Nature alone is not enough to endow a female who bears children with the qualities needed for effective motherhood. Other things must be in place to ensure godly mothering. No greater privilege is bestowed upon a human being than the opportunity to give birth to an immortal soul and influence that child with biblical truth. More specifically, to be able to teach one’s child about God, impart divine wisdom, and exemplify Christ-exalting living is quintessential mothering.

How then can a mother be made to fulfill such a noble task as godly mothering? *A godly mother must be conceived in the womb of the new birth.* The one who is to conceive life within her must be born of the Spirit of God. This new birth that comes from God is not the result of human effort but is the product of the Holy Spirit. Motherhood without God is possible but is not good. There is too much at stake. The brush with death in giving birth, time and energy given on behalf of others, and mothering a future generation is without eternal value if Christ is shunned.

A godly mother is made by a mother who is godly. The best start in life is one that grows and develops under the watchful loving eyes of a mother who knows God and passes on His truth in the Bible to her children. Were you brought up by a mother who loved Christ and who taught you the Scriptures from infancy? If so, rejoice and aspire to do the same for your children. This kind of intergenerational spiritual linkage bears consequences for thousands of generations (Ex. 20:6). *A godly mother is also made by having a father who knows his heavenly Father.* Fathers, do you have a daughter? Meg Meeker in her book Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters has said that “daughters who spend more time with their fathers are less likely to drink, take drugs, have sex as teenagers or have out-of-wedlock babies.” Yes fathers, your time with your daughter matters greatly both in its quantity and quality. Daughters need dads who live for Christ.

A godly mother is made by being around older women who are devoting their remaining years to the display of inner beauty (1 Pet. 3:4; Tit. 2:3). Older women in the church who embrace life as an opportunity for sacred service to God, who use their tongues for encouragement rather than injuring others, who do not allow chemical dependencies to become a substitute for dependence on God, and who are committed to passing on the truth of God as it has been woven into the years of their experience are a rich treasure for mothers to be and mothers in the making. The work of a mother is not finished when the nest is empty. There are younger women who desperately need older women to whom they can look and see how to live God’s way.

A godly mother is made by knowing older men who are blazing a trail that is worth following (Tit. 2:2). Older men who are clear and discerning in their thinking, worthy of respect, self-controlled, rock-solid in their faith, who know how to love and to live with their hope set on heaven can make an incalculable contribution to the way mothers-to-be think about manhood. A mother in training needs an example of what true masculinity is like for it may be part of her task to rear a son for God.

A godly mother is made by learning early in life the value of displaying the precious jewelry of Christian truth (Tit. 2:4-5). The church working in concert with the family has a great work to

do. Young women have to be taught how to express love to their husbands and children. As has already been pointed out, older women in the congregation must rise to the occasion and offer guidance in how to be committed to the spiritual welfare of one's husband, in showing interest in what he does, and how to be his helper. Infants and small children are cute. But with that established there is a lot of love-work that has to be done. Children are self-centered and if left to themselves will bring heartache to their parents. They have to be taught what love is, how to get along with others, the importance of self-control, respect for authority, knowledge of the Scriptures, and how to make decisions. The mother who wants to be a God-pleaser needs guidance in how to lay out life's priorities, in not being ruled by emotions, and how to develop a theological mind. It is this kind of jewelry that is to adorn the mother after God's own heart.

A godly mother is made by understanding that outer beauty without inner beauty is a monstrosity (Prov. 11:22 "As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion."). The world brings great pressure to bear on young girls. It would have them believe that facial cream, make-up, clothes, a model-like figure, and beauty to die for are what define femininity. Let the man beware who wants a godly mother for his children. The man is caught by looking at the gold ring and failing to see the pig. What is the pig? It is that woman who is morally flawed and relationally defective. The young girl who wants to grow up and have children of her own would do well to live by the truth that beauty is only skin deep. What really matters is having a heart that radiates love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Now that would be a mother that would make any son or daughter proud.

A godly mother is made by being savvy as to the degree of moral corruption that exists in society. To be spiritually ditsy is no laughing matter. The mothers of tomorrow need a Christian world and life view that makes them able to see through the smoke and mirrors of modern thinking. Multi-culturalism, the internet, the theory of evolution, and a host of other concepts and issues require a biblically razor-sharp mind.

A godly mother is made by refusing to be a self-satisfied woman, but instead has an insatiable appetite for God and His Word. In an age where the god narcissism rules (having a love-affair with oneself), a mother who is running hard after God will not preen herself on the latest fashions, hairstyles, or linger long in front of the mirror. She does not neglect her appearance and health, but her primary concern is to know the Scriptures and how they apply to her life.

A godly mother is made as she prays for, respects, and is devoted to her husband. She will not grow weary in the well-doing of submitting to her husband in the Lord and delights in the opportunity to exemplify the way Christ's church submits to Him. By doing this she lives out gospel truth and gives her children an everlasting portrait of God's redemption in Christ.

A godly mother is made by valuing her children as gifts from God. She views them as made in the image of God, but because of sin are in need of God's forgiveness. The early morning finds her in faithful intercession before God for those for whom she is responsible.

A godly mother is made by becoming an authentic worshiper of God. Her children must see her standing alongside other believers in Christ singing the songs that extol God and the wonders of His salvation. A confusing message is sent to sons and daughters when their mother would rather stay at home and watch television than giving herself in ministry and encouragement to others on the Lord's Day. But her worship doesn't begin and end on Sunday. The whole of her life is a

praise response to God's mercy and grace to her. Her worship of God on the first day of the week is matched by her kindness on Tuesday.

Is it your desire young women to be a mother one day? Do you know what it takes to be a godly mother? Now is the time to set out on that journey. It will not be easy, but it will yield heavenly rewards that will echo throughout eternity. This would be a good time for all mothers in the making to renew their heart's desire to exalt Christ. "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (Prov 31:30).

A Father's Love (June 17, 2007)

Is it true that "you can't really appreciate God as Father, if you had a poor relationship with your human father?" It has become a widely accepted concept in our psychologized culture to think that the lack of a father's love determines one's view of God. Make no mistake. It is better, much better, to grow up in a home where one is sure of their father's love for them. It is also a sad reality that many enter adult life without the joy of knowing what it is like to have been nurtured by a strong father's proven love. Where do we turn for a moral compass as fathers who want to know how to love?

We have to begin where everything begins, with God Himself. It has been revealed to us that God the Father's love for God the Son is an eternal love (Jn. 3:35 - "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand."). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived His life on this earth assured of His Father's love. There is a special love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father (Jn. 5:20 - "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing. . ."). D.A. Carson summarizes the wonder of intra-Trinitarian love, "This intra-Trinitarian love of God not only marks off Christian monotheism from all other monotheisms, but is bound up in surprising ways with revelation and redemption." (The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God) These "surprising ways" sound the depth of God's infinite love in Trinitarian Fatherhood and Sonship. The standard for all other love relationships is found in the Father's love for the Son (Rom. 8:32 - "If God did not spare His Son, how shall He not also with Him freely give us all things?").

It has further been revealed that the Son's love for us is a sacrificial love (Jn. 15:9, 12 - "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. . . This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."). Bound up in God the Son's love for us is all that we need to know about love. Consider all the verbs connected with the love of Christ in action (coming, praying, giving, dying, washing, interceding, sending, rebuking). Jesus' love is full of blood, sweat, and tears. This kind of love is to be imitated by us. As fathers we do not need to flounder about trying to figure out what love is like. All we need is eyes to see, ears to hear, tongues to tell, and feet to walk. This is made possible by God's supernatural power within every believer. A Christian father has no excuse for not being fully engaged in the work of love.

But like a cascading river rushing over rocks bringing precious water to a fertile valley, a father's love must have a source. We are able to love because God first loved us and then out of love for Him love sweetens the lives of others. The supremacy, uniqueness, and perfections of God call for our undivided attention. He is to be loved above all else. This is an all-consuming love that thinks, chooses, and sacrifices. It is a commitment to do what brings glory to God. Fathers, our

love for God is to be white hot with the desire to please Him, taking pleasure in Him to the full extent of our lives. As we love Him with all our minds, we will grow in our ability to understand spiritual realities. Our world and life view will be constructed by biblical truth. When God is loved with all of our strength, our energy will be harnessed to discipline our lives for godliness. All of our bodily powers and appetites will be drawn into our pursuit of God. Can you imagine growing up in a home with a father like that, one whose energy is focused on caring for his family, spending time with his sons and daughters, preparing them for life God's way? What a gift that would be.

A father's love for his children is to be supernatural and expressed in hundreds of ways. Fathers, God can make it possible for you to be patient beyond yourself by not giving up when your children disappoint you. You won't reject them or yell at them when they embarrass you in front of others. You will tirelessly answer questions. Fathers with four and five-year-olds have some special opportunities to show their love toward sons and daughters whose imagination is at its height, who are meeting the challenges of learning to get along with others, and who have boundless energy.

A father's love is not arrogant. It doesn't attempt to bully his children into submission by brute force, threats, and the refusal to say I am or "I was wrong, will you forgive me?" Men, we do have a struggle with our pride, don't we? How easily it can get a choke hold on us and keep us from humbling ourselves in repentance and forgiveness. There are too many fathers on ball fields who are trying to achieve self-centered goals and rectify personal frustrations through their children. Base hits, goals, and touchdowns don't make a son or daughter great. Being loving, supportive, and encouraging after strikeouts, dropped fly balls, and failures reveal what is really in the heart of a man.

When a father loves with God's kind of love he will rejoice in the truth. It chooses to delight in those things that please God. Fathers, are you aware of some of the temptations your children face at school? Have you forgotten what it is like to want to pass a math test so badly that you let your eyes look for answers in the wrong places? A loving father will rise early and pray for his children. He will instruct them in the infinite value of truth-telling. True love sets limits and disciplines when sons and daughters are disobedient. This hard work of love is not left up to the mothers. The memory of a father who told the truth and did not make promises that he did not intend to keep is a priceless treasure.

Fathers, where does this kind of love come from? It comes from knowing God through faith in Christ and growing the grace and knowledge of Christ. Is that true of you? It comes from the work of the Holy Spirit who shapes our desires, thinking, and affections by the teachings of the Bible. It comes by the discipline of grace. Decisions are made out of a resolve to please God. It comes by a vibrant, strong covenant-companionship with the wife to whom you have made vows and are committed to with the last drop of your blood. It comes from experiencing the reality that only God can fill a "father-hole" in your life. It means taking responsibility for the "specific lies, false beliefs, desires, expectations, and fears that poison your relationship with God." Are there sins toward your own father that must be confessed to God? Are there sins of your father against you that need to be acknowledged and forgiven (Mk. 11:25)? Ponder the good things your father did for you. Don't let bitterness and anger cloud the good things. Overcome evil with good. Give to your children and your children's children the pleasure of having had a father who loved with God's kind of love.

Men, none of us have loved as we should have loved. But let's commit ourselves to this kind of love for the remainder of our days.

Running with Endurance (June 24, 2007)

Long distance runners know the value of endurance. Whether it's a race of twenty-six miles or six miles durability is required. Actually, endurance has to be combined with stamina and speed in a competitive road race. Endurance gives the runner a strength base on which stamina can be built so that a desired speed (pace) can be maintained. These principles of road race training illustrate basic truths about the Christian life. We will come back to this.

What is the role of endurance in the Christian experience? One popular writer has said, "Must we endure to the end to be saved? Yes." But what does this mean? Do believers in Jesus Christ have to hold on to their salvation through the sheer force of their will by means of good works in order to go to heaven? Does perseverance in the race of the Christian life clinch one's salvation? The basic question before us is this: "Must those who profess Christ as their Savior endure to the end (of their life) in order to be saved?" To answer this question certain words have to be defined. For example, what is meant by the word, "saved"? The Bible speaks of salvation from sin in three tenses. 1) We are saved from the penalty of sin (Rom. 8:1). This is a free gift, and comes because of God's saving grace (i.e., we do not earn it). It comes by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone (Jn. 3:16). 2) We are being saved from the power of sin (Jn. 10:10; Gal. 5:16). This is a process of growth/maturity in Christ which is a lifetime in nature. 3) We will be saved from the presence of sin (Rom. 13:11). At that time there will be reward for perseverance in the faith (Rom. 2:6-7; Gal. 6:8). According to the Christian's faithful obedience there will be rewards.

Does endurance bring us our justification? Absolutely not. If so, then our acceptance by God is based on our works. Justification becomes an ongoing process. This is not biblical (Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 3:24). Does endurance bring about our glorification (salvation from the presence of sin)? Absolutely not. We do not earn our entrance into the presence of God, nor do we have to wait until the end of our life to know if we are saved (Jude 24, 25). The gospel of the free grace of Jesus Christ must not be front-end loaded with works or back-end loaded with works. A final question remains. Does endurance bring about our salvation from the power of sin (we are being saved)? It most certainly does. We are to be faithful before God by walking in obedience to His Word. To the degree we live faithfully and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are delivered from the power of sin (i.e., its tyrannical rule in our life. Our ability to bring glory to God throughout eternity is related to endurance. This brings us back to the picture of the Christian life as a race. We are to run the race by laying aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us (Heb.12:1). As we obey God's Word and do those things that please Him, we accumulate the gold, silver, and precious stones of works that are valuable and enduring. Some Christians run a better race than others, but every Christian finishes the race. There are no "DNFs" (did not finish) for true Christians. How well are you running?

So, in summary, it can be said that no Christian will ever stand before God because they have endured or persevered. Our acceptance before God is because of who God is and what He has done for us in Christ (Rom. 8:1-4). When we are declared righteous before God (2 Cor. 5:21) we

are secure in Christ forever (Phil. 1:6; Tn. 10:27-30; Rom. 8:35-39). We are "protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5).

It would be convenient if all evangelical Christians believed the same way about the role of endurance/perseverance in the believer's salvation. But that's not the case. Some, for example, believe that it is possible for a Christian to fail to endure and thereby lose their salvation. How would this happen? Different answers are given, but most who believe in conditional security ("a believer can lose his salvation if he doesn't persevere in holiness") say that Christians may lose their salvation when a willful sin is committed or they willfully deny Christ. There are many problems with this view. In short, it is contradicted by the explicit teaching of the Scriptures that the security of the believer rests in God's hand and not the durability of the Christian (Jn. 10:27-30).

Those who believe in the eternal security of the Christian have different views of what persevering in the faith means. Some say that continual obedience is necessary for salvation in the sense that all true believers will endure in this obedience. Others say, however, that true Christians can backslide and do Christ-denying things with the result of loss of blessing and rewards. The difference between these two persuasions is the degree to which a believer can sin. These issues will be left for future analysis.

But let's come back to the Christian life as a to distance race. The race is entered by faith in Jesus Christ. It is to be run by faithful obedience to Christ. Endurance makes increasingly effective service possible (stamina). The better the race we run the more Christ is exalted. We must put aside anything that hinders our progress in the race. It could be a habit, a relationship, a secret pleasure, a house, a sport, entertainment, and almost anything which is an ever-present threat to progress in the Christian life. Pride, envy, covetousness, and a host of other entangling sins can trip us up and make us fall. Christian, how are you running your race?

Meals on Wheels (July 8, 2007)

The drive-through window at your favorite eatery can be a useful convenience. If you are eating the right kind of food (believe it or not some healthful meals can be created in the fast-food world) and are pushed for time, the "may-I-take-your-order" system can work for your advantage. The same is true when it comes to truth. There are various ways you can make of a meal of God's Word. You can study the Bible in your own private world. This should be happening in the life of every Christian. Small group Bible studies offer the opportunity to hear God's Word taught, ask questions, and encourage fellow believers. Special things happen in worship services of the local church. Corporate worship offers the church family a united experience in hearing and doing the eternal Word of truth. Believers can enjoy the opportunity to think about and act upon a particular passage of Scripture and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ together.

But what if you have to miss the Sunday morning or Sunday evening service? May I suggest that you access the convenience of listening to the sermon on the internet, a CD or a tape. This will keep you up on what is happening in the congregational life of the church and nourish your own soul. Keep a supply of sermons on CD or tape in your automobile. Work out a system so that you can at least hear some exposition of the Bible during the week. This is an excellent way to

redeem the time. Personally, I have listened to thousands of hours of Bible teaching in my truck when running errands, visiting someone in the hospital, and driving to my daughter's house near Chattanooga. Beth and I have enriched our lives by attending Bible conferences while driving on the interstate to visit family and friends.

Last Sunday morning Justin preached on Matthew 5:27-30. It was an excellent treatment of a vital passage for dealing with lust and temptation. If you missed the message, get a tape or CD Listen to it and pass it on to someone else. Being there would have been good, but don't let an absence go without some compensating action. Last Sunday evening the sermon was "Overcoming Depression." Do you know how to think through in a biblical way the dark side of human experience? Some Christians have a better knowledge of the world's interpretation of depression than what God has said. This should not be.

Our church, of course, is not the only source of Bible teaching. There are other excellent places where Bible truth is taught. When you find one of these, pass that information on to your friends. A network for recommended truth-meals is one way we blind beggars who have experienced God's eye-opening grace can tell other blind beggars where food is to be found. In this way some of our car-time can be turned into meals on wheels.

Adam's Animals (July 29, 2007)

One of my favorite programs once upon a time was a TV show called "Zoo Parade." It featured a wildlife expert named Marlin Perkins. I enjoyed the antics of the various animals as they were brought into TV studio. Lining up animals and talking about their peculiar characteristics was fascinating and still is. A trip to the zoo with the grandchildren is an opportunity to marvel at the variety of animal life God has created. Can you imagine what it must have been like when God brought before Adam several hundreds of animals to name? It has been said that it would have been possible for Adam to name about 3,000 of the basic kinds of birds, domesticable animals, and smaller wild animals in about five hours. Naming the animals was the occasion for the first man to demonstrate his rule over creation.

We are told in the Bible that "the earth brought forth living creatures according to their kinds – livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." Through an economy of words there is given a summary of the creation of domesticable animals (e.g., cows, dogs, cats), large non-domesticable animals (e.g., dinosaurs), and small animals that crawl or creep close to the ground (e.g., chipmunks, turtles). They were made out of the same material as man, the basic elements of the earth. Evolutionists would have us believe that the existence of similar broken genes in the genomes of humans and chimps proves their common descent. But why not understand similarities between humans and animals as traceable to their Creator?

Animals were made for man, not man for animals. Did Adam and Eve have any pets? We can only imagine. One thing we do know is that one of the animals, a serpent, appeared to Eve. Satan used it as an instrument of deceit. Whatever form the serpent had in the garden, Eve was not frightened. She carried on a conversation with the voice of the evil one with relatively deadly ease. The rest is history. One of God's fallen celestial creatures used another creature, an animal, to bring our first parents and all other human beings into the domain of spiritual darkness.

As we read on in the story of redemption the world becomes increasingly corrupted by sin. It gets to the point that God was sorry he made man, animals, creeping things, and birds of the sky (Gen. 6:7). How did animals share in God's curse on living creatures? Did the development of carnivorous appetites make them increasingly hostile to man? What we know is that animals, creeping things, and birds were doomed to die in the deluge. However, enough of them found a home on Noah's ark so that the new world could be populated again with "birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 8:17). It is also stated that after the flood of Noah's day God gave human beings permission to eat animal flesh (Gen. 9:3). Never has God rescinded this dietary permission. Though restricted in various ways for the nation of Israel by the Mosaic Law, meat is an accepted menu item. But even the Mosaic dietary laws were lifted under the New Covenant (Acts 10:15; 1 Tim. 4:3, 4). Those who choose to be vegetarians have the freedom to do so, but there is no spiritual advantage to a meatless diet. Certainly, no Christian has the right to judge other Christians because of what they eat or do not eat (Col. 2:16). The protocol for our nutritional needs is determined by common sense eating and attention to God-honoring care of the physical body.

Because of the curse of sin animals die just as human beings do. Human life is sacred. Animal life is not. God provided garments of animal skin to clothe Adam and Eve in their new sin-conscious world (Gen. 3:21). It was upon two animals that physical death was first visited. It took the death of an innocent victim, the animal, to cover a sinful Adam and Eve so they could have fellowship with God. Animal sacrifice became necessary for man to worship God. We can follow a trail of animal blood from the first family to Noah, to Abraham, and throughout Israel's history. The shedding of innocent blood was necessary as a condition of forgiveness for man, the sinner. Israel's sacrificial system was a major pedagogical preparation for the Messiah who came to shed His blood so that sinners might obtain eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). Reader, do you know God's forgiveness in Christ? The death of an animal is not a pleasant thing, but even more grievous was the piercing through and crushing of Jesus Christ so that we could be accepted by God (Isa. 53:5; Heb. 9:14). Now is the time for you, dear friend, if you have not already, to call out to God for His forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

The fact that animals have played a vital role in redemptive history does not mean that they can be treated with cruelty. Wisdom tells us that "a righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the compassion of the wicked is cruel" (Prov. 12:10). Henry Morris has aptly summarized the truth that is stated here, "When God placed animals under man's dominion (Genesis 1:26-28), this was a stewardship, not a license for cruelty. God has a purpose for every creature, and even though man can use animals for food, clothing, etc., they should be respected as creatures of God. However, animals should not be regarded as human ancestors or as gods to worship (Numbers 11:21-34; Job 39)." Well said. Animals that are placed in our care should be treated properly. Feed them. Take good care of them. Enjoy them. We have every right to establish laws that punish people for being cruel to animals. At the same time, one has to wonder so many moderns can be incensed over pain inflicted on animals and have no regard for aborted babies.

The role of animals in man's fall, redemption, and restoration will be completed in the millennial kingdom when Eden-like conditions will exist in the animal world. Isaiah casts an eye on that day when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, and the lion will eat straw like the ox (Isa. 11:6-8). If words mean anything, this is a picture of the harmony that creation will experience when the Messiah comes to establish His kingdom on earth. Lion petting and people friendly wolves and leopards excite the imagination. Will the bluebird light

on our shoulder and the rabbit hop toward us for a scratch under the neck? We can only imagine. Best of all will be the presence of Jesus Christ. We will see Him whom so many have loved and served though having not seen Him. Come Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

The Mind in the Mirror (August 19, 2007)

Do you know who you are? No, this is not a question about whether you have dementia or not. This question is how aware are you of the kind of person you are? Do you talk too much? Do you talk too little? Are you too critical at times? Are you cheerful or gloomy in disposition? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable around people? Are you self-disciplined? Do you appear to be a know-it-all to others? Is it difficult to hurt your feelings? Have you admired yourself in the mirror more than a few times? Do you avoid making decisions? Are you disorganized? Do you tend to procrastinate? Have you been wrong and wouldn't admit it? There are many other questions that could be useful. The purpose of this push toward self-analysis is not to fan the flames of self-centered introspection. We need to ask hard questions of ourselves as a part of a biblical self-judgment. The apostle Paul said, "if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged" (1 Cor.11:31). The context of this statement is prevention of divine discipline, and the point of the passage is the necessity of distinguishing between what we are and what we ought to be. So here we are back to the basic question. Do you know what you are? What do you see when you look at your mind in the mirror? Are you thinking right about life, relationships, responsibilities, yourself?

In order to experience a transformation of life into the image of Christ, we must see ourselves in the mirror of reality. When we were conceived, a fashioning process began while in the womb (Psa. 139:15). Our physical, emotional, and mental traits were shaped by God's sovereign hand through the instrumentation of family genetics. When we were born and began to develop our environment played a role in shaping us. This interplay between nature (genetics) and nurture (upbringing) has long been debated. But the fact remains that because of our inherited sinful nature we will choose certain self-centered paths. Some sins will appeal to us more than others. At the same time, we observe those who have found ways of disobeying God's law and we emulate them. Sin dwells in us all and we become skilled at practicing it. This can happen because we think of ourselves more than God or other people. Sin-darkened understanding guides our steps in a life of unbelief. We develop a self-concept (what I think about myself) that needs supernatural transformation.

When a person becomes a new creature in Christ there are immediate and significant changes that take place. The tyranny of our old sinful nature is broken. It doesn't have the same ruling power that it did before we were born again. But sin still indwells the believer (Rom. 7:17). It is indeed an unwanted guest, but a guest, nevertheless. We have an inclination to want our own way and to practice the very evil that we do not wish to practice (Rom. 7:19). We have formed sinful habits. Our minds will still want to take us off in directions away from God's law. All this means that we have grace-work to do. We can't change without God's help. That is grace. Sin and self-centered living have to be fought. That is hard work. One of the first orders of business in the Christian life is to establish, develop, and maintain a biblically balanced self-concept. A wise teacher helped me with this many years ago. Allow me to restate some of what he taught me.

The first truth is that I must see myself as a significant person. We were created in the image of God (Gen. 1-2; Psa. 8). There is importance to my life. This is not pride. Pride is that outlook that seeks to dispose of God and create self-importance by my own standards. What do other people do, or not do, that makes me feel unimportant? What do other people do that makes me feel important? There is biblical work to be done to develop and maintain a biblical balance with regard to my being important in God's sight.

The second truth is my individuality. I am a unique person (Isa. 45:9-10; Psa. 139:13-16; 1 Cor. 7:7). God has sovereignly endowed me with a certain personality and a set of natural gifts. What I look like, what I can do and not do have all been determined by God. We should thank God for our abilities and accept our limitations. Sadly, some live their entire lives ticked at God because they are not taller, shorter, smarter, prettier, more handsome, more athletic, or just about anything one is not, and others are. This is not the way to live. Have you been able to identify some of your sovereignly endowed areas of strength (gifts and talents)? Are you aware of some of your obvious, sovereignly endowed areas of limitation (non-strengths)?

The third truth is my sinfulness. I am a sinful person. I sin and have sinned (Rom. 3:23; 1 Jn. 1:1-10). Even as Christians we are not perfect. We choose to do the wrong things. We have weaknesses, make mistakes, and fail to do the right thing. Sin has touched every facet of our being, our thoughts, our deeds, attitudes and actions. Have you accepted this fact? As believers in Jesus Christ, we are no longer under the penalty of sin. We do not have to live under its power and one day we will be free from its very presence. Do you tend to be a perfectionist (e.g., "I can't be happy until the house is absolutely clean")? How does this square with the fact that we can't do everything exactly right? What are some of the side effects that occur as a result of my perfectionism?

The fourth truth is my immaturity. I am a person who can and needs to grow in Christ (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18). Every believer ought to be experiencing change in his life. My wise teacher said, "It is not always wrong to be immature, but it is always wrong to remain immature." This reminds us that it is possible to be mature in some areas and immature in other areas of our lives. Can you identify areas in your life where you have made progress? Are you more patient than you used to be? Are you more discerning, more self-disciplined, more caring? Remember, the growth process involves time, plus truth, plus obedience (Heb. 5:14). In what areas of life and ministry do you tend to be immature? Are you willing to ask this of someone who knows you well? Husbands, ask your wife if you love her as Christ loved the church. Wives, ask your husband if you are showing respect for him.

The fifth truth is my independence. I am a person who needs to function on my own (Gal. 6:4; Matt. 7:5; 2 Cor. 13:5). We cannot expect other people to make decisions for us. God holds us responsible for making biblically informed, wise decisions, so that we can stand on our own two feet spiritually. Am I expecting others to do for me what I should be doing for myself? Am I guilty of doing things that can make other people dependent on me? Why do I do this? Do I have a tendency to be indecisive and procrastinating? What am I doing about this? Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry preparing and equipping His disciples to be able to function without His physical presence. How am I practicing this in the lives of those for whom I have responsibility?

The sixth truth is interdependence. I am a person who needs others (1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16; Heb. 10:24-25). God has spiritually gifted us so that we can contribute to the spiritual growth of others. Do you acknowledge the necessity of full participation in the life of your church? Can you identify an area of expertise (gift or talent) which someone else in your family or church possesses which you do not and seek to encourage them? Have you been a team player throughout your life, or have you tended to be a loner? In what areas are you dependent on others? In what areas are others dependent on you? It is God's desire that we function together harmoniously in our homes and churches.

These sixth truths, when practiced, will enable us to see ourselves in the mirror of biblical realism. I am thankful for my teacher, Dr. Grant Howard who is now in heaven, for his wise words. It would be beneficial if you answered the questions in each area. Self-awareness, when it is stimulated and informed by biblical truth, is vital to a Christ-exalting walk of faith. A mind that is being renewed by God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit is a mind that knows how to think about oneself.

The Gospel in a Flat World (August 2, 2007)

On Monday, May 18, 1998, Kevin, Molly, Lucy, Amanda, and Noah Heinz bid farewell to their church family and set out on a journey to Kazakhstan. This had been preceded by a special commissioning service on Sunday, May 17. The text for the message that morning was Romans 10:14 ("How Shall They Hear?"). Kevin and Molly Heinz wanted to take the gospel to a place where few, if any, churches were found. Kazakhstan, with its decades as a part of the Soviet Union and its Muslim population, offered a challenging opportunity to bear witness to the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things. It was not easy making the adjustments from suburban life in American to the harsh realities of a new culture and a new language (actually two languages, Kazakh and Russian). In September of 2000 Beth and I visited the Heinzes in their adopted city of Almaty. They were in the early stages of planting a church and encouraged us with their zeal to reach the Kazakh people.

Seven years later on August 22, 2007, Beth and I again crossed through ten time zones and returned to Almaty, Kazakhstan. Kevin and Molly were there to meet us at the new airport. But this was only the beginning. We saw new automobiles, new construction, and newly paved roads everywhere. There is a wave of prosperity sweeping over this central Asian metropolis. But best of all there is a new church in the city. It is the Kalkaman Bible Church. On Sunday morning the little flock met in a newly renovated house a few miles from where the Heinzes live. The service started shortly after 11:00 a.m. with Byeram, a man whom Kevin has been discipling, playing skillfully on the dumbra (a stringed instrument) and leading worship in song. Lifting their voices in praise to God was Keray, age 72, holding his little blue hymn book close to his aging eyes joined by Kuderbye, the converted alcoholic, Goolmeira, Byeram's wife, and others. There were testimonies and prayer followed by a message from Kevin from Exodus 20 explaining the purpose of the Mosaic Law in the redemptive plan of God. Molly helped Beth and me to understand what Kevin was saying because he was teaching in Kazakh. Only seven years ago Kevin and Molly were trying to function in the marketplace with incomplete sentences and halting Kazakh. One was teaching and the other was translating a language, which only nine years ago was an unknown tongue to them.

Traveling to other countries, experiencing different cultures, and hearing languages which we cannot understand is an adventure. But the real joy of it all is spending time with God's servants who have taken up their cross and followed Christ. This has led them to people who have not heard about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how, through simple faith in Him, they may have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We call those who go cross-culturally to do this, missionaries. Some quibble over the use of this term and argue that all Christians are missionaries, or at least are supposed to be. In a sense that is true. All of Christ's people are sent to tell the good news. But the word missionary has a time-honored use in describing those who have gone beyond the boundaries of their country to places and people around the globe. Some go and others send, but every believer in Jesus Christ is to be meaningfully involved in world missions. Thomas L. Friedman in his best-selling book, The World is Flat, describes how ten forces have "flattened the world." By flattening he means a new kind of globalization that has taken place in the last ten years, namely, one in which "people can plug, compete, connect, and collaborate with more equal power than ever before... flattening forces are empowering more and more individuals today to reach farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before, and that is equalizing power – and equalizing opportunity, by giving so many more people the tools and ability to connect, compete, and collaborate."

The church of Jesus Christ has opportunities that were unimagined fifty years ago. Airline travel makes it possible to fly to a country like Kazakhstan, over eleven thousand miles away, in a relatively short time. It may not feel this way when you traverse multiple time-zones. Within twenty-five hours Beth and I were able to leave Atlanta and arrive in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Compare that to traveling by boat and train. Add to this the internet phenomena. Digitalized communication has changed everything. The Heinzes' constantly updated Web site and e-mail accessibility have given them a virtual presence to us their sending church. Think of the days when missionaries "disappeared" for four years at a time, or even longer ago when they packed their earthly goods in coffins and never came back home. A new day has dawned. Now church members can visit their missionaries on the field and come back with a better understanding of how missions works and all within a matter of days, not weeks or months. Do you think this could make a difference in the degree to which a local church enters into world evangelization? I think so. This is not to say that technology can do things for us which only God can do. The early church didn't have jets and computers, but it did admirably well in turning the Roman Empire upside down for Christ's sake.

Berachah Bible Church has much to be thankful for. God, by his infinite grace and mercy, has moved a family out from our church and placed them half a world away as ambassadors of reconciliation. We can rejoice that the Heinz family is joyfully establishing relationships, building communication bridges, and sowing the seeds of the gospel for Christ's glory. We stand alongside Kevin and Molly Heinz in seeking to answer the four questions raised in Romans 10:14-15; "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" Because Jesus Christ is the culminating act of God in redemptive history, faith must be placed in Him if one is to be delivered from the wrath of God. There is no other way for sinners to get into God's heaven other than through the saving faith in Jesus Christ. Since calling on the name of Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, God has put in place the means by which the gospel may be heard and believed. Through His infinite wisdom God has made us as Christians instruments in His hands. There must be someone to proclaim the hope that is in Christ. God is not going to write the

message of the cross in the sky. It takes a messenger who is sent. We in the church of Jesus Christ are both of these, messengers and senders.

God has flattened the world, as it were, by creating modes of transportation and communication that connect us to the nations on this planet in extraordinary ways. My prayer is that we will have the discernment and zeal to make the best of our opportunities in this lost world before we stand in the presence of Jesus Christ to be judged according to our faithfulness.

A Reminiscence (September 9, 2007)

We receive a magazine entitled “Reminisce.” A friend has given us a subscription to “the magazine that brings back the good times.” It is filled with pictures of days gone by. For example, you might find an article on the year 1921 revisited or a time capsule as it is called. Some of us find visiting the past quite interesting. The Eskimo Pie and the perfume Chanel No. 5 were new in 1921, just in case you were interested. Yes, this is trivia, but one may like to know what it was like when one’s grandparents and parents were alive. But a remembering of the past doesn’t have to be just about nostalgia, do-you-remember-when, and the so-called good old days. Remembering can be a useful exercise of mind in pondering the really important things in life. If you were to look up the word “remember” in a Bible concordance, you would notice this word is used thirty-two times in the Book of Psalms. God wanted Israel to actualize His hand in their life as a nation. Worshipers of God need to be confronted with God and His acts and respond in faith. Remembering can be valuable to the extent that it opens up our minds to God’s mercies, faithfulness, grace, sovereignty over all of life, and the marvels of His redemption in Christ.

The occasion of dedicating a new building to the service of God is an appropriate time to do some reminiscing. This is not a tightly bound history of Berachah Bible Church, but rather thinking about some of the past experiences in its thirty-seven years of existence. The thought of starting a church came to mind in the summer of 1970. At the conclusion of a Sunday morning worship service, I was sitting next to one of my students from Carver Bible College. He had been attending church with me which had raised some eyebrows in an all-white congregation. But this particular Sunday was different. At the end of the service my African-American friend went forward during the public invitation to present himself as a candidate for membership. This might not seem like a major event in the post-segregated South, but in 1970 it prompted a social, moral, and spiritual earthquake. Space does not permit the full story. However, after deliberation by the board of deacons a called conference of the church revealed a startling announcement. Tony Evans, the student, would not be accepted into the membership of the church. It was decided that he would be better served if he worshiped with fellow African-Americans. Such a conclusion seems so preposterous that it is embarrassing to repeat it. But that is what happened.

Our family could not remain in a church that was willing to compromise biblical truth and insult fellow members of the body of Christ. Beth and I withdrew our membership and contemplated what to do next. Out of this crisis came the thought of starting a church where God’s Word would be preached, and no one would be excluded based on skin color. That seems like a very simple and unquestionable standard for a new church. But there were few churches that were committed to rigorous Bible exposition and racial inclusion. So the journey began. Bible studies were held in the home of Lew and Deanne Rabbitt in Red Oak. From there the developing church rented a school, and then leased an office building in East Point. It was in 1978 that

thirteen acres were purchased in northeast Fayette County. It took another four years to start the first building. We did not want to incur any debt, so some years of patience were necessary. A new addition to our original building was completed in 1994. Six more acres were purchased, and plans were begun for construction of a new fellowship hall and classrooms (the building that we dedicate today). It is with thanks to God that all this has been completed and paid for by His grace and the faithful giving of His people. The fact that debt has been avoided is not in praise of our church family, but it is a testimony to the way God has enabled us to give “not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God’s loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Grace giving is not a celebration of the giver but of God who provides. It has been the desire of our church to exemplify how Christians should handle their finances. Saving money, exercising patience, giving generously to the work of the gospel, and living within our means have been exercised through two land purchases and three building programs. Our personal finances and our church finances are to be governed by a passion to live in such a way as to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

Laying up treasures in heaven means a lavish support of world missions. On Saturday, November 5, 1983, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin conducted a Great Commission Workshop for our congregation. During this time, we evaluated our church’s involvement in world missions. We all agreed. There was a lot of work to be done. We were encouraged by Dr. McQuilkin’s messages on the Sunday following the workshop. We were challenged to prayer for missions and taken to Matthew 9:13 to be reminded of God’s compassion for sinners. These themes moved us to enlarge our commitment to reaching the ends of the earth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. By God’s grace, since the founding years of our church, hundreds of thousands of dollars have flowed into the support of missionaries and special projects. Families and individuals, such as the Sherwoods, Dawn (Scherer) Cagasan, the Jarnigans, and the Heinzes, have gone to the Philippines, Haiti, and Kazakhstan. The church has sent the pastor and usually his wife to seven different countries. Short term missions teams have ministered in Trinidad, Costa Rica, Kazakhstan, and Bosnia. At the present time two young couples in our church are setting their sights on missionary work in Africa and Eastern Europe. For all this we are supremely thankful to God for working in hearts and lives and setting before our eyes a world in desperate need of the hope of the gospel.

In order to carry out the work of the ministry these many years, God has generously supplied pastoral staff assistance. Paul Curtas gave invaluable help for nine years before he was asked to become the Director of the Fellowship of Christian Airline Personnel. Many in the church family were able to celebrate Paul’s marriage to Claudette, the answer to his prayers regarding a helpmate, by traveling to Switzerland in October 1995. Two of our young men, gifts from Nelson and Jody Wallace, Rob and Seth, gave us valued service in working with the youth and in pastoral assistance. In 2000 Bryan Ryan became our Minister of Youth and served us well through his commitment to the Scriptures and his love for God. In 2001 Justin Culbertson, newly graduated from the Master’s Seminary, joined the church staff as an associate pastor. He not only brought himself but gave us Brook, his wife, who fears the Lord and loves His Word. Justin and Brook are an answer to this pastor’s prayers. Beth and I and Betty Clark are the only charter members remaining at Berachah. A new generation is taking on the responsibilities that go with proclaiming the excellencies of Christ. That is as it should be. Praise God for faithful believers who carry on the work of God’s kingdom.

In the next few days a new chapter opens up for Berachah Bible Church. Wade and Natalie Grubbs will be taking their place among us as Wade serves on the pastoral staff. He will help with the youth, music, Sunday School, and other works of the ministry. Beloved, there is much work to be done. My continuing prayer for Berachah is that we will be a Bible-loving, Christ-centered, missionary-sending, gospel-proclaiming, mercy-giving, Spirit-energized, God-exalting, worshiping community of rock-solid believers. Reminiscing counts for something. It can be a way of reviving our zeal for God. Come. Let us go on to maturity and new frontiers with God.

Get on Board (September 16, 2007)

A river boat cruise which follows a route of historical significance can be a most enjoyable learning experience. If, for example, you were to take the 7-night St. Louis to Nashville cruise, you would be promised to walk in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, listen to the tale of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, get a glimpse of pioneer living, and visit the Country Music Hall of Fame. It will probably not change your life, but it can all be very entertaining. I would like to propose another kind of cruise. This one takes you down the flow of the river of thought which has been given by the Holy Spirit which can change your life. But a certain river has to be chosen. I recommend the book of Romans river cruise. You can watch Bible truth unfold with each passing mile. Or, rather, should I say each passing biblical paragraph.

We are going to embark on a study of the book of Romans. There is a cruise down the river of Amos for the ladies. The shipboard experience through the Gospel of Matthew has already begun. It is not too late to get on board. You can catch it at Matthew 6:1-4 this Sunday evening. However, there is some preparation necessary if you are going to get the greatest possible benefit from a study of a book of the Bible. Take a few minutes and familiarize yourself with the following recommendations lest you waste the opportunity of a lifetime.

Going through a book of the Bible is not the only way to study the Scriptures but there is not a better way. Why is this so? The Bible tells us that it is a God-written book and most profitable for knowing how to live life God's way (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). The Holy Spirit of God guided the writers of Scripture to say exactly what God wanted said (2 Pet. 1:21). When you read through any part of the Bible you are reading the words of God. In an exposition of Romans, Amos, Matthew, or 1 Corinthians, a detailed explanation of the text is given along with application of that truth to daily living. Going from verse to verse and paragraph to paragraph you are following the thought of the Spirit of God. There is no substitute for a consistent and disciplined way of handling Holy Writ. The mind of the Holy Spirit will confront and shape your thoughts. All this is vital to maturing in the Christian faith.

What then should be done while flowing down a river of biblical truth? Read the book you are studying and memorize portions of it. Read Romans straight through at one sitting. Read it multiple times. Drench your mind in its thoughts. Memorize Romans 1:16, 17; 3:21-31; 5:1-6; 8:1-6; 35-39; 12:9-21 and any other portions you choose.

In advance of each message read the text to be covered and pray over it ("Lord open my eyes to see wonderful things from your law."). Take the outline and your notes on the message and pray through them the week following the message. Be consistent in hearing all sermons on Romans. If you have to miss a Sunday, listen to the sermon on the internet or get a CD from the tape

room. Don't let gaps in the flow of the book go unattended. After each message on Sunday discuss the passage preached during the ride home or during the dinner meal. Find some way of interacting with the truth that has been taught. Take notes during the message. This will help you to concentrate better and give you something to refer to when memory begins to fade (I don't mean fading later in life. I mean the week after the message.). And, most importantly, don't let the teaching of God's Word go in one ear and out the other. Pray that your life will be transformed by truth. Write down ways in which you can take action, such as repenting of sin, changing wrong thinking, ways to communicate the gospel in your neighborhood, teaching the book to your family or some other small group, etc. But don't not do anything (pardon the grammar).

The Bible is a double-edged sword and as such is active (powerful, Heb. 4:12). It is effective in fulfilling its purpose and has unlimited capability (e.g., It regenerates, opens eyes, changes lives, changes nations, brings revival). It is also discriminating ("sharper"). In this way it is penetrating in its operation as it probes and exposes. Scripture lays bare our motives and uncovers our self-deceiving tendencies. Come and hear what God has said in the book of Romans and submit to the convicting power of its message. Pray that the Holy Spirit will lift up the Lord Jesus Christ in all His majesty and glory. Revel in the glorious gospel of God. Get on board and let the river of God's thought take you to the "life-transforming doctrines of Christianity."

A Few Thoughts on Praising God (September 23, 2007)

Christians are a unique people, especially when it comes to our singing. We gather in groups and worship God by singing praises to Him. I was recently reminded of this by Dr. James Boice when he said, "There is singing in other religions, of course; but it is usually mere chanting, which is itself a religious exercise designed to make the worshiper more 'holy' or bring him closer to the deity. Christians do not sing as a good work or as a spiritual discipline. We do not sing to find God. We sing because he has found us, and we are happy about it." How true. For those who have been born again by the Spirit of God the gospel has proven to be the best news imaginable. Do you think that way? Or has time tended to dampen your enthusiasm for what God has done in your life? Let's take this a step further. It is because of who God is that we have reason to praise Him. The gospel is God. It is from God, through God, and by God that we have been snatched, as it were, from the fire of God's judgment.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the drumbeat of the book of Romans. This gospel is the only hope for this world. It is a call to offer praise to God publicly and privately for all that God is and what He has done us. We can do this in our corporate worship on Sundays. But we can also do this in our private, alone times. To help us in this direction I would like to offer some praise points. Use these praise-reminders sometime during the coming week and devote yourself to nothing but praise to God. These praise points are taken from Psalm 107 which appeals to God's people to "give thanks to the Lord for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting." The whole psalm pivots around this one theme of praising God for the deliverance (s) that comes from His loving and wise sovereignty over all things. The commentator, Derek Kidner, has entitled Psalm 107, "God to the Rescue." The historical setting is Israel's deliverance from the Babylonian exile. But the theology of God's deliverance is bigger than Israel's experience. It is that and more. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, saw Messianic implications in the psalmist's words (Lk. 1:79).

The psalmist uses four illustrations to highlight the wonders of God's rescue. Our own spiritual condition apart from Jesus Christ is etched in these vivid pictures of personal peril. In the first place, *give the Lord praise for rescuing those who are lost in the wilderness* (vv. 1-4). Before God brought us home to Him, we were lost, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted sinners. We were wandering about in the wilderness of sin apart from God. *Give the Lord praise for releasing those who are imprisoned* (vv. 10-16). The picture here is of those who are in jail. But chains, bands, and bars are no match for an omnipotent God. Before we came to Christ we were behind the bars of our own unbelieving hearts. Rejoice in your newfound freedom to serve the Lord who brought you out of darkness and misery (Lk. 4:18). *Give the Lord praise for restoring the sick to health* (vv. 17-22). The imagery now moves to those who are afflicted by the disease of their iniquities. Have you thought that way about your sin? It is like a wasting disease. It is death itself. Without God's restoring work of grace, you and I would suffer forever from the self-inflicted wounds of sin. Only God's grace can heal our wounds of guilt. Are you thankful? If you are not, then something is terribly wrong. You may not be God's child. Then, dear reader, call out to the Great Physician who alone can save you. If you are a believer, break the silence and praise God.

Give the Lord praise for rescuing those who are battered by the storms of life (vv. 23-32). This final peril is one of being caught in a powerful storm which threatens to drown you in the tempestuous waves. One can almost feel the howling winds and see the towering waves. But then there is God. He guides those who are being buffeted by wind and water "to their desired haven." Can you not hear the calmness as the storm has been stilled? What is the psalmist telling us? It is God alone who is big enough to deliver us from the clutches of sin's penalty and power. How could we, then, live a life devoid of praise to God?

In a summary chorus the psalmist describes God's providential hand over all of human history. *We are to praise Him because He is sovereign over good and evil, pain and pleasure* (vv. 33-42). Boice says, "God sends sorrow as well as joy, hardship as well as material blessing – yet is not arbitrary." No matter what kind of day you are having, it is the occasion for rejoicing in the Lord. Delight in the duty of gratitude. Revel in the perfections and infinite wisdom of God, not to get something from Him, but to savor His goodness.

My Grandchildren and Alcoholic Beverages (October 7, 2007)

I have vivid memories of driving away from the University of Georgia campus in Athens one fall day when my daughter was a student there many years ago. Her mother and I had explicit trust in our daughter that she would make the right choices, but the alcohol culture that surrounded her at that time was not a pretty sight. Alcoholic beverages were everywhere. They appeared to be some kind of status symbol. Every parent, especially Christian parents, has to wonder how their son or daughter will handle the social pressure to drink alcohol. According to the Behavior Risk Surveillance System in 2002, 55 percent of U.S. adults were current drinkers. Forty-five percent of U.S. adults do not drink any alcohol at all. I have six grandchildren and one of the concerns I have for them is what they will decide regarding alcohol. Each of them will have to make a decision just as I had to, as did our two children. What kind of counsel will I give them?

First of all, this is what I will not tell them. I will not tell them that the Bible absolutely prohibits the drinking of alcohol. They expect me to be honest. There is no single verse which absolutely forbids the consumption of a glass of wine. I cannot tell them that the Bible says the drinking of fermented grape juice is a sin in and of itself. It would make my instruction on the subject a whole lot easier if I could point to a place in the Bible where God said not to drink an alcoholic beverage. Furthermore, I will not tell them that wine in the Bible is just grape juice. Each term used for wine and strong drink in the Bible describes a beverage that was capable of intoxication (four different Hebrew words and two Greek words). I will not tell them that Jesus turned water into grape juice. At the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee Jesus miraculously made wine that tasted so good to the guests that they said it was better than the wine they had just drunk. It was called “good wine” (kalon oionon). The same term is used elsewhere in the New Testament for fermented wine.

I will not tell my grandchildren that New Testament communion wine was unfermented (Matt. 26:29). The language and the season of the year at Passover would indicate that it was fermented wine (no fresh grape juice was available at that time of the year). It should also be noted that some in the Corinthian church were drunk at the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:12). Drunkenness, combined with other sinful behaviors, was such an abuse of the communion service that God took the lives of some of the saints at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:30). However, it is not necessary for a church to use wine today in its communion service. The emphasis is not on the symbol but upon what it symbolizes, namely, the atoning death of Jesus Christ. I will not tell them that total abstinence from alcoholic beverages was a New Testament condition for church membership. Nowhere does the New Testament teach this. It is true that I Timothy 3:3, 8 teach that elders and deacons are not to be addicted to wine. God could easily have said that they should drink no wine at all, if He had wished. The exhortations are against strong drink and much wine.

Neither will I tell them that alcoholism is a disease. God holds the drunkard responsible for his behavior (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10). Deliverance from the life-dominating power of alcohol is possible by God’s grace (1 Cor. 6:10-11). Drunkenness finds its source in one’s sinful nature (Gal. 5:19-21). The disease theory, and that is just what it is, is filled with self-contradictions and avoids the issue of personal responsibility. Alcohol may lead to a variety of physical ills, but the decision to abuse alcohol is a moral choice. Some self-examination is necessary. Why is alcohol important to me?

In summary, I am responsible to tell the truth (Eph. 4:25) and will not reshape the culture of Bible times in order to respond to a social problem in our day. I do not want my grandchildren to grow up and discover that I had been less than honest in my handling of the Scriptures. If they can’t trust me to have integrity in the interpretation of the Bible, then what credibility will I have in other matters? If I give my grandchildren the impression that to merely abstain from alcoholic beverages makes them more holy than those who do drink, then I have failed them. Jesus and His disciples drank wine (with some alcoholic content) as did Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and other strong Christians.

But what will I tell them the Bible does teach about alcoholic beverages? I will tell them that the Bible teaches that drunkenness is a sin. In the Old Testament it was classed with such crimes as murder and rape and could lead to the punishment of death by stoning. Incurability was treated with the utmost seriousness in the Old Testament theocracy (Deut. 21:18-21). The New Testament Scriptures are plentiful in their condemnation of drunkenness (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9, 10;

Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:19-21). As a vice that finds its source in the sinful heart, it can lead to eternal judgment. Drunkenness is no laughing matter.

I will tell my grandchildren that God considers strong drink extremely dangerous. Priests who ministered in the tabernacle in ancient Israel were told to avoid strong drink under the penalty of death (Lev. 10:8, 9). Solomon said that “wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). He also taught that strong drink is not for kings (those who are responsible for others) lest they become unable to think clearly and, therefore, pervert justice (Prov. 31:4-5). The prophets of the Old Testament trained their theological guns on the self-indulgent within Israel who gave themselves over to the abuse of alcohol (Isa. 5:11; Mic. 2:11). A society that is marked by alcohol dependence is not a healthy society and will reap a harvest of moral ills. God wants them to know that alcohol leads to a slowing of the thinking processes (Prov. 31:4, 5; Isa. 28:7; Hos. 4:11) and the inability to adequately control one’s mental and physical responses (Jer. 25:27; 51:39).

I will tell them that total abstinence, though not required, is extolled in the Bible. The Nazirite vow was a special vow of dedication to the Lord which included the abstaining from wine and strong drink (Num. 6:1-21; Lk. 1:15). The Rechabites distinguished themselves by refusing to drink wine (Jer. 35:6, 19). These voluntary exceptions to the drinking of wine indicate a freedom to take special measures to avoid dangers in the consumption of alcohol.

I will tell them that the wine (and other alcoholic beverages) drunk today is far different from that drunk in New Testament times. Wine itself was light wine, not fortified with extra alcohol. Concentrated alcohol was introduced to Europe by Arabs in the Middle Ages when it was brought from China where distilled liquors seem to have originated. What is now called liquor and twenty percent fortified wines were unknown in Bible times. The drinking water of the biblical world was often unsafe. It was much more convenient to purify water by wine. It has been observed that one would need to drink twenty-two glasses of New Testament wine in order to consume the amount of alcohol in two martinis today and “in other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water (New Testament wine), but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before the mind.” The wine used today is not the wine of the New Testament. The alcoholic beverages of today fall into the category of “strong drink” in the Bible.

There is a host of other miseries brought on by the enslavement to alcohol physically, mentally, financially, and relationally. Untold numbers of grieving parents can tell stories of their teenage children slaughtered on the highway by trying to mix alcohol with driving. I will tell them about my friend from high school days, the quarterback on our football team, whose funeral I conducted when he was thirty-nine years of age. It all started with his love for beer as a teenager.

And, finally, I will tell my grandchildren exactly why I have chosen not to drink alcohol. Because my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is my responsibility to take care of it (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Would some alcohol necessarily harm me physically? Possibly not, but I have chosen to take the safest route and avoid a path filled with unnecessary risks. These are my personal convictions. I can’t impose them on others, but I believe they reflect biblical wisdom. Those who have a contrary view are also obligated to express it through the lens of Scripture.

Secondly, because of the example I set for others, both believer and nonbeliever, total abstinence is the expedient thing for me. It is not in the best interest of other believers (Rom. 14:21). Would my drinking cause anyone else to sin? I do not want to make it easier for someone else to drink. Therefore, I have chosen to restrict my liberty in consideration of Christians with a weak conscience or who might set out on a journey of a life dominated by alcohol. Also, it is not in the best interest of the gospel (1 Cor. 8-10). For the sake of the gospel, I am willing to set aside anything that might hinder my witness and effectiveness for Christ. I do not want to encourage anyone who is struggling with alcohol's rule over their lives. It is my freedom not to drink. Does my love for the taste of alcohol exceed my love for people?

Thirdly, because I must glorify God in everything I do, I have chosen voluntary abstinence from alcohol as a means of bringing honor to Him (1 Cor. 10:31). It is not necessary to turn to a chemical in order to deal with the world's deficiencies and the pressures of life. Fourthly, because of the possibilities of a personal fall, it is better not to set myself up for such a fall (1 Cor. 9:27). By God's grace I have never been arrested for a DUI, been drunk, or impaired my judgment with alcohol. This does not make me more holy than someone who drinks and has avoided these failures as well. But I have taken the precaution to avoid the dangers. Fifthly, it is because of the degree of the problem of alcohol abuse in our culture that I exercise my Christian freedom to be a challenge to the culture. Sixthly, because of the availability of many wholesome non-addictive beverages, I can slake my thirst in better ways. And if I am looking for peace and escape, I have God whose peace passes all understanding and in whom I find constant refuge.

That is what I will tell my grandchildren. I will love them no matter what choices they make, but I will not be disappointed if they use their freedom in Christ to set alcohol aside. Alcohol has never been a friend. It brought untold pain and suffering to the home in which I grew up and to people I have loved dearly. The Lord knows the battles I have fought against sin in my own life. But thank God, one struggle I have not had to contend with is addiction to a chemical which could never replace the joy of knowing God's sufficiency in Jesus Christ. That is what I want for my grandchildren.

Together for World Missions (October 21, 2011)

It takes the entire congregation to make a World Missions Conference happen. The Missions Committee plays a vital role in planning and organizing our annual conference. But it takes all of us pulling together to call our church family to the grand enterprise of spreading the gospel flame to the ends of the earth. I say "enterprise" because world missions is important, difficult, and dangerous. Is there anything that exceeds gospel proclamation in importance? If we take our lead from the media's attention to societal values, we are left with the temporary. World Missions is about what is eternal. This is not arrogance. This is reality. The environment, drought, presidential campaigning, international terrorism, famine in Darfur, the war in Iraq, and local politics are not unimportant. But in the supernatural order of things certain truths are supreme. God is there. He is not an imaginary being. He has made us for fellowship with Himself. We are sinners and there is an infinite gap between us and a holy God. We can't reach Him on our own. God has made a way to have access to Him both now and forever. It is through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can have the forgiveness of sin and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

What must we do? Many things. But we have an immediate opportunity to invest time, money, and effort into eight days of intense concentration on sending out those who are taking the good news about Jesus Christ around the world. Here are a few ways we can all participate.

1. Commit yourself to praying three times a day for the missions conference; our speakers, Grace Promise for 2008, our attendance, candidates for missionary service.
2. Host a missionary family in your home. Have them to your house for a meal. Spend some time talking with them about what they do.
3. Visit every missionary display in the Fellowship Hall. Refresh your memory on Berachah's missionary family.
4. Arrive early enough for the Sunday services so that you can ready your heart to be a hearer and doer of the Word of God. A prepared hearer is a responsive hearer.
5. Determine what should be your part in our Grace Promise commitment for the coming year, 2008. Could it not be more than it was in 2007? Think, talk, and plan with your spouse about your financial involvement in world missions. Are you making any sacrifices so that the gospel can go to those who have never heard about Jesus Christ?
6. Consider the possibility of participating in a missions' trip in the coming year. Is there a missionary family you could visit at your expense?
7. Set up and plan to pray for a different nation of the world in each week. Get a copy of "Operation World" and pray around the world in 52 weeks.
8. Put a world map up somewhere in home (e.g., a small one on the refrigerator, on the kitchen table) to keep you reminded that the world is bigger than Fayette County and its environs.
9. Adopt a missionary family that you will give special attention to in the coming year; consistent prayer for them, communication through e-mail, attention to special needs they might have, etc.
10. Make up your own list of what you can do to be a team-player in our annual World Missions conference. But let's not allow these eight days to go by as some form of special entertainment. That will not look good at the judgment seat of Christ.

As I write this, I am looking out my window at a squirrel busily digging little holes and packing away acorns for the coming months. Right now, his grocery store shelves are full (acorns have been bombarding my roof for two weeks now). That little gray furry creature is focused on the present and the future. Take a lesson from him. Seize the moment and plan for the future. The Lord Jesus Christ is coming again for His sheep.

The Value of a Dollar (October 28, 2007)

On a recent trip to visit the Heinz family, our missionaries in Kazakhstan, it was necessary to move from one airport to another in London. The bus ride from Heathrow to Gatwick cost 19 British pounds. That did not seem all that unreasonable until we calculated it into American dollars. It was \$39.00. Ouch! Traveling around the world makes an American citizen realize that the American dollar is not doing all that well in the exchange rate. There are multiple implications of this not immediately noticed by the low spending traveler. One of our missionary candidates making preparations to attend language school in Quebec, Canada is experiencing a significant increase in the required tuition. The missionary couple will pay more as will those who are participating in their outgoing expenses and monthly support.

Fulfilling the Great Commission costs money. It always has and the Lord of the church knows this. There is a way to finance the gospel witness of God's people. How did this work in the witness nation, Israel? The missionary impact of Israel as God's covenant people under the Mosaic covenant was financed through the tithes and offerings of the twelve tribes (Mal. 3:10). How did this happen? There were required tithes and offerings which were part of a system of taxation God legislated for Israel to fund the theocracy. Levites (tribe of Levi) managed Israel's worship system. They had to be supported (Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:8-28). Israel's festivals also had to be funded as well as the needs of the poor (Deut. 12:6-17; 14:28, 29). When Israel withheld her taxes, God withheld His blessing. The purpose of the temple was to bear witness to the glory and salvation of God. It was a call to all Israel and to the nations to come and worship the Lord God. The failure to pay the priests (representatives of God before the people) had the effect of limiting Israel's effectiveness as a priest nation.

God built into Israel's social, economic, and religious life the matter of priorities. He was to be at the center of the life of His people (Prov. 3:9, 10). When Israel offered the "first" of her produce this took in a wide range of possessions; the family's firstborn (Ex. 13:1, 2 – man and beast), the feast of first fruits (Lev. 19:23-25, grain, wine, olive oil, sheared wool), coarse meal (Num. 15:20, 21), honey and all produce of the land (2 Chron. 31:5). Think about the implications of all this in terms of the world view Israel compared to the other nations.

In Israel's thoughts, plans, and possessions God was to rule supreme. All of life belongs to God. Unless a man or woman recognized the claim of the Creator on all that he or she has, including material possessions, there would be a colossal failure in the management of time and money. We, like Israel, are accountable to God for the way we use our money and possessions and must use them in a way that reflects His Lordship. Are you honoring God with the things you own? Are you bringing biblical truth into your thoughts about your finances? It is a fallacy to think that Israel's tithe created a neatly compartmentalized view of service through giving. Israel was taught that all of life is to be used for the glory of God.

When Jesus stepped onto the stage in the drama of redemption what did He say about possessions and money? He boldly taught that it is more important to lay up treasures in heaven than to accumulate treasure on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). He did not ban material possessions, nor did He forbid saving money. He tells kingdom citizens that God must be at the very center of all our thinking about material things. He is concerned about selfishness and misplaced values. We live in a fallen world where everything is subject to decay. For a good reminder of this take a trip to the junk yard or a sanitary land fill. The ferocious appetite of the fires sweeping through

southern California is a vivid reminder of what will happen to earthly treasures (I Jn. 2:17). Therefore, we are to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. What are these “treasures?” They would be everything that believers in Jesus Christ can take with them beyond the grave (i.e., holiness of character, obedience to all of God’s commandments, souls won to Christ, and fellow believers nurtured in the faith). Generosity in giving is one of these treasures in heaven. Laying up treasures, in the words of John Stott, is “to do anything on earth whose effects last for eternity.”

Where does the church of Jesus Christ stand in all of this? Christians must give so as to provide for the costs entailed in equipping the saints, evangelizing the lost, and show mercy to all. This is done by setting aside a certain percentage of our income on a first day of the week basis (1 Cor. 16:1-4). Financing God’s work is not to be carried out by the methods that bring in the most money (i.e., whatever works). It is not on the basis of what many other churches or Christian organizations may be doing. It is not even on the basis of the Old Testament law (God’s plan for Israel). Rather it is giving that is systematic and regular, accepted as an individual responsibility, proportionate, voluntary, and carefully administered by the local church. Our giving on a first day of the week basis is part of our worship life. It is an expression of our love for Christ (2 Cor. 8:8, 9). Are you involved in demonstrating the value of a dollar in the work of God’s kingdom? Have you allowed yourself to become mired in personal debt and to squander your hard-earned money through high interest costs? Dear Christian, we are to commit ourselves to a plan that has an eye on eternity.

The local church is to assume the responsibility of contributing to the support of those who are involved in the work of the Great Commission (Rom. 15:27). Wise money-management is required of the church as it receives financial gifts from the worshiping community of believers. There are overhead costs that have to be paid (e.g., lights, water, insurance, salaries, equipment, materials, maintenance). As church members we should expect wise money management from our leaders. There must be a strategy for participation in global evangelism. The elders and the missions committee have to consider who is best fulfilling the Great Commission. Where are the greatest needs? Who is the most qualified to receive funds? The work of establishing priorities in the support of world missions is a difficult task. We are to be good stewards of what God has given to us. Church, pray for those who have to make these decisions and let us keep ourselves personally involved in the process of accountability and decision making.

Every believer is to excel in the grace of giving consistently, generously, and joyfully (2 Cor. 9:7). Paying for the costs of spreading the gospel and planting churches in every people group in the world is expensive. But it all comes down to where I, as God’s child, am with God. Am I growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ? Do I want to please God? Do I love Christ? Am I a good manager of the assets God has placed in my hands? Am I working? Am I saving? Am I avoiding debt? Am I making wise investments? Am I living in such a way as to free-up money for the kingdom’s sake? My giving as an individual worshiper who is delighting in God is to merge with other worshipers bringing their love offerings. Our combined gifts are a sweet offering to God. As we are enabled to give by His grace, so we exalt Him. A dollar is a valuable thing. But its value is determined by its use. Are your dollars flowing into the war chest for the Great Commission campaign? God has ordained our giving as the means by which He calls and gathers His sheep from the ends of the earth (“I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear my voice...” Jn. 10:16).

Politics, Sewers, and the Bible (November 4, 2007)

Sewage systems and the Bible may seem like a strange connection of thought. So, an explanation is necessary. I recently attended a political forum. The purpose of the forum was to present to the community the candidates for mayor and town council in a near-by city. There were seven candidates who received prepared questions and then questions were received from those in attendance. During this time a man approached the microphone and addressed his question to one of the mayoral candidates. The candidate was questioned regarding a statement he had made in the past doubting the authority of the Bible and its role in the founding of our nation. The candidate took the bait and went on to say in response that “the Bible was written by men, not by God.” This was a mistake in more ways than one. An audible groan went up from the audience. I wondered. Had he forgotten where he was running for political office? He may have cooked his campaign goose. As a follow-up to this there were local newspaper blog submissions which revealed what has become a common retort to this kind of thing, namely, what do one’s religious beliefs have to do with running for a political office? Admittedly, on first appearance this theological query seemed out of keeping with discussions about the power of government, property rights, the town manager, and sewers. It has been said that all politics is local. That being true, we have an issue that should not go away. On the national scene the same conflict stokes the fires of political debate. Exactly how does God, the Bible, and Christian beliefs fit into politics?

Does a politician have to believe the Bible is the Word of God for him or her to govern effectively? The answer is no. There are moral and ethical people in public office who serve their constituents admirably who do not believe the Bible was written by God. At the same time there are politicians who have given lip service to God and the Bible who have been ethical disasters. But this doesn’t tell us everything. What we want from our elected officials is honesty, good judgment, humility, a respect for the rights of others, and a sense of accountability to someone other than themselves. Every voter should look for good character qualities in their candidate. Does he keep his word? Is he committed to justice and mercy? Does she have respect for human life? What is his view of the role of government, private property rights, the relationship between the community and the individual, taxes, and other such things? The notion that one’s job performance and character qualities are not necessarily related is preposterous. Would someone pay for the services of a financial advisor who was under indictment for embezzlement?

We have the right to expect a town councilman to proceed with integrity as he makes decisions on whether his community has a sewer system or not. Population density in a community is not a moral matter, though of course it may be a very important factor in determining the kind of community the people want. The mayor or councilman who does not take the Bible seriously could very well have good sense about land use, quality community life, and managerial decisions. But what is it that would incline leaders in our counties and cities to be trustworthy, committed to the common good, and adhere to the law? We want elected officials who have a conscience that is properly informed by moral and ethical standards. Given our understanding of human nature, how does this happen?

Character qualities come from God-given moral sensibilities (Rom. 2:14, 15). This is true whether one believes in God or not. This is sometimes referred to as “unwritten universal moral law.” Everyone has it written into their heart. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “They say things like this: ‘How’d you like it if anyone did that to you?’ – ‘That’s my seat, I was there first’ – ‘Leave

him alone, he isn't doing you any harm' – 'Why should you shove in first?' – 'Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine' – 'Come on, you promised.' People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups." We know we are like this, but often don't stop to wonder why. It is because we are hard-wired by our Creator for a sense of right and wrong. We bear God's image even though it is marred by sin. Discussions about fairness, justice, right, and wrong assume a moral law that is etched within each of us. This doesn't mean that we will necessarily live up to what we think is right and fair, but it can promote certain beneficial expectations within governments and communities.

A politician will be faced with decisions over whether to approve a certain kind of business in the community, whether an industrial park should be built, or if developers should be restricted and how. Campaign promises to the community, zoning laws, and economic factors have to also be included in the decision-making process. The temptation of bribery and unethical schemes will have to be resisted. This is some of what goes into governing with integrity.

But the most important thing has yet to be said. The city of man has its values, ideals, and aspirations. But there is another city, the City of God, to use Augustine's language (Augustine was a well-known fourth century theologian). James Boice summarizes it this way, "Augustine distinguished between two entirely different societies: the city of man, which is characterized by self-love, and the City of God, composed of those who love God and want to serve him. The city of man will never be God's city. It has a different origin, progresses along a separate path, and is moving to a radically different end. Yet those who are members of God's city are nevertheless in the world and need to conduct themselves as a renewing force within it." What is being said is this: the investment of time and labor in the civic affairs of this world can be a noble thing, but it is not enough. To have lived for this life only while ignoring that city "whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10) is the height of folly. We may build our cities into very comfortable places to live, but they are all doomed to decay and final destruction. Like Abraham of old the Christian is called to live by a worldview that runs counter to that of the culture. The wise and God-honoring way to conduct one's life does not rule out commendable citizenship, but it has an eye on the future. Those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and are counting on His righteousness to save them are not anti-cultural but are to be counter-cultural. They may serve as mayors, legislators, judges, and presidents, and work for the good of mankind. But at the same time, they are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. They live to glorify God and "wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20).

It is not necessary to be a born-again Christian and believe the Bible in order to govern well as an elected official. But when that great judgment day comes and the great and the small stand before the throne of God and the books are opened, one's eternal destiny will not be decided upon by the good things we have done, how well we have governed, or how sincerely we thought we were right. Our credentials and politics will not have mattered. Our entrance in God's eternal heaven will be based on whether we belong to Christ or not, not any good works of our own. All candidates for public office have really only one question that they must answer correctly. Have they trusted in the King of kings and Lord of lords for their eternal salvation?

Those Who Have Never Heard (December 2, 2007)

A question that is probably the most frequently asked of preachers and Christians in general is, “What about the person who has never heard of Jesus Christ? Will he or she be condemned to hell?” This is a question of everlasting importance and there is a clear biblical answer. This question is often raised as an objection to the claims of Christianity in regard to the exclusive way of personal salvation, namely, is belief in Jesus Christ the only way to heaven? Sadly, quite often when a Christian is asked this before an audience of unbelievers he chokes and begins to equivocate, leaving the impression that there may be other ways to heaven. To lead people to believe that there might be another acceptable way to God other than belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is a crime of major proportions.

The question about the exclusive nature of salvation through Jesus Christ is important because it addresses a person’s everlasting state. Where will the individual spend eternity and why? This matter cannot be dodged. It impacts other biblical teachings and the church’s commitment to world missions. Why do we believe it is important to send missionaries throughout the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ? One’s answer to this question will reveal much about how seriously the message of Christ and the Bible is taken. Tragically, certain well-known theologians and pastors in our day are saying some very confusing and out-right wrong things about the plight of those who die without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must look at what the Bible teaches.

The Lord Jesus Christ, because of His completed atoning work on the cross, is the only way to heaven. There is no other way to be saved but through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6 - “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me.”). To offer a way to heaven other than the all-sufficient atonement of Jesus Christ is to make Christ’s death unnecessary. Tremendous responsibility is placed upon all of us who call ourselves Christians. We are under a mandate from Jesus Christ Himself to take the offer of salvation to those who have not heard the gospel.

It must also be made clear that adequate revelation has been given by God to hold everyone accountable to Him. No one has any excuse (Rom. 1:19, 20; Psa. 19; Rom. 2:12-16). The lost are condemned not because they have heard and rejected Christ. They are condemned because of their rejection of the revelation God has given about Himself. In the first place there is the witness of creation. The telescope and the microscope send a message. There is a Supreme Being. He is to be worshiped and thanked for who He is. God exists and all human beings know it, yet man has rejected God and goes his own way. Because of this the wrath of God abides on the creation. There is also the witness of conscience that holds us accountable to God. Man is responsible because he is able to draw enough conclusions about God to carry him further if he would go. But human beings are condemned for violating their own moral standard. It was Paul Little who said that “the whole world – every person, whether he has heard of the Ten Commandments or not – is in sin. Romans 2 clearly tells us that every person has a standard of some kind, and that in every culture, people knowingly violate the standard they have.” What is man’s response to God’s witness to His existence? He actually holds down the truth (Rom. 1:18). There is a mythical idea about the man who has never heard the gospel. He sometimes is represented as neutral about God or a seeker of God. But this is not the case. Instead of seeking after God, rebellious man invents false religions. It has been said that “men are not lost because they have heard the gospel and rejected it. They are lost before they even hear the gospel.”

Also, to be considered is the justice of God. God, because of His perfect character, will judge the world fairly. God is just (Acts 17:31). We can have absolute confidence in His perfections of character. God judges by the standards inherent in Him as a person, not by the inadequate and superficial standards we may seek to impose upon Him. He is holy and in a class by Himself (Ex. 15:11). There is an infinite distance that separates Him from every creature. He is righteous which makes Him absolutely right in all that He is and does (Psa. 11:7). He is the definition of perfection. He is just which means He is absolutely fair in the treatment of His creatures. The just judge must punish evil (2 Thess. 1:8). God does not issue get-out-of-hell free passes without judging sin.

God, because of His great love for mankind, is prepared to bestow salvation on the lost (Matt. 11:28; Jn. 3:36). God is great in patience and desires the unsaved to come to repentance. John Calvin said, "So wonderful is his love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost." How true. It is the nature of God to forgive sins and grant eternal life. God will see to it that His sheep will hear His voice and follow Him and give eternal life to them no matter where they are in this world (Jn. 10:27, 28). Rahab, Naaman, and the Assyrians of Jonah's day are examples of how the gospel can get to unexpected places (Josh. 2:9 Heb. 11:31; 2 Kgs. 5:15-19; Jon. 3:5). The gospel has gone out to the corners of the earth. Consider what happened in the first century. It spread from the British Isles to India by the end of the first century and well beyond that in subsequent centuries.

We know that a universal distribution of people will be redeemed and present before the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 5:9). It is correct to conclude from this that a wide distribution of people who are redeemed indicates a wide dissemination of the gospel. It also reminds us that a wide representation of people who are redeemed shows us that God is at work. We must not make the mistake of thinking that because mankind is in rebellion against God that His salvation purposes are frustrated in any way. God will see that His gospel reaches far and wide.

God is at work drawing His sheep to Himself. We can see this in His response to those who respond to the light of revelation He has given. He prepares the hearts of those who will be converted as He did with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-30) and Cornelius (Acts 10:34, 35). God is sovereign in the drawing of sinners to Himself (Acts. 17:27). How does He do this? He uses the proclamation to His Word and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 10:17). This happens when the truth of the gospel is clear in the mind of the sinner. It is seen and acknowledged as the truth. Let me ask you dear reader. Has the gospel been made clear to you? Have you been reading the Scriptures and wondering what they mean? No one can be accepted by God and enter His heaven who does not personally believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Is this true of you? But you ask; what about that person who doesn't know Christ and has never heard the gospel? God will provide further light if there is a desire to know the true and living God. The sinner in whose heart God is working will not be refused.

One very important truth remains to be stressed. The person who has heard the gospel will not be asked about those who have not heard when he faces God at the judgment. Every individual will have to account for what he or she personally has done with Jesus Christ. When we face God, the issue will not be the heathen. Perhaps you are one of those who has used the excuse of the heathen (the person without a Bible and a knowledge of the gospel) for changing the subject when you are faced with the necessity of believing on Jesus Christ for salvation. This could prove to be a spiritually fatal mistake. If you die without calling on the Lord Jesus Christ for the

forgiveness of sin, there will be no other way to enter God's heaven. The late pastor, James Boice, has described the issue clearly, "... the native is condemned for failing to do what he or she actually knows he or she should do, that is, seek out, worship, and give thanks to the God revealed in nature. Everyone falls short there." That is exactly right. We have all fallen short of God's glory.

Our greatest concern should be our own standing before God. Are you under His judgment and bound for a Christless eternity in hell? What an awful prospect. Our next greatest concern should be those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. My Christian friend, are you alert to the opportunities in your own immediate mission field? Am I more concerned over people that I have never seen than those I see every day? Become actively involved in world missions. Every maturing Christian should have a burden for the lost throughout the world. If you want to please God, be a world Christian. The question, "what about those who have never heard the gospel," can be answered by another question. What have you done with the gospel of Jesus Christ that you have heard?

The Return of Moloch (January 8, 2008)

Shelomith and Abigail were brimming with delight as they compared their pregnancies and childbirth stories. They laughed over the adventures of their baby girls, who were only a few months old, and dreamed of who these darling children would grow to look like (her mother's eyes, her father's nose), and what roles they would play in the community of Israel. But one evening Abigail's husband, Shema, hot and tired from another seemingly hopeless day in the sun-parched field, brought sad and chilling news. It had been decided. There was no other way. Their young daughter, Timna, must be taken and given as an offering to the god Moloch. The priest had announced that children must be sacrificed if there was to be rain which the nation so desperately needed. The parched land cried out for ground-soaking rains. Only the gods could give it. Abigail wept upon hearing what was to be done with her bright-eyed baby girl. She looked into her little girl's face. Her mind was racing with ways to avoid this awful thing. But the decision had been made. Shema and Abigail both knew that their child like others in Israel would have to pass through the fire, if Moloch's blessings were to be received. They wrapped Timna in the blanket especially woven for her birth. They walked silently together down the hill to the valley of Ben-hinnom. They could hear drums, bells, and chanting. With his priest attendants standing by there stood the image of Moloch before them. With one final look into the innocent and angelic face of Timna they presented her to the priests, who with prayers to the god for renewed fertility and prosperity, laid their firstborn in the fire-reddened arms of Moloch, protector and provider. The gift of this young life would help to insure blessings. Abundant harvests would replace the barren fields. They watched without visible emotion while the flames reduced their baby to ashes. Moloch had been given their most treasured possession. Now what would he give in return, hopefully peace and plenty.

This true-to-life story was probably repeated thousands of times (Jer. 32:35; Lev. 18:21; 20:2, 3, 4, 5; 2 Kgs. 23:10). Could such a horrible ritual take place in our day? I tell you it does. It takes place in the killing of millions of unborn children every year in America in the name of the god of pro-choice. How many aborted babies are offered on the altar of personal rights deemed more important than the rights of the unborn? Life is given by God. He created life (Gen. 1:26, 27; 2:7). Our every breath is a manifestation of life given by God. What makes human life sacred? It

is because every man, woman, and child is made in God's image. God is the author of human life. The high value of human life is reflected in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). The wonder of what God has done for sinful human beings, who deserve only death and eternal judgment, is seen in the everlasting gift of forgiveness and joy through faith in Jesus Christ. Bound up in this sublime gift is also the resurrection of our bodies. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we have the promise of our own resurrection body.

When does human life begin? The Bible is not ambiguous about this. The fetus is described as a person. It has developed all its human physical characteristics by about eight weeks (Jer. 1:4, 5; Lk. 1:41-44). The biblical ethicist, J. J. Davis, is certainly right when he says that the "biblical writers saw a continuity between the prenatal and postnatal states." God's hand is seen in the development of the fetus in the womb (Psa. 139:13-16). David saw his dignity, his value, his meaning in life as arising from God's involvement in the development of life in the womb. This truth is the occasion for praise, gratitude, and worship.

Where do the Scriptures lead us in this matter of the fetus and the question of whether it is fully human? The benefit of any doubt regarding the fetus should go to the fetus. We should treat the unborn as human, since in the words of one theologian, "it is highly likely that God regards a fetus as a person capable of (at least potentially) that fellowship with God for which man was created." Such a critical issue as human life being at stake demands that fetal life is treated as infant life. Would we not act on the presumption that an unconscious person is alive and not treat him as dead till proof is certain? If one is driving and sees what may be either a pile of rags or a child lying in the street, one will assume it is a human. What logic is it that treats the unborn as disposable when God counts it as life given by Him? The gods of our age have made the innocent and defenseless in the womb as potential offerings. These child sacrifices are most often for something other than saving the life of the mother. We have become all too comfortable with Moloch's flames.

A Few Thoughts on Reading Genesis (January 13, 2008)

How is your reading coming along? I mean your daily Bible reading. Hopefully, you are with others in the congregation who are attempting to read the Bible through this year (Bible Reading Plan 2008). This is a good thing. It literally puts us all on the same page. There are several advantages to a systematic, consistent reading of the Bible. It engages our minds with the mind of God. We become immersed in the thought of God and thereby find out what He has done in redemptive history, what He is doing, and what He will do. There is no substitute for such a mental saturation with the unfolding of the greatest story ever told.

By thinking our way through the story of redemption we can see where God places the emphases and watch how His sovereign hand guides human events to the accomplishment of His purposes. This is very important to remember. You are not just reading disconnected stories of long ago. The Scriptures have a storyline. A plot develops. The Holy Spirit of God is the editor-in-chief of the Bible. Therefore, every paragraph has significance. That will require effort on our part in deciphering the connections, context, and meaning of the biblical narrative (especially important in the Old Testament narrative sections). So, read with your mind fully engaged. You can take

notes if you have time but be careful. You don't want to over-extend your reading time (e.g., consulting notes in a study Bible or a commentary) and then get behind in your reading. We all live busy lives and we have to measure our time, yes, even our Bible reading time. Do what you have to do to stay consistent (every day!). If you fall behind don't quit. What a delight it will be to all cross the finish line together next December 31.

Before we look at some of the lessons from our reading this past week, keep in mind that there are three levels of narratives in the Old Testament (See How to Read the Bible for all its Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, pp. 74-75). There is the top level which is "the universal plan of God worked out through creation." We can see God preparing for the coming of the Redeemer. The middle level centers on Israel; how God worked through the call of Abraham, the formation of the nation of Israel, the establishment of Israel's theocracy, possession of the Promised Land, and God's chastisement of Israel for disobedience. But at the same time the Spirit keeps our eyes upon the hope of Israel and the world, namely, the coming of the Messiah and the Savior of mankind. Thirdly, there is the bottom level. This is made up of all the mini-narratives and details (e.g., Jacob's cunning and Esau's grudge). Fee and Stuart summarize all this very well in saying that "every individual Old Testament narrative (bottom level) is at least a part of the greater narrative of Israel's history in the world (the middle level), which in turn is a part of the ultimate narrative of God's creation and His redemption of it (the top level)." The only thing I would add is that the plotline of the Bible is about the establishment of God's kingdom. This story is seen in Israel's kingdom in the Old Testament and the anticipation of the coming earthly kingdom at the Second Coming of the Messiah anticipated in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. This coming earthly kingdom (the millennial reign of Christ) will come to pass because of the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the cross (the cross comes before the crown, 1 Pet. 1:11; Acts 1:11; Rev. 11:15).

There is much more to be said about the grand purpose of God unfolded through the Bible (You will want to enroll in the Berachah Bible Institute). But for now, let's focus on one of the stories we read this past week. Have you not noticed God invisible hand guiding the decisions, schemes, and even the sins of Abraham's descendants? Jacob deceived Esau in order to get the birthright (Gen. 27). Esau gets angry and bears a grudge against his brother, Jacob. He is eager to find a way to kill Jacob. But can this happen? Is not the promised seed of Abraham, Israel's Messiah, to come through Jacob's descendant? As we read the story we are fascinated by God's overruling, purposeful will. God kept Esau from taking Jacob's life by prolonging Isaac's life forty-three years and by allowing Rebekah to hear the words that were in Esau's heart.

We take encouragement from this. The God of Jacob preserved his life and ensured the continuation of the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). This same God is our God. He is working out His purposes in our lives. Yes, even through our sins, and errors, and self-will to fulfill what He has already decreed will happen (Psa. 33:10; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 46:10; Acts 2:23). This is no excuse for our bad behavior. But it does remind us that God is greater than all our sins and infirmities. He is greater than the schemes that others plot against us. Things can look confusing and maybe even hopeless. But even as God directs the leaf that falls from the tallest oak to exactly where He wants it to land, so does God cause "all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Take heart. Lift up your head. Don't succumb to despair. Put your complete trust in the God who is perfect in wisdom and love. And keep on reading. You'll learn the ways of God.

The Book of Love (February 8, 2008)

“I wonder, wonder who wrote the book of love?” That’s the way a song of days gone-by starts out. It is a rather shallow song, but it does present us with an opportunity to think about what real love is like. After all, Valentine’s Day is coming up this week (men have you forgotten?) and you may be one of those hapless males who will stand in front of the card rack trying to find the right words to say, “I love you,” wondering how it can be said in a meaningful way.

The best place I know to get a handle on the meaning of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-6. To read the apostle Paul’s prose opens up a treasure chest of truth about love. But notice the direction being taken here. There are those who would have us to believe that love is indefinable. How can an emotion as mysterious as love be captured in words? The fact is that if love can’t be defined and described then we are left with bubbles of feeling that evaporate into thin air. Love can be lost as easily as it can be found. Tragically, many marriages have broken up on the reef of self-love, disguised as marital love. And it doesn’t take long for this kind of love-boat to sink. So, let’s visit the features of real love.

Love is patient. It chooses to persist creatively when suffering at the hands of someone else. It does not retaliate when wronged. *Love is kind.* It chooses to reach out to others in order to make their lives richer. It seeks to bring help to the hurting. *Love is not jealous.* It chooses to refuse resentment because someone else has something I don’t. *Love does not brag.* It chooses to avoid self-promotion (trying to look good when we suspect we are not good). Am I trying to create an image that is contrary to reality? *Love is not arrogant.* It chooses not to indulge in power plays. Do I use people to achieve my goals? *Love does not act unbecomingly.* It chooses to treat others with respect. How indifferent am I to the effect that my behavior has on others? *Love does not seek its own.* It chooses not to place self-satisfaction above service. Am I willing to sacrifice my rights for the benefit of the one I say I love? *Love is not provoked.* It chooses to absorb irritations and offenses out of concern for others. How tolerant of annoyances am I in the interest of others? *Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.* It chooses to let God keep the moral scorecard of life. Do I keep a private file of personal grievances? Am I willing to let God settle the score? *Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness.* It chooses not to delight in the sins of others. Do I enjoy endless discussions about what is wrong with others, my spouse, my friends, my children? *Love rejoices with the truth.* It chooses to delight in those things that please God. Do I excuse lust and adultery in the name of love? *Love bears all things.* It chooses to put up with all kinds of hardships. Do I run from problems and people? *Love believes all things.* It chooses to not be gullible and cynical but wise. Am I willing to take risks in seeking to help others? *Love hopes all things.* It chooses to be confident about the future. Do I take the failure of someone else as final? *Love endures all things.* It chooses to not stop loving. Do I live with my bags packed?

Hopefully, the above will be some of the stuff of your valentine card. But better yet, make it the way you love. Love is not simply propositions to be contemplated. It is a relationship that looks like our relationship to Jesus Christ. He loved us so much that He gave Himself in a violent death so that we might live with Him forever. It was a love that considered our dreadful condition and did not remain passive. Jesus spilled His blood so that we could have the forgiveness of our sins and be free to love Him. Is that your kind of love? Men, I have a word for us. Not that our wives are where they ought to be in this matter of love, but our love in a special way is to emulate that of Christ’s love for His church. Allow the following questions to filter out the spiritual and moral toxins that are limiting our love.

- Do I provoke my wife to wrath and discouragement by my angry and critical spirit?
- Does my lack of spiritual discipline frustrate my wife?
- Do I show her affection and give her my full attention?
- Do I frequently tell her I love her and back it up with actions?
- Do I give her the freedom to pursue her interests, to seek God, to study the Bible, to have friends?
- The world, the flesh, and the devil – My wife has to contend with these. Am I adding a fourth?
- Did I violate my wife’s sexual purity before marriage? If so, have I repented of that and asked her forgiveness?
- Am I remaining loyal to my wife both physically and mentally? Do I flirt with other women? Am I kinder and gentler with other women than I am with my own wife?
- Do I have another life that is filled with sexual fantasy, pornography, and lust after other women?
- Am I living as a spiritually diminished person and don’t care?
- Do I seek revenge when my wife avoids me, ignores me, or is cool to my romantic advances?
- Do I pull my wife away from church because of my projects, toys, play, and other interests?

We should not be wondering who wrote the book of love. God did. He has written it in His own blood.

Taking God Seriously (February 17, 2008)

Profanity has found its way into every nook and cranny of modern-day conversation. At one time it was not tolerated in public life, but now it is written into television and movie scripts as much as punctuation itself. Taking God’s name in vain is even practiced by Christians who, of all people, should know better. I have even heard preachers bring God’s name into their own dramatic oratorical flourishes by way of exclamation, not worship. How is this being done? God’s name is profaned every time it is out of keeping with who He is and what He does. When a person says “my God” in a flippant way they are showing contempt for God’s greatness and goodness. The way we talk about God reveals what is in our heart, and how seriously we take God.

If we love God, then our adoration of Him will flow within the banks of worship and obedience. A growing, loving relationship with God demands right thoughts about God. These thoughts will be defined and shaped by what God says about Himself, not by what we might imagine Him to be. Our adoration of God will express itself in the way we think and speak about God. But, in the words of Fred Catherwood, “It is odd in this so-called secular age, when so few people believe in God, that the name of God is always on their lips. If there is no God, what is the point of cursing God?” These comments are made in reference to the third commandment which says, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Ex. 20:7). The concern is the protection of the Name of God and issues a warning to those who would attempt to use God, all that He is, and all that He stands for in a belittling way. All who desecrate God’s name and reputation will have to answer to Him.

Those who love God will take Him seriously. They will not treat His name irreverently or attempt to use God to further their own agenda. “There is none like Thee, O Lord; Thou art great, and great is Thy name in might” (Jer. 10:6). Taking God seriously is the evidence that one knows God. To know God is to take His name as one’s redeemer. This is more than just a means of identification. When a woman takes her husband’s name in marriage a new relationship is forged. To take God’s name is to become His child by faith in Jesus Christ. God’s name reveals who He is. He is a person. He is self-existent. He is self-sufficient. He is eternal. He is holy. He is a Savior to all who put their trust in His Son. People who know and love God will reverence His awesome and wonderful name. The beauty of His perfections will captivate their thoughts. Their thoughts about Him will give them great joy and the utmost respect for Him.

When we take God seriously, we refuse to misuse His name. This includes perjury (Lev. 19:12; Matt. 5:33-37). To swear that something is true which one knows to be false and to use God’s name to “co-sign” is to take God’s name in vain. We can commit perjury by making vows, oaths, and promises and then breaking them. “But 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, no, so that you may not fall under judgment” (Jas. 5:12). To use God’s name as a cover for a lie makes God out to be what He is not, namely, either nonexistent or indifferent to the truth. Trustworthiness is part of God’s image, which He wants to see in us. God’s name is dishonored when promises are made and broken, when vows are made to God and not kept (e.g., marriage vows are not to be taken lightly. To break a marriage vow is to treat God with contempt.), and when claims are made that God will do something that actually the Bible teaches otherwise. There are those who stoop so low as to involve the name of God to disguise a personal project with the intent to defraud.

God’s name must not be misused by playing with the things of God. A flippant and frivolous attitude toward God and things sacred is to trifle with God. This can be done when we pray piously and don’t mean it or when we sing Christian songs while our minds chase things other than the truth we are singing. Some people will attempt to use God’s name to achieve power and control. This is reprehensible. Beware of those who approach you saying, “The Lord told me to tell you that you are to....”

We must come back full circle to that culturally acceptable desecration of God’s name, profanity. To treat something as profane is to regard it as unholy. To profane God’s name is to treat it with contempt and show disregard for God’s infinite worth. For example, when God is asked to damn some person or thing, one is actually uttering a prayer. It puts God in the damning business and intentionally deflects attention away from His offer of forgiveness and eternal life. The use of “O my God”, “my God,” “Jesus Christ” and other such irreverent exclamations are an attack upon the person of God. His name is not a name to damn anyone. Watch out also for “polite” swearing by using “golly,” “gosh,” “gee,” and other minced oaths which could be misunderstood. It is the only name that can save sinful human beings. His name is not to be used to exalt one’s own exalted opinions or an attempt to be a drama queen. If you are inclined to use God the Father’s and God the Son’s name to heighten the impact of your communication, why not work on improving an impoverished vocabulary? May all our words declare that we are awed by a holy, righteous, loving, and sovereign God.

Our culture is sick and dying. Sinful human beings oblivious to the fact that they need God’s salvation are busy coronating themselves the kings and queens of the universe. God is reduced to

a subject for a panel discussion, on which men and women sit in judgment. If you are in any doubt about the slide in our nation in its diminishing view of the majesty and glory of God start counting the times you hear His name treated with contempt. Christian reader, let us watch ourselves. In the words of the late A. W. Tozer, “Are we losing our ‘Oh!’?” We can begin checking our thoughts about God by memorizing and repeating daily the words of Scripture, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33-36). Marinate your minds in these delectable truths and rejoice that this is “my God.”

The Resurrection and Liberation Theology (March 21, 2008)

A theology unfamiliar to many Americans has suddenly been thrust upon them in the current presidential primary campaign. Sermon clips from Barack Obama’s pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, have touched off a fire storm of heated debate. What many do not understand is the kind of theological viewpoint that drove the tirades of Rev. Wright against America. It is known as liberation theology. It finds its roots in the 1950s in Latin America and quickly spread rapidly throughout the region. It took a special hold among certain Roman Catholic leaders but leapt into Protestant circles as well. The essential belief of liberation theology views the oppressed peoples of this world as channels of God’s grace. As the poor and downtrodden rise up and throw off their oppressors, salvation is realized. Liberation theology is a reinterpretation of the Christian gospel through a social and political setting. In other words, it is another gospel. One version of liberation theology is black liberation theology. Dr. Wayne House describes it as follows: “Oppression relates to physical, economic, psychological and political repression. In view of this oppression, black theology (and liberation theology in general) seeks to speak to ‘this world’ problems, rather ‘other-world’ issues; to concrete circumstances, rather than abstract thought; to the sinfulness of man’s plight in a ghetto, rather than sin in man’s heart; and to a savior who delivers man from earthly slavery, rather than a Savior who saves man from spiritual bondage. This is black liberation theology in a word.” Not all African Americans have bought into this false gospel by any means, actually only a hand full. But if you want to hear it in its raw form in the pulpit, listen to Rev. Wright’s expostulations.

Human history is littered with false gospels. They come and they go. But they always manage to seduce the spiritually blind and the biblically ignorant. One of the appeals of black liberation theology is that it speaks to people in the midst of their struggles. It offers hope. It does so by using the familiar terms of the Christian gospel; salvation, Savior, faith, hope, etc. The images of Israel’s redemption from bondage in the Old Testament are invoked as a paradigm for the oppressed in our day. It is all quite slippery. The unsuspecting and the disenfranchised can see it as a way out of social and economic oppression. A part of the deception is that the true gospel is mocked as other worldly and disconnected from the realities of the here and now. Of course, this is untrue, but Christians have helped to perpetuate this image by being uninvolved in the pain and suffering of the poor of this world. Biblical Christianity will live out the truth of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.

The major tragedy of the false gospel of liberation theology is that it is not the real gospel. It promises what it cannot provide, namely, good news. The really good news of Jesus’ death,

burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life is replaced with a social and political agenda. The call is to overthrow the oppressors by revolution, if necessary, in the name of justice. The problem of the sinful human heart is ignored. Salvation is interpreted to mean equality and justice for all in this life. The promise of heaven for the redeemed of God is distained as a mere narcotic for the “have-nots.” Jesus Christ is turned into a political deliverer. By doing this Jesus is made less radical than the revolutionary He is claimed to be in liberation theology. Jesus came to be the Savior of the world by conquering sin and death. When Satan offered Him the kingdoms of this world He refused. Not because a kingdom on this planet was an alien idea. Jesus will come again one day to establish His kingdom on this earth. But it will not be independent of an atoning sacrifice and an empty tomb. The cross work of Christ was necessary because a sacrifice for the penalty of sin had to be made. In doing this He struck a death blow to the real culprit behind all human injustice and oppression. The human sinful heart is the source of social and political corruption.

What does the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean in liberation theology? According to James H. Cone, the architect of Black liberation theology, the resurrection of Christ means “that all oppressed peoples become his people... The resurrection-event means that God’s liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers... It is hope which focuses on the future in order to make men refuse to tolerate present inequities. . .to see also the contradiction of any earthly injustice” (as quoted by Paul Enns in “The Moody Handbook of Theology”). One can see that another gospel has been created to call the oppressed to experience liberation from political and social bondage.

Political change is not the answer to society’s problems. Our only hope is a radical change of hearts and lives. The true gospel rests upon the twin pillars of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Read the Book of Acts. Did the early church engage in a political movement to bring down an oppressive Roman government? What was the subject of its preaching? Why was the church persecuted and ridiculed? What produced generosity and unselfish living in the lives of Christians? What was the hope of the downtrodden and oppressed in the community of faith? It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The early Christians spread the message of the gospel with an unflinching fervency. They unashamedly declared that Jesus’ resurrection was proof that He was Israel’s Messiah. Wicked authorities collaborated to kill Jesus, but God raised Him up (Acts 2:24, 31; 3:26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30-37; 26:23). The gospel message was Jesus Christ’s death on the cross for the remission of sins and His resurrection by the power of God. It was not a call to overthrow corrupt governments. Sinners were told to repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 4:12). It was because of hearts made new in Christ that the grace of generosity flowed toward the needy (Acts 4:34-37).

The short-term hope for our world is hundreds of thousands of Bible-rich, Christ-exalting, mercy-giving churches, places where lives are changed, and communities are enriched. The long-term hope for a world filled with inequities, injustices, and oppression is the coming again of the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:6-10). The resurrected Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world is alive, in heaven, and is coming again. Reader, have you put your faith in Him? He is the Liberator from sin, the oppressor of us all.

The Effective Mother (May 11, 2008)

We honor you today, mothers, and appreciate you. You may sometimes wonder how effective your role is as a mother. This is not an easy question to answer for several reasons. In the first place your work is not finished. In most cases your children will outlive you and you are unable to assess the impact you have had upon their lives. You must also consider the creaturely limitations of not being omniscient. We can't know what is going on in someone else's heart. Only God knows the effect one life has upon another. In addition to these factors, evaluation of oneself is always incomplete and must be left in the hands of God. Have you been faithful as a mother? God alone makes that determination (1 Cor. 4:1-5). It is necessary for a mother to remind herself of these matters of faith lest by severity of judgment and the incompleteness of human perspective discouragement is invited as an annoying guest.

At this point you may need to pull yourself together, if you are a mother saddened by a child who seems to be disregarding everything you taught him or her. Take some heaping tablespoons of God's grace. He is in control of all things, even the foolish behavior of a wayward son or daughter. Your work is not over. "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." If you really believe this, you can avoid some of the depression and self-pity that knocks the wind out of your motherly sails.

Having said this there is a biblical outlook that is to have legs and feet on it. Effective mothering doesn't just happen. There is a lot of sentimentality about motherhood that doesn't measure up to truth. Just because you have biologically produced offspring doesn't guarantee success in rearing children. We are, tragically, made well aware of this by mothers who do horrendous things to their children (e.g., drowning them in a bathtub, locking them in a basement room without food, abandoning them, and other such unnatural and evil things). Good mothering is not an automatic thing. You know that. But you will need to remind yourself of the truth that there is a way God wants you to define motherhood and it is not the world's way.

That is enough of the dark side. What is it that constitutes effective biblical mothering? The effective mother is a God-server, not a self-server ("The woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." Prov. 31:30). Strength and wisdom for rearing children God's way is drawn from a deep and growing relationship with God. Fearing God is awareness of His moral purity and power. A God-fearing mother is genuinely afraid of failing God. Disobeying her Creator and Savior is not an acceptable option. She worships, serves, trusts, and obeys her Lord out of love for Him. This happens as a mother's roots of daily living go deeply into the written Word of God. Mothers, as a result of this you can give the best possible advice and guidance to your children. You are able to construct a set of values which reflect the substantial in contrast to the trivial and harmful. The mother who loves God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength gives her children monumental memories of God's love woven into the fabric of life.

The effective mother must understand the nature of her relationship with her husband. The Christian wife knows the wisdom of being submissive to her husband. Please throw out all notions of inferiority or cowering weakness that may have attached themselves to what submit means. Mothers, you will best shape your children's lives for eternity by living out the relationship of the church to Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:22-24). Biblical submission energetically pursues ways to please God through the support, help, and encouragement of one's husband.

When a wife and mother plans and acts for the welfare of her husband she is providing priceless pre-marital counseling. The response of a wife to her husband is a highly nuanced and individualized thing. But it is in the daily routines of the home that future husbands and wives are made. Do you speak respectfully of your husband? Are the two of you a good working team? Is it evident that you love one another? The way in which you and your husband relate to one another says volumes to your children. Their eyes and ears are absorbing what will form their outlook on marriage and how things are to be in the home.

The effective mother knows what and how to teach her children. This does not mean that the husband is off the hook. The buck stops with him. The husband and wife share the role of instruction in the home. Sons and daughters are admonished by that ancient sage, Solomon, to listen to their father's instructions and not to forsake their mother's teaching (Prov. 1:8; 6:20). It was Timothy, the apostle Paul's trusted associate, who was nurtured in the faith of Christ through his grandmother and mother. Mothers must partner with their husbands to provide a truth-rich environment in the home. Older mothers are to help younger mothers in preparing their children in biblical decision making, what it means to love God and one's neighbor, how to interpret the Scriptures, the display of courtesy and good manners, and how to do all things for the glory of God.

An effective mother displays the precious jewel of Christian truth. A healthy home will have a godly mother in the middle of it. She exudes the fragrance of a sweet disposition. Kindness has a way of setting the tone of behavior in a household (Titus 2:5). Irritability, harshness, and making demands of everyone will sour any home. Yes, some people are easier to live with than others. But let a grumpy husband and grouching children have an encounter with the sweetness of the graces of the Spirit. Mothers, how sensible are you? Much was made of this attribute for the Christian homes on the island of Crete. Cretan culture needed large amounts of sensibility. So does our culture. Sensibility in a mother means that she will have her priorities straight. She won't be chasing the latest child-rearing fad, but instead follows the compass of divine wisdom. A sensible mother is not ruled by her feelings. Anger and bitterness are not allowed to jerk her around. She lives with the joy of the Lord defining her moods. A sensible mother is not easily offended. Love and patience are allowed to soften the blows of self-centered people around her. She knows the value of time and plans her daily routine accordingly. May God grant us increasing numbers of sensible mothers who are an anchor in the home and church amidst the howling winds of a culture gone mad with frivolity and foolishness. These mothers who have their biblical wits about them are steady, strong, and not desperate.

Mothers, these words are not written to load you down with guilt but with hope. Effective mothering is a lifelong pursuit, and one over which God is sovereign. He will enable you to do what is wise and good. Savor the tenderness of a Savior who knows your heart, loves you, and will reward your faithfulness.

Global Warning (June 8, 2008)

Global warming as a media fixation has taken back seat to the presidential primaries. But that doesn't mean it has gone away. The theory of man-made global warming has attracted adherents with a religious-like zeal. Former vice-president Al Gore has been the drum major for the climate-change crusaders whose ranks are filled with professional meteorologists, other

scientists, politicians, and the main-stream media. The rush to save our planet has also been joined by various Christian leaders and organizations. Mark Bergin in *World Magazine* recently reported that “Many other nongovernment relief organizations, such as Christian Aid, World Vision, and Oxfam International, are taking steps toward reducing their emissions and helping impoverished people prepare for potential changes in sea level, weather patterns, and agriculture.”

A Christian response to global warming predictions by necessity has to be multifaceted. There are many questions that have to be asked. Is global warming taking place and if so, is it man-made? Most would agree that there has been some increase in the climate temperature of our planet. But this does not mean that global warming is man-made. S. Fred Singer, professor emeritus of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia and president of the Science and Environmental Policy Project, has stated, “...every scientist knows, correlation is not causation. During much of the last century the climate was cooling while CO₂ levels were rising. And we should note that the climate has not warmed in the past eight years, even though greenhouse gas levels have increased rapidly.” Is there a “scientific consensus” that the burning of fossil fuels is the chief cause of warming today? Again, Singer observes that there is “no such consensus” and this is “not how science works.” He adds that “Science proceeds by the scientific method and draws conclusions based on evidence, not a show of hands.”

There is also another problem with the so-called “scientific consensus” argument. This bullying tactic has been used to shut down all objections to Darwinian evolution. How many times have evolutionists, especially those in the media, attempted to shout down the opposition with variations of “most scholars believe”? Consensus is no better than the presuppositions it brings to the discussion. But another question arises. If there is global warming, what can be done about it? It is not the purpose of this present discussion to offer proposed solutions. However, beware of those who have a vested financial interest in combating an alleged man-made global warming. Actually, there are some environmental advantages to a slightly warmer climate with more carbon dioxide. According to Fred Singer, “Economic studies have demonstrated that a modest warming and higher CO₂ levels will increase GNP and raise standards of living, primarily by improving agriculture and forestry. It’s a well-known fact that CO₂ is plant food and essential to the growth of crops and trees – and ultimately to the well-being of animals and humans.”

One of the special features of the debate over global warming is the slugfest that has started among various Christians. In a recent editorial in the *AJC* the executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Robert Parham, rebukes current Southern Baptist Convention leaders for being caught in “a religious disconnect on (global) warming.” Parham, an ordained Baptist minister, thinks that “scientific consensus” should be enough to rally good Christians to the banner “of human-induced climate change.” He argues this by condescendingly chiding those who believe “in special revelation” (i.e., an inerrant and trustworthy Bible). If the Bible doesn’t speak about man-made global warming, then we can’t be sure if it is happening. That, according to Parham, is the self-imposed dilemma of Bible believers. This kind of shallow and herd-bound thinking about global warming calls for reminders in biblical realities.

Planet earth’s original climate was perfect. It had to have been. God created it and said that it was very good. Our weather problems began at the fall of man into sin. The curse of death was pronounced upon all creation. Thorns, thistles, and sweat replaced an ideal environment. Paradise was lost. Creation was subjected to futility. Adam and Eve’s descendants were

consigned to a struggle against a hostile environment. Mankind has been trying to cope with the terrestrial thermostat since he was driven out of the garden. From the tropical climate of the pre-Flood world to the uniformity of the seasons in the post-Flood world human beings live in a groaning creation. Until the kingdom of God on earth when the curse on creation will be partially lifted, God has established a certain kind of uniformity in nature. In his notes on Genesis 8:22 (“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”) Dr. Henry Morris has commented that, “Absolute uniformity of the day/night cycle and the seasonal cycles assures at least general uniformity of functioning (allowing for statistical variations) of other processes.” In other words, the planet will function according to a principle of uniformity, even while creation groans and suffers, until that day when new heavens and a new earth become a reality (Rom. 8:22; 2 Pet. 3:13).

In the meantime, human beings can do great damage to the environment. Forests can be cut down and replaced with earth scaring erosion. Animals can be hunted to extinction. Their natural habitats can be ravaged leaving them no place to live. Streams can be polluted by man-made pollutants. The air can be filled with enough particulate matter to make life unbearable. No one denies that mankind can do some incredibly bad things to the water he drinks, the air he breathes, and the ground in which he grows his crops. But can finite creatures actually destroy the planet? You would think so from listening to all the “save the planet” propaganda of recent years. What an arrogant boast. The claim is that the creature can actually do what only the Creator can do, end life on this earth as we know it. Human beings cannot save the planet any more than they can save themselves from the wrath of a holy God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Sinful, fallen human beings flatter themselves with their vaunted aspirations much like our ancestors did who set out to build a religious monument on the plains of Shinar (Gen. 11:1-4). However well-intentioned the save-the-planet mentality may be, it is a fool’s errand.

But all this is not to say that we should be indifferent to the care of creation. Through common grace (the blessings God gives to all people that are not part of salvation from sin) God makes it possible for societies to maintain acceptable living conditions (“The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made....The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, you satisfy the desire of every living thing” Psalm 145:9, 15-16). We should rejoice in and utilize all that science and technology offer us for making a better environment (clean air, pure water, and wise use of natural resources). Christians should be in the vanguard in both micro-environmentalism and macro-environmentalism. It is not a mark of good stewardship to litter, waste, and be indifferent to recycling. Industries should not be allowed to pollute air and water without accountability. Also, to be factored into Christian environmentalism is the wise management of one’s personal resources. Money is not to be wasted. Conservation has always been important in a Christian world and life view. Conserving means economizing and economizing means the best possible use of money and time for the glory of God. Loving one’s neighbor calls for a commitment to doing all within our power to be good stewards of God’s gift of creation.

The problem is that environmentalism has become a religion to many. Under the cover of the “greening” of life a new totalitarianism has arisen. In the words of Charles Krauthammer, “Environmentalists, having proclaimed the ultimate commandment – carbon chastity – are preparing the supporting canonical legislation that will tell you how much you can travel, what kind of light you will read by, and at what temperature you may set your thermostat.” The “Church of Environmentalism” with all its dogmas and its sacramental service to reverse global

warming fails to engage our minds with the most serious calamity of all. There is a coming global disaster. It is already in the making. The creation has been subjected by its Creator to futility, sometimes called the law of entropy. Decay and death are moving our planet and the universe inexorably toward dissolution. It is waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the new world order He will bring about. One day the curse that now rests upon nature will be removed and its great symphony of sighs will be a thing of the past (Rom. 8:20-21). Therefore, God has issued a global warning. He is going to shake the earth and the heavens (Heb. 12:26-27; Rev. 6:12-14). The ultimate global warming will take place. God will destroy the heavens and the earth by fire taking vengeance on those who do not know Him (1 Pet. 3:7; 2 Thess. 1:7-8). What are we to do? We are to turn from our unbelief and put our trust in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. One day this earth will be transformed into the paradise for which it was intended. The best is yet to be for those who belong to Jesus Christ.

God and America (June 29, 2008)

What does God expect of America? That may seem like a very presumptuous question. I do not claim to have received any direct communication from God on this matter. The only authority that can be cited for answering a question about what God's thoughts would be on a matter is an appeal to Holy Scripture. For this discussion I presuppose that the Bible is the only book God has written and it remains the sole source of revelation of His mind. But back to the question. Why is it necessary to seek God's truth about America? The question, in my estimation, is answered in its asking. God exists. He has spoken. We must listen. God is our creator, rules sovereignly over the universe, and is infinitely wise. We owe our existence to Him. We ignore God's counsel to our own peril.

God expects America to fulfill its role as a nation among nations. Human governments exist to promote the public good and to restrain evil (Rom. 13:1-8). This of course presumes that the citizenry knows what is good and what is evil. Without some minimal moral categories, no nation can survive for very long. Public order must be maintained. Freedoms are to be protected, and citizens must fulfill their responsibilities to government; obey the laws, participate in civic affairs, pay taxes, and assist in the defense of the country. Christians have a special interest in the protection of personal freedom and a general state of peace within the nation. This is marked out by Paul in his admonition to the church to pray for those in authority that they may be converted and that conditions favorable to the spreading of the gospel would exist (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

God expects America to honor His moral law. This law is written within every human being and in the record of divine revelation, the Bible (Rom. 2:14-15). The "interaction of conscience and innate morality may result in a good life" (Charles Ryrie). If and when the general compliance with God's moral law occurs, our nation will be a better place to live. But when people violate God's moral law and invert the standards of justice there will be societal dissolution. The death of a culture is guaranteed when evil is called good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20). We are living in a time when America is undergoing a mega "cultural shift." The redefinition of marriage to include same-sex marriage is one of those morally insane changes that are evidence of the death throes of a civilization. The war against the children of our nation is accelerating at an alarming pace. Child pornography, child prostitution, and sexual molestation of children are a grief to the conscience of morally sound people. God came after nations with a big stick who did not protect

the innocent and defenseless (Amos 1). We are paying the penalty for our love affair with moral relativism. Thank God for those lawmakers and government agencies who seek to stem the tide of moral evil that exploits children.

God expects America to repent of its wickedness. Ancient Nineveh was sent a prophet of God (reluctant as that prophet was) to call the Assyrian people to their moral and spiritual senses. The prophet Jonah, after the chastening of the Lord, went about that great capital of the Assyrian empire preaching repentance. Nineveh was at the center of an idol worshiping, cruel, and tyrannical nation in the eighth century B.C. (Jon. 1:2; Nah. 3). Amazingly, by God's grace, the king and the people turned to God in sackcloth. They humbled themselves before God Almighty, turned from their wicked ways, and cried out to God for forgiveness. God took notice of their repentance and spared them from judgment. This great revival in Nineveh is a witness to the accountability of all nations to a holy God. America would do well to take notice of this story of God's grace. Do we think that God does not notice the moral wickedness that blights our land? There will be a pay-day someday. While it is true that in a very real sense we are already under the judgment of God (Rom. 1:18-32), how long will God be longsuffering toward our nation? No one knows. But God will not allow His righteous, moral standards to be flaunted in the name of tolerance, multi-culturalism, or whatever human contrivance is used to declare independence from Him.

God expects America to acknowledge His sovereign rule over all nations (Psa. 22:28). This is a reality whether it is acknowledged or not. The nation that honors God and His everlasting dominion is on the right side of human history. When King Nebuchadnezzar, the ancient king of Babylon, was at ease in his house and prospering in this palace he was on his way to a rendezvous with God. As Nebuchadnezzar strutted about his city and bragged of his greatness God cut him down to size (Dan. 4:4, 30, 32-35). The mighty monarch of Babylon publicly confessed God's absolute sovereignty after a humiliating experience of groveling in the dirt like an animal. The nation that sets out to banish God from its collective conscience is doomed to its own demise. Having "in God we trust" on our currency is no automatic protection against divine wrath, but it counts for something, especially if justice, mercy, and humility before God are woven into the fabric of our nationhood.

Many Americans take a smug measure of self-satisfaction in this nation's brain trust, power, and wealth. But such a self-congratulatory outlook is misguided and ultimately disastrous. God has placed His premium upon a different kind of person. The prophet Jeremiah splashed some theological cold water in the face of a nation that had viewed itself as exceptional; "Thus says the Lord, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:23-24). Let us each determine to be the kind of Americans that delight God.

Gloom and Doom or Suffering and Glory (July 20, 2008)

A recent article in the AJC, entitled "Doom and gloom enter the room," sketched a rather dismal view of the way things are in America. Global warming, increase in the price of gasoline and food, recession, and war in the Middle East cast dark clouds over our nation. If we want to think

about sad news, there is a formidable list of tragic events. What about California's venture into legalized same-sex marriage, the powerful international pornography industry, government schools that seek to propagate an antichristian worldview, the continued clamor for the destruction of human embryos for the sake of so-called scientific advancement, and the recent polls that reveal seventy percent of Americans agreed with the statement that "many religions can lead to eternal life." In addition to these there is the mad rush to read the latest New Age book, A New Earth by Eckhart Tolle. All this is only a sampling of the contrary winds that are blowing in our culture. Gloom and doom is not confined to the physical and material. Actually, the greater threats we face have to do with the moral and spiritual evils that abound, seemingly unchecked, even applauded by minds set on suppressing the truth God has revealed about Himself and the world we inhabit.

Five people, from various professions, were solicited in the AJC article to offer their interpretations of the ills that beset us. The responses are a mixture of good and not so good advice. As to the economy it was observed that "short-term thinking convinces us this is a uniquely bad time." A professor of earth and atmospheric sciences somehow knows that "it (global warming) looks a lot worse 100 years from now than it does ten years from now." One could have hoped for good news from the contributing pastor, but the best that she offered was, "God, why aren't you doing something about it (the terrible things happening in the world)? 'And God says, I've already done something. I've created you, and you're supposed to do something about it.'"

The Scriptures of the Christian faith are not silent about the direction the world will go before Jesus Christ's second coming. We do not know when His coming will occur, but we can expect the shadows of the prophesied Great Tribulation events to characterize coming times. What perspective should Bible believing people have toward adversity in the short-term? How are we to think and live when the misery-index spikes upward? We have abundant divine wisdom with which to work. The epistles of the New Testament are unanimous in calling us to hope-filled living. Don't get too comfortable with this fallen world. The Corinthian Christians were admonished to revamp their thinking about marriage. It might be better to consider the advantages of the single life in a time of adversity (1 Cor. 7:25-31). But whether one is single or married the things of this world should not rule over us. We must rule over them. We are not to be driven by our emotions and possessions. Our conveniences and comforts may evaporate before our eyes. But that is not what our life's story is about. The apostle John seconds this truth with his affirmation that this "world is passing away" (1 Jn. 2:15-17). Higher gas and food prices, though not desirable, are not to determine the Christian's joy index. The possibility of Iranian nuclear weapons is not beyond God's sovereign control and purposes. The Christian is to sit lightly in the saddle of this world's stuff. The financial stability of banks, the current mortgage crisis, and the drop in the Dow-Jones average can be unsettling. But one's anxiety about these things is in direct proportion to how many of their eggs they have placed in the basket of this world. Authentic, robustly biblical Christianity tells a different story. The apostle Peter did not flinch at the realities of this world. He told his suffering readers that "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Pet. 4:7). On the surface this statement seems a bit premature. Peter said this about 64 A.D. Here we are almost two thousand years later. Is "the end" still at hand? Yes, it most definitely is. The second coming of Christ looms large on the horizon of our future. It is an any-moment possibility. This prospect for the Christian throws an entirely different light on all the pain and suffering endured in this world. The story of those who belong to Christ is not written in the ink of gloom and doom. Hardships, the uncertainties of the economy, ridicule

suffered in the name of Christ, and the ascendancy of God-ignoring secularism are to be met with a hardy appetite for holiness of life. Our eyes are to be fixed on Christ who is coming for His church.

Dear fellow believer, let's not allow our thoughts to be held hostage to the love of this world. Are we fearful, worried, grumpy, or sorrowful? This is a presidential campaign year. Politicians have much to gain from bad news about the state of our nation (depending on the number of promises they make). Let's don't get pulled into false hopes based on the illusory promises of political candidates who are going to make our lives "all better" if we will just vote for them. God's people are to live by His promises. They know that earthly trials are to be immersed in the joy of the Lord. "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself, perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10). That's far from "gloom and doom."

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic (August 10, 2008)

The buses are being inspected. School supplies are being purchased. The rhythms of a new school year are about to begin. But what type of school will it be? Some will be enrolled in public school, some in private schools, and others will be home schooled. The diversity of choices begs a question. What is the best educational model for your children?

I recently asked Dave and Alma Huether to give me some of the distilled wisdom they have learned from their experience of rearing four children and having been involved in all the above school choices. I will intersperse some of my own comments along the way.

Parents do not make decisions out of fear (exposing children to "the world"). They will meet sinners everywhere, even in home school. Public schools allow sinful lives to be more exposed, but a private school (Christian or non-Christian) has the same sins only better hidden from authorities. The students see it all in the trenches. We should be reminded of the biblical counsel to not love the world wherever it is found. The world is that entire system of thought and life untouched by the Word of God. Parents and students must be alert to all things that are set against God and His righteous purposes in this world.

A family spiritual life (led by Dad if he is there, or Mom as his delegate, or if she is single) is essential. This is to be a daily effort. Every challenge brought home from school (evolution, drugs, alcohol, smoking, relationships, bullies, laziness, failure, etc.) are wonderful God-given opportunities for truth-rich, Bible-based, God-centered conversation (Deut. 6:7). It is very difficult to overcome a father who is uninvolved in the education of his children. There is no substitute for a dinner hour at the family table with a father and mother asking probing questions about the world of ideas within the context of biblical truth. Using the long and short moments of spare time in the routines of life for gentle and reasonable conversation will yield great dividends for children. But do not make every conversation a deep ten-point lecture. Keep "school" and the "grilling" off the dinner table ("what did you make on that test today?" etc.) Unless they bring it up about the lab that blew up, or the dissected frog that jumped back to life, don't interrogate them. Don't overlay your inquisitiveness.

Do not vilify the school, the teachers, or the authorities, in front of your children. Remember that parents are finally responsible for the education process, not the school or the teacher. Do not be lazy or intimidated about keeping up with what is going on with the classes, the work, and the teachers. Take a “coaching” attitude toward your student, lots of encouragement, help, time, and enjoy what they are doing with their day. Be careful about unduly driving your children to a brand of “excellence” that is beyond their capabilities. Stress the value of using their God-given abilities for His glory.

When it comes to making a choice about the type of school, be flexible. Know your child. Don’t feel locked into one kind of schooling choice once you have started. Talk with others about this decision as necessary. If a particular school or type of schooling is working well for your student, don’t be self-righteous about it. There are no guarantees when it comes to producing well-adjusted, academically competent, and God-fearing children.

Public school requires little time of involvement comparatively speaking. Parents you must exercise discretion about how active you want to be. Private school requires parental involvement for everything: projects, field trips, sports, transportation, arts, band, class, after-school clubs, etc. Home schooling requires time (obviously), but it offers flexibility, unlike a private school. One of the characteristics of American society is busyness that engulfs families. This requires some out-of-the-box thinking and counter-cultural planning. Parents, are you allowing the perceived demands of schooling to undermine family unity and God-pleasing priorities?

Public school makes the least financial demands. Private school requires much money. Tuition is only the beginning. Homeschoolers must also pay for everything, but the parents determine how far that extends. It is wise to work within the boundaries of biblical stewardship. What can you afford? Are you in debt? Are you giving generously to your local church? You may need to seek financial counseling as a part of the schooling decisions for your children.

Public schools use the crème athletes for sports and many extra-curricular activities. The rest are spectators. Private schools generally allow all students (those who desire to participate) a spot somewhere, sometime on the team. For homeschoolers everybody plays. Parents and students need a shared biblical view of sports and athletic competition. If your child enjoys sports, help them to determine the kind of athlete they are. Do they want to commit themselves to the training required to develop their abilities? But don’t allow them to succumb to the couch-sitting, potato chip-eating, television-watching, computer-addicted culture.

Parents should become students of their students. Learn your children’s weaknesses, strengths, sin patterns, work ethic, skills, abilities (not everyone excels at math, etc.), personality, sensitivity, and spiritual walk. Know your child and never forget that all good education is an experience in home schooling. The home is to be a vibrant place, one that stimulates the mind and encourages learning. There is much that can be done in a family committed to explore the wonders of God’s creation and investigate the way in which God’s sovereign hand has worked throughout human history. If a Christian world and life view is not forged and exercised in the home, any type of school will be inadequate and even dangerous. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are God’s gifts to His creatures. Experience the pleasure of God in the good work of preparing children for the rest of their lives.

A Refuge in Deception (September 7, 2008)

Imagine taking refuge in a cardboard box for protection from a category five hurricane. That would be beyond the pale of good sense. The drama of human history is an unending lesson in the folly of self-deception. Human beings have a seemingly incurable penchant to believe their own lies. Ancient Israel is one sad example of this. God had given to His covenant people the promise that He would protect them from predator nations. The one stipulation was that Israel was to obey His commandments. It was not that complicated. Trust God. Don't put confidence in the power of other nations to do what only God can do. Did Israel listen? No. Instead she formed an alliance with Egypt to protect her from a powerful and dangerous Assyria to her north. This was a futile exercise in seeking refuge in a deception. Israel became intoxicated with the prospects of Egypt's military might. It was an exercise in seeking refuge in a cardboard box of self-deception. This is folly of the highest order for several reasons.

The prophet Isaiah exposed Israel's political diplomacy for what it was, namely, unbelieving self-confidence. In the first place it was an attempt to create policies contrary to reality. Secondly, it was a doomed effort to build a security system out of human values. And, thirdly, this support system was a house of cards. Edward J. Young describes it this way; "They (Israel) were skillful in deceit and treachery of all sorts, the art of dissimulation and secret intrigue and anything else that belonged to the methods of false diplomacy and common politics." For it was Isaiah who said, "we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter" (Isa. 28:15). The witness nation was living in a cardboard box of a false sense of security. How easily we can do this.

One of those cardboard boxes of self-deception is the popular lie that a God of love would not send anyone to hell. Fallen human beings disdain the idea of divine judgment and will believe anything that provides avoidance of it. The doctrine of hell is offensive to modern minds and is not allowed into any thoughts about life after death. As a result, gods are constructed who will accommodate truth-dodgers. But one truth unrelentingly towers above the little thoughts of self-deceived sinners. Jesus will not let us off the hook. He said, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (Jn. 3:18). The cardboard box of a God of love without wrath is incinerated in the presence of the blazing holiness of an all-powerful God. The only safe place is in Jesus Christ, who because of God's matchless love was delivered up to death for us all. He is the only place of refuge when the howling winds of God's wrath blow at the last judgment.

God is not a malleable being who can be shaped to suit our own desires and interests. In his book, Ten Lies About God, Erwin Lutzer, pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, has identified a variety of ways in which people make God whatever they want Him to be. One of these card-board box gods is "the God of my health and wealth." Some Christians find this god to be quite attractive. He bears a striking resemblance to the consumerism and entitlement mentality of Western civilization. Lutzer appropriately says, "How can we believe in such a God when Jesus said, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head' (Matt. 8:20)?"

Another god in this pantheon of idols is the "God of my emotional need." This god has a large following in our therapeutic culture. One of these self-constructed deities makes much of us, is

there for us, and views sin as simply a lack of self-esteem. How convenient, a god who “exists to give me the unconditional acceptance I deserve.” There is much talk in our day about “unconditional love.” There is certainly a sense in which God sets His love upon His elect in a way that He does not upon others (Eph. 5:25). But in the words of Don Carson (The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God), “God’s discipline of his children means that he may turn upon us with the divine equivalent of the ‘wrath’ of a parent on a wayward teenager. Indeed, to cite the cliché ‘God’s love is unconditional’ to a Christian who is drifting toward sin may convey the wrong impression and do a lot of damage.”

God is love. But we must not attempt to refashion this precious truth into an image that suits our interests and imagination, as seems to have been done in William Young’s best seller, The Shack. A lesser god is one who is the creation of a finite mind. The God of the Bible is revealed in all His perfections. He is the one who is of infinite worth. When the storms of life come at us in all their ferocity, will your confidence be in a cardboard box or in the “God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psa. 46:1)?

Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed (September 21, 2008)

“A book is an axe that breaks the frozen seas within.” One of those axes that has profited me immensely in recent days is Simplify Your Spiritual Life by Don Whitney. As you may remember, Dr. Whitney was our “One Conference” speaker this past April. This “little-big” book (200 pages, 91 chapters) will stir your thinking in more ways than you can shake a stick at. I took a chapter a day the first thing in the morning. In this way it served to give me some fresh ideas that could immediately be implemented in my Bible reading and prayer time. For example, in the chapter, “Meditate and Apply,” a useful series of questions are presented in response to the admonition, “When you encounter Scripture, search for at least one application of it.” Great profit was also gained from the chapter, “Ask the Joseph Hall Questions.” Use its advice and become more meaningfully engaged in your daily Bible reading.

Don’t be confused by the word “Simplify” in the book’s title. This is not a book about shortcuts to maturity in Christ. The explanation of four misconceptions will keep your spiritual tires from running off the road (pp. 39-40). In a day when spirituality has been stripped of its biblical meaning, the chapter, “Embracing a Trinitarian Spirituality,” makes the necessary correction and reminder that, “True spirituality, in contrast to the popular, self-defined spirituality of today, is above all a God-centered spirituality. Any spirituality without God is just self-worship by another name.”

If you are intimidated by the thought of journaling, Whitney offers some excellent suggestions in his collection of chapters, “Simplifying and Your Journal.” A modest amount of journaling can, in the author’s words, assist “in creating and preserving a spiritual heritage, in clarifying and articulating insights and impressions, in monitoring goals and priorities, and in maintaining the other spiritual disciplines” (p. 95).

Other life altering bits of wisdom are in such chapters as “Read One Page Per Day,” “Pray Through Today’s Plans,” “Avoid Spiritual Anesthesia,” “Learn to be Content with Christ,” “Remove One, Organize One Thing.” If you think you have stagnated in your service for God,

follow the counsel that says, “Even if you aren’t sure which spiritual gift you have, concentrate the bulk of your ministry time in areas where you think your heart and abilities best belong.”

Simplifying Your Spiritual Life lends itself not only to private devotional reading but would also serve well in a group discussion. No matter how it is incorporated into your life it offers “spiritual disciplines for the overwhelmed.”

Walking Down Wall Street (October 8, 2008)

How are Christians to think and live at this time of national financial crisis? Let’s review some of the ways faith is to walk through such a time as this.

We can begin with a paradoxical thought. Though we should not be conducting our lives any differently than we always do (assuming that biblical wisdom is ruling our thoughts, interests, pleasures, and plans), we ought to be living differently in the sense of a heightened awareness of our circumstances. It was said of the sons of Issachar in the time of king David that they were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do” (1 Chron. 12:32). This tribe of Israel was known for its good sense in having cast their lot with David rather than Saul. The point of this for us is how critical it is that we know what is happening around us, discerning shifts in the winds of culture, politics, and the economy. We are to watch the development of current events with a biblically keen eye. How does God want me to respond to what I see taking place in my nation?

We ought to be living by the Scriptural standards of financial stewardship. Jesus has told us to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (Lk. 16:9). Invest for eternity. That’s what ought to be guiding our financial lives. Are you living within your means? Do you carry credit card debt? Why? What are you doing about it? Have you taken on a mortgage which is beyond an affordable range? Reevaluate your spending and saving habits. This is a good place to begin.

Don’t panic. If you have investments in the stock-market don’t take unwise action. Making rash decisions at this time is like jumping out of a roller coaster. You will get hurt. Hiding money under the mattress is not wise money management. John Wesley’s advice is still valuable. Make as much as you can. Save as much as you can. Give as much as you can.

Inform yourself. What is going on in our national economy? Read and listen to wise people, though even this can be a bit confusing given the conflicting opinions of smart people. But there are sources of accurate information that you will need to locate and access. There is not virtue in sticking one’s head in the sand when ill winds are blowing.

Don’t be angry after dark. “Be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph. 4:25-26). There is a righteous anger, but it can easily degenerate into bitterness. Wall Street did not get into the financial mess it is in without the contributions of a lot of people. Greed, fraud, and the failure to hold financial and governmental institutions accountable have all entered into our present economic debacle. But be careful. Nursing a grudge toward individuals, lending institutions, liberals, conservatives, or particular presidential candidates will poison the well of one’s heart. There is a larger issue that must rule

our thoughts and responses to pain and suffering. God is wisely and lovingly sovereign over all our losses and gains. Job is a worthy model. Job lost almost everyone and everything near to him. What did he do? He worshiped God (Job 1:20).

Beware of placing confidence in our political system to solve our social, moral, and economic problems. Election season fever is infecting millions of minds. Politicians are making promises which will be easily forgotten when power is gained. It is quite unsettling to see so many carried away by utopian dreams. If a certain candidate is elected, so the rhetoric goes, he will solve our problems. The gullible are easily mesmerized by promises for change. The older and wiser have seen all this before. It is the moral character of a nation that determines its strength and stature in the family of nations. Go to the polls and vote, but don't be deceived by those whose worldview will only ensure greater suffering for coming generations.

The current crisis in the marketplace is a painful reminder of the fragile and temporary nature of earthly kingdoms. Governments come and go. Their stories are told in our history books. The prophet Daniel's account of the story of human kingdoms leaves us in stunned silence. A stone, the Son of Man, is seen smashing into the kingdoms of this world. They will be destroyed and, in their place, will come Christ's kingdom that will endure forever (Dan. 2:44). The nations have a rendezvous with Jesus Christ. The city of man awaits its fiery destruction. The business world will lament the loss of the commercial empire they have built (Rev. 18:11-16). A catastrophic stock-market crash on a world-wide scale will one day occur. All of this precedes the second coming of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

We must live prayerfully and evangelistically. A time of economic instability serves as a "road-block to hell." God sends disasters to warn all who are worshiping lesser gods of the eternal disaster of hell. Will those who are worshiping at the altar of materialism come to their spiritual senses and repent? Will Christians who have been drawn into the sins of the culture have their eyes opened and repent? These are responses for which we can pray. The church of Jesus Christ must show the world how to walk down Wall Street.

I Want to Vote (October 24, 2008)

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is not authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). These words are directed to Christians as a preamble to a section on the civic duties of the church. Human government has been instituted by God for the good of mankind. Our form of government provides privileges and freedoms unrivaled in human history. One of those privileges is the right to vote. In a few days we will have the opportunity to cast our ballot for the next president of the United States. For whom should we vote? Most registered voters have already made up their minds. What is offered here is a rehearsal of those principles that will guide this citizen at the voting machine. I want to vote for the presidential candidate who will come closer to providing the kind of leadership needed at this hour in our nation's history.

I want to vote for a candidate who thinks and makes decisions based on a Christian worldview. A worldview is simply the way in which one interprets reality. Christian theism, for example, views reality through the lens of a belief in a God who is infinite and personal (triune), omniscient, sovereign and good. Ethics are seen as transcendent and based on the character of

God as good (holy and loving). The reader is encouraged to consult James W. Sire's book, The Universe Next Door, for a helpful development of what it means to think within the sphere of Christian theism. Moral absolutes, the sacredness of human life, and marriage as between a man and woman are some of the features of how consistently a presidential candidate adheres to a Christian worldview.

I want to vote for a candidate who will honor the founding documents of our nation. The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land. Our form of government, with its rights and liberties for American citizens, is set forth in this extraordinary document. It is not perfect, but it is probably the best mankind can do this side of Christ's kingdom. Sadly though, there are those who want to interpret the Constitution according to their subjective whims and whatever the popular consensus is at the moment. The original intent of the authors of our Constitution is set aside to our peril. The matter of the Constitution and how it is to be interpreted bears directly on how this citizen will vote.

I want to vote for a candidate who holds a high view of human life. Abortion on demand may be legal, but as a moral option it undermines society's responsibility to protect the defenseless. It is unconscionable for a nation to look the other way while innocent infants are slaughtered in the womb. Laws and moral persuasion work to restrain a low view of human life. We should expect a candidate for the highest office in the land to uphold the value and worth of every individual. Social usefulness is not the criteria for whether one lives or dies. A presidential candidate who countenances abortion on demand is inviting the dissolution of the nation he must swear to defend.

I want to vote for a candidate who believes that marriage is between a man and a woman. Same-sex marriages and so-called civil unions for same-sex partners are an insult to the God-ordained institution of marriage. Those who declare themselves to be homosexual certainly have inalienable rights (e.g., jobs and housing). "Nonetheless, legislation and public funds should not promote sinful lifestyles." A presidential candidate who waffles on this important issue has declared war on the family as a "divinely-willed institution."

I want to vote for a candidate who will appoint judges who are not hostile to Christianity. The appointment of Supreme Court justices and federal court justices is one of the duties of the president of the United States. Therefore, a presidential candidate who would likely appoint judges who will use their judicial authority to redefine marriage, deny rights to the unborn, and attempt to refashion America according to a secular social agenda will contribute to the ruin of our nation. Such a presidential candidate will not get my vote.

I want to vote for a candidate who will respect the right of the United States of America to exist as a sovereign nation and who will not subordinate our national authority to the United Nations or any kind of international socialistic world order. In a paraphrase of what one astute observer has said, beware of any presidential candidate who supports "treaties and conventions" that would empower international agencies to rule over a nation's economic affairs or who will attempt to transform godless social theories into international law.

I want to vote for a candidate who will uphold a strong national defense and who will refuse to weaken us through any form of unilateral disarmament. Human government exists to promote the good and restrain evil (Rom. 13:4). Police departments and our armed services function to

protect us from those who would seek to do us harm. Diplomacy and treaties have their place but never at the expense of an informed judgment about human nature. We are sinful human beings living in a fallen world. The belief that human nature is perfectible may set the stage for the next world war.

I want to vote for a candidate who supports Israel's right to exist as a nation. There are terrorist organizations and governmental leaders who wish to destroy the nation of Israel. Will the next president of the United States contribute to the weakening of Israel's right to defend itself? Listen carefully to what each candidate is saying about these issues.

I want to vote for a candidate who will not subvert our free enterprise economic system. There is a debate being waged at the present time about the role of government in a market economy. Many people are angry at certain financial institutions and are calling for more regulation. The basic idea of free enterprise, namely, putting men "on their own to make economic decisions, and let them reap the rewards or lack of rewards from those decisions," is at its best when governed by personal integrity. Those who invite more government controls, thinking that this will ensure a healthy national economy, will wonder what happened when their personal freedoms have vanished.

I want to vote for a candidate who will not think that higher taxes is the answer to every economic and social problem we have as a nation. Government has the right of taxation. That is not the argument. Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk. 12:17). If governing authorities are to fulfill their purpose in punishing wrongdoers and commending right doers, they will need some money to do it (Rom. 13:6-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). But the Eighth Commandment says, "You shall not steal." Wise national leadership knows the difference between covering legitimate costs and stealing. Watch out for that presidential candidate who wants to take money by force to fund what he deems as "good causes." In doing so, government undermines the charitable potential of its citizenry.

I want to vote for a candidate who views justice and mercy not as a means of power and control but as the means of correcting social and personal structures that are evil. The informed Christian voter knows that "the Bible denounces laws that are unjust." Equal treatment under the law is a cherished value. We are to look for a president who sees himself as the president of all the people, not just the wealthy and the powerful.

I want to vote for a candidate who has personal moral strength. It is not necessary that he be a Christian to govern equitably and wisely. But he must be honest, just, merciful, wise, and tested. Who are his best friends? What is his political record? If he is a senator, how has he voted on key issues? What is his vision for America? Does he tell the truth? What are his virtues? Character is king. A presidential candidate could be Machiavellian in his politics, even though he is a good administrator and makes grand promises. Voters beware.

Voting is not an easy thing. It takes preparation, information, and personal maturity to make an acceptable judgment at the ballot box. Even when we vote for the one who seems to be the best candidate, we may still be disappointed. But this is no excuse to stay home on voting day. We do not know what is in store for our nation. If government continues to be seen as the solution to all of our problems and an entitlement mentality (confusion of "wants" and "needs") succeeds in

driving the electorate to vote for the candidate who promises them the most, we will have lost the virtues that guard our freedoms and made us a strong nation.

I want to vote for the presidential candidate who has a profound sense of God's sovereignty over all nations, whose integrity is not for sale, who is not an enemy of Christianity, who will not allow the systematic destruction of the family, who cherishes American liberty, who will protect the defenseless, who is committed to peace through a strong military, who repudiates the abuse of political power, who believes that God is the only absolute owner of all things, who insists on justice for the poor as well as the rich, who knows that religious and political freedom are God-given, not government-given, and who will execute the duties of the presidency in humility under God.

Perhaps you have felt a longing as you have read these qualifications for national leadership. The Christian knows that only the Lord Jesus Christ will bring a perfect government to this world. Our hopes are invested in the coming King of kings and Lord of lords and His universal reign of justice and compassion.

Infants, the Government, and Voting (October 31, 2008)

With a Presidential election breathing down our necks, it is in order to respond to some of the flawed thinking that has spread throughout the electorate. Sadly, even Christians have succumbed to some confused and patently unbiblical reasoning (if it is even that). Some seem to have forgotten the importance of abortion-on-demand as a critical issue.

Let's briefly review the biblical teaching regarding abortion. One, God has made it very clear that the developing fetus is already human life (Jer. 1:4-5; Psa. 139:13-16; Ex. 21:22-24; Lk. 1:35, 41-42; 2:21). The embryo is a human being, not a tumor or mere tissue. As one observer has said, "Ultrasound has given a stunning window on the womb that shows the unborn at eight weeks sucking thumb, recoiling from pricking, responding to sound." Two, fetal life is defenseless and will be vindicated by God (Psa. 10:17-18; 146:9; 68:5; Amos 1:13; Prov. 6:16-18; Jas. 1:27). Abortion is an assault on God, not just human beings. Woe to those who make God their adversary. A nation that legitimizes, through its legal system, the destruction of innocent human life is in for hard times. These two fundamental facts about the unborn should give pause to those who treat the unborn as if they are expendable.

The "pro-choice-for-government and pro-life-for-churches" position is one particularly troubling attempt to side-step the abortion issue. It has found some currency even among professing Christians. The idea is that churches, not the federal government, must take on the moral issue of the sacredness of human life. This has the appearance of getting one off the hook in the abortion debate. One can ostensibly vote for a presidential candidate who supports abortion on demand, while at the same time they say that they believe that abortion is wrong. But this is a morally and logically flawed argument. What good is a moral conviction if it has no implications in the public square? Not surprisingly, closely associated with this outlook is the argument, "What right do the pro-lifers have to impose their view of morality on others?" It is contended that you can't legislate morality in a pluralistic society. The fact of the matter is that government has legislated morals quite regularly. Robertson McQuilkin in his book, *Biblical Ethics*, has said, "...to say that morals should not be legislated is foolish. Most of what is legislated is in the realm

of morals. If one's private religious convictions demanded that he hold slaves, have many wives, discriminate against blacks, or mutilate Orientals, these same liberal defenders of personal rights and freedoms would seek for legislation to stop him. The questions are, Whose rights? (The mother's or the unborn infant's?) and, What rights? (The right to life of the infant or some lesser rights of the mother?)."

It is unconscionable that a Christian would knowingly vote for any political candidate who did not believe that life begins at conception and that life should be protected by appropriate laws. A critic might say, is this not one-issue voting? Yes. It is and appropriately so. Randy Alcorn has put it in sharp focus. "So, is the candidate's stand on the issue of shedding innocent blood important enough to disqualify him as a candidate? Yes. While a single issue can't qualify a candidate, it can disqualify him.... I don't think someone is a good candidate just because he is pro-life. But he cannot be a good candidate unless he is pro-life. Personally, if he is committed to legalized child-killing, as a matter of conscience I must vote against him." Christians who do not enter the voting booth thinking this way are contributing to the cheapening of human life. This is a moral consequence we cannot afford and for which our nation will pay a heavy price.

Briefly, there is one other matter in this presidential campaign that has become the subject of much discussion, namely, the role of government in the welfare of its citizens. One candidate has said that increased taxes are necessary to "spread the wealth around." The word "socialist" has been batted around. The Bible has been invoked as providing proof-texts for "taking from the haves and giving to the have-nots." Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40, "to the extent that you did it (feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc.) to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" are often cited as a mandate for so-called social justice. Mercy shown to those in need is certainly a way in which a Christian demonstrates love for his neighbor (Lk. 10:25-37). But to use this biblical text to support confiscatory taxation as the basis for establishing a welfare state is contrary to its meaning. Jesus was commending good works as the fruit of God's work of grace in the hearts of believers. Increased taxation, a bigger government bureaucracy, and a government-knows-best spell trouble for personal freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Another passage of Scripture used to legitimize a welfare state is Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-37. It is the account of the early church pooling its resources to help those in need. It was totally voluntary and not designed to create financial equality among Christians. Believers in Jesus Christ were taking exceptional measures in a response to the need of the moment. It is a good reminder that all our time, money, and possessions belong to God (not to government). This is part of the witness of the church to the unsaved of the truth that the grace-clear streams of generosity find their source in the springs of new life in Christ. If churches everywhere would live out justice and mercy in their ranks, think of the impact this would have upon society.

Christian, when you visit the voting booth this week, don't check your brain and theology at the door. Vote for the candidates who best measure up to a Christian world view. The words of Albert Mohler are most helpful, "Have you cast your vote yet? If not, what could possibly be more important - on this one day - than taking your stand with those who defend the right to exercise democracy and fulfill the responsibility of citizens? How can you face your neighbors, or your children, and say that democracy just takes too much of your time? So, go vote. Vote your convictions. Vote for life, liberty, and the cause of what is right. Let your voice be heard." I would only add to this that part of what is right is recognizing the wrongness of denying the

rights of infants in the womb to live and the wrongness of giving government the right to steal in order to put itself in the place of God.

How to Live Under the New President-Elect (November 9, 2008)

Amanda Jones, 109, voted for Barack Obama in the presidential election on November 4, 2008. Mrs. Jones, the daughter of an emancipated slave, Emmanuel Alfred Roberts, was born in 1899. She is quoted as saying in response to the election of Sen. Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States, “The white is over everything.... I never thought the colored would rise up” and accomplish this (John Burnett, NPR). She went on to say that Barack Obama’s election is “a blessing.”

This is a touching story, no matter what one’s politics. Living in the United States of America is an experience of race relations, hard fought politics, and the influence of Christianity. Slavery bound our nation in the shackles of a moral evil. But once its chains were broken, segregation and Jim Crow laws captured much of society in the twentieth century. This cultural cancer was confronted by the Civil Rights movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1950’s and 60’s. Now, forty-five years after Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” message in August of 1964, America has elected its first African American president. But many Christians have found themselves conflicted by this turn of events. President-Elect Barack Obama has taken positions on certain moral and social issues that conservative Christians find offensive and unacceptable. One African American pastor has summed up the political and moral dilemma this way. “I am pro-life, and President-Elect Obama is the most anti-life senator to come to power in my lifetime. I also am pro-conservative justices (who limit legislating from the bench). I am pro-marriage – that is, pro-heterosexual marriage. In the end, I could not overlook these issues as I approached Election Day. But the temptation to justify voting for Obama was strong, for I did not want to be against the side of history – of an African American finally making it to the Oval Office.”

We can rejoice that history has been made. It’s a good thing that no matter what one’s ethnicity, it is possible to become President of the United States. But there are problems. Barack Obama, as indicated above, holds views on human life and homosexuality that are blatantly anti-Christian. In a speech the very night of his election victory homosexuality was mentioned as another form of morally legitimate diversity along-side of ethnic diversity. Even when they disagree with the political, social, and moral policies of the one occupying the Oval Office, Christians must know how to conduct themselves as Christ-honoring citizens. The following thoughts are designed to help believers in Jesus Christ to fulfill their responsibilities in such a time as this.

We are to live by confidence in the rule of God over all our circumstances, political and otherwise (Psa. 145:3; Dan. 4:34-35; Rom. 8:28). God in His infinite wisdom determines who will be the President of the United States. This does not mean that God approves of the policies and the manner in which a president governs. He does, however, hold office by divine appointment.

Christians are to submit to governing authorities and are to be law-abiding citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). We are to know how to render “unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). Paying taxes and giving honor to

whom honor is due are a part of Christian citizenship. This also means that in our political system, if we think we are paying too much in taxes we can work for reform of the laws, etc.

Never forget that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the crown jewel of God's redemptive plan (Eph. 1:3-12). We are to live for the proclamation and spread of the gospel to all peoples. Human government cannot solve our moral ills or create a social utopia. Human nature is not perfectible. Those who ignore this and taut a political agenda that defies God's moral law are a danger to humanity. The crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, is mankind's only hope.

The church of Jesus Christ is to serve as the conscience within every nation in which it exists (Matt. 5:13-16; Titus 2:7-8; Phil. 2:15). The Holy Spirit indwelling the body of Christ constitutes a restraining force to moral evil. This is another reason why authentic Christianity seeks to protect the unborn, the weak, the elderly, and defends the divine institution of marriage as between a man and a woman.

Pray for our governing authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-4; Prov. 21:1). "Entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, (are) to be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority." Our prayers affect decisions at the highest level.

God turns nations over to the folly of their defiance of the truth He has revealed about Himself (Rom. 1:18-32; Hab. 2:2-20). Scoffing at God's moral law and substituting the creation for the Creator is a prescription for the ruin of a nation. The collapse of Western culture is evidence of God giving us over to the consequences of our arrogant disregard of transcendent truth.

Fear, worry, and anger must not become boarders in our homes (Phil. 4:6-7; Eph. 4:26). Anxiety regarding the state of the economy will devour joyful, generous Christian living. Anger toward those with whom we have serious political disagreements can turn us into very unpleasant people and poor advertisements for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Don't let the news-media determine your understanding of the way things really are (Rom. 12:2; Jer. 28:15). The Bible is the only "no-spin zone" in this world. Beware of the crisis-cadence of cable news. It can make you jumpy (e.g., "the sky is falling") and pugilistic (looking for a fight). Be wise to the distortions and the moral and social agendas of those who package the news for you.

If you are a parent, prepare your children for the challenges of their adult lives (Eph. 6:1-3). The price of our current economy mess will largely be paid by our children and grandchildren. They are going to need all the instruction and training they can get in how to live in a collapsing civilization. Instruct them in wise decision making, respect for authority, how to stand alone for God, honesty, debt-free living, and the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things. Let them see what authentic Christianity looks like.

Manage your personal finances according to biblical precepts (Lk. 16:1-13). Money and material things are a cruel master. In the words of one popular financial counselor, "Live like no one else. So you can live like no one else." This does not mean hoarding and self-centered living. It means staying out of debt, living within one's means, and supporting the work of God with generous giving.

In a recent column Albert Mohler has given us wise counsel regarding living under our new President-Elect's administration. "There must be absolutely no denial of the legitimacy of President-Elect Obama's election and no failure to accord this new President the respect and honor due to anyone elected to that high office. Failure in this responsibility is disobedience to a clear biblical command... We must pray that God would change President-Elect Obama's mind and heart on issues of our crucial concern. May God change his heart and open his eyes to see abortion as the murder of the innocent unborn, to see marriage as an institution to be defended, and to see a host of issues in a new light."

Let's allow an African American pastor to call us to our duty to President-Elect Obama. Pastor Eric C. Redmond, author of Where Are All the Brothers? Straight Answers to Men's Questions About the Church, and past Second Vice-President of the Southern Baptist Convention, says that "The question for me at this time is this: Can I continue to live Soli Deo Gloria under a President whose moral judgment already is questionable before he takes the oath of office? Yes, I can, for I can be obedient to Scripture, praying for the one in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-3), honoring the one in authority (1 Pet. 2:13-17), submitting to the one in authority (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1), and seeking righteousness for the entire citizenry (Prov. 14:34). These I will seek to do by grace. I will "honor the good appointment of God."

A Thanksgiving Walk (November 23, 2008)

If you are reading and listening to the news, you are being swamped with a whole lot of bad news. The economy is in the tank. Iran appears to have enough uranium for an atom bomb. Higher taxes look like they are on the horizon. Gay-marriage advocates are on the increase. The evil of abortion on demand is not even being discussed. It's true that these things in themselves should not send a strong Christian over the edge. The world is busy being the world. We live in a perpetual Romans 1:18-32 moral and spiritual free-fall. And here we are at Thanksgiving. Don't expect a lot of help from our culture when it comes to a Christian world view experience of thanksgiving. The following is a modest proposal for some really good things for which we should be thankful. We create Christmas lists, so why not create a Thanksgiving list.

We can be thankful for the perfections of an infinitely wise and holy God (Psa. 106:1). He is a God who is always all right. We don't get up in the morning and say to God, "How are you?" God doesn't grow old or need wisdom. He always knows what He is doing, never makes any mistakes, and is absolutely trustworthy. Revel in the fact that God has not left this world without a Savior. It needs one desperately. We are sinners, the whole lot of us. We need forgiveness. Without God's provision of His beloved Son, we are doomed to an eternity of God's wrath. That's a thought that is overwhelmingly depressing. There is only one place where there is no condemnation of God and that is in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:1). The truth of the matter is that because of Christ's righteousness we can be accepted by God and live with Him in His heaven forever. Be thankful for that (2 Cor. 9:15; Rom. 7:23-25; 1 Cor. 15:57).

We can be thankful that God has chosen us and has gifted us to serve Him (1 Tim. 1:12). Because of God's grace you and I can play a role in the body of Christ. God took a Christian-killing, blaspheming, self-righteous religious zealot like the apostle Paul and showed him mercy. He gifted Paul and sent him everywhere spreading the good news about God's salvation in Jesus

Christ. If God has saved you, you have a mission. You have been gifted by the Holy Spirit for a role in the church. Be thankful for that.

We can be thankful for the awe-inspiring works of God in creation and providence (Psa. 75:1; Psa. 19:1; 25:1). The splendor of God's handiwork in the sky above and the earth beneath should cause us to celebrate His mighty power. Our prayers, conversations with our family, schoolwork, and walks in the woods should be marked by praise and thanksgiving. Don't sit in front of the television all day on Thanksgiving. Go outdoors. Take a walk. Look at the trees. Watch the clouds. Pick up a leaf. Watch the sunset. Feel the wind in your face. While you are doing this, think about the truth that God is near, present in all places and at all times. He is always at hand. He is in charge of the universe. The late James M. Boice put it this way, "Are you aware that God really is near at hand, that he is present in all that happens, and that nothing that ever comes into your life or happens to others is accidental?" That's good. Savor that along with the turkey and pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving Day.

We can be thankful for God's provision and protection (Rom.14:6, 7; Psa. 18:49; 69:29-30). Receive with thanksgiving what the Lord has given us. Don't fail to give Him thanks for the life He has given you. That last breath of air you drew, that last heartbeat. Who gave it to you? One thing it means is that God is giving you continued opportunity to worship and serve Him. And we would certainly not want to eat that first bite of cranberry sauce without looking up to heaven and thanking God for the food He has provided and the taste buds to enjoy it (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

We can be thankful for those in positions of authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2). We have just elected a new president. He needs our prayers. The task awaiting him is gargantuan. Our praying ought to done with thanksgiving "on behalf of all men," including presidents (whether Democrat or Republican). Thank God that we can assemble together as Christians to worship God, can be protected from lawless men, and that we can live out our faith before unbelievers. And remember, a thankful heart is an evangelistic heart.

We can be thankful for the triumph of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:14). We who have been born again have been subdued by God's grace. The fragrance of that grace is to be released through us. Thank God for people you know whose lives have been transformed by God's Spirit (Rom. 1:8; 2 Thess. 2:13-14). Thank God for Christians who are standing strong through difficult times and persecution (2 Thess. 1:3; 2 Cor. 9:11). Has someone been generous to you? Thank God for them and His grace to you through them. Thank God when the gospel frees sinners from their slavery to sin and they become slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17). Do you know anyone like this? It's a long list isn't it? When you take that walk and look at the beauty of God's creation, be sure to thank Him for the undeserved favor shown to the one wearing your shoes.

When You Pray (December 7, 2008)

"Lord, bless the missionaries." "Lord, lead, guide, and direct Larry and Pam as they look for a new house." "Lord, be with Harold as he faces surgery next week." We Christians have a bad habit of using mindless clichés in our prayer life. If you are afflicted with the disease of banality in your prayers for others, there is some biblical medicine.

When the apostle Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus, he blazed a theological trail for us (Eph. 1:15-23). God's sovereignty in the conversion and spiritual growth of his readers was the driving thought as Paul interceded for them ("faith in the Lord Jesus... and your love for all the saints"). We, too, ought to make it a habit of thanking God for His intervening, sovereign grace in the lives of those we read about in reports of the progress of the gospel in missionary newsletters. We are also to pray that God's sovereign and holy purposes may be accomplished in His people. Nothing is more important in this world than knowing God better. This truth sat on the front row of the apostle's thoughts. Because of this he prayed that his readers might have needed insight in grasping certain crucial truths.

All believers need their spiritual "lights" turned on. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand the significance of biblical doctrine. This is called illumination ("I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened"). One area where the lights need to be turned on is the comprehension of the glorious destiny to which we have been called in Christ ("know what is the hope of His calling"). When praying for fellow believers, ask God to enable them to see how to live with eternity's values constantly before their eyes. As a result, this will shape their perspective on material things, insecurities regarding money, generosity, and related matters.

Just a night-light's output of awareness of the meaning of "what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" can contribute to great changes in one's life. We need to know who we are in Christ so we will want to live in line with this reality. Instead of "Lord, be with Tom as he visits his in-laws this week," we can pray, "Lord, may Tom see himself as you see him (as God's inheritance in Christ) in all his relationships and conversations this coming week."

Pray for that family member in the hospital that he or she will comprehend "the surpassing greatness of (God's) power toward us who believe." The spiritual wattage of this truth will make it possible to see beyond the pain and suffering of the moment to what God wants to do in the believer's life. We need God's power to transform our lives through the hardships we endure. This resurrection power is available to those who belong to Christ.

When you pray this week take the time to think and pray through the petitions Paul prays in Ephesians 1:15-23. They will protect you from the use of those clichés that easily slip into our praying. The mind will become more biblically engaged as we go before the throne of God's grace and intercede for one another. What a privilege. Prayer does change things and people.

Twelve Resolutions for Christmas (December 14, 2008)

There is a studied effort in our society to eliminate God, the Christ story, and other biblical themes from the "holiday" celebration. I would like to offer some resolutions that if followed could be significant Christian counter-cultural activity. These are not intended to be a kind of legalistic system that if adhered to will earn something from God. Rather, they are an attempt to more clearly focus our worship during the season before us.

1. I resolve not to use language from which God's words have been erased. I will not allow the "holiday season" to become a substitute for the "Christmas season." If I send cards or e-mails, I will use meaningful, biblically significant, and truth-laden words.

2. I resolve to listen to and meditate on the eternal truth of God's Word no matter how busy I get. A sermon on tape, the Bible on tape, sermon notes to which I prayerfully respond, and daily Scripture reading can do much to keep my mind on the truth of the Christmas story.
3. I resolve not to buy anything that is unwise, unnecessary, or that will diminish my ability to give to God's work. The presents that I give will be meaningful, useful, and well within my budgetary plans. Waste, impulsiveness, and debt will not be allowed to reside in my life.
4. I resolve to enter the month of January without the weariness and regrets of having over-committed myself during the month of December. I will ask God for wisdom as I plan my days.
5. I resolve to respond to the commercialization of Christmas by displaying generosity and mercy toward those who have very real physical and material needs. I will look around to notice those who may be lonely and/or need a helping hand.
6. I resolve to pray every day through the Christmas season for the missionaries our church supports. I will make a special gift to one of our missionary families. I will look on the monthly church prayer calendar to pray for the persecuted church around the world.
7. I resolve to listen to some Christ-centered, God-exalting Christmas music in my home or in my car at least ten minutes every day.
8. I resolve to read the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-38 on Christmas day with my family. I will not let presents, football, or food crowd out the wonderful words of life.
9. I resolve not to allow food or entertainment rule over me during the Christmas season. I am responsible for what I eat, how much I eat, and what I do with my mind and time. I will glorify God with my body and not abuse it.
10. I resolve to display either in my house or in my yard a reminder that Christ came to this world to save sinners. A manger scene along with an explanation of its meaning will be one of the best memories our children can have of the Christmas season.
11. I resolve to share the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ with at least one person during the Christmas season.
12. I resolve to be patient, kind, forgiving, helpful, sacrificial, and joyful during the Christmas season. I will display the Savior in my attitude and relationships knowing that all true goodness exalts the glory of God.

The Prince of Peace (December 21, 2008)

The Christmas season has a way of stirring up human aspirations for peace. This is understandable. Look at our world. Wars, civil strife, threats of nuclear proliferation, and terrorism are the rule, not the exception, in our violence torn world. It's as if our world were broken, we know it, but are helpless to do anything about it. The truth is that our world does

totter under the weight of human depravity. The human heart is committed to an agenda that does not include allegiance to God, only allegiance to oneself. James the apostle tells us plainly that the source of wars is self-seeking ambition within each of us (Jas. 4:1-2). The Bible doesn't hold out any hope for man-made peace. It is just not going to happen. Jesus said that at the time preceding the beginning of the end of human history there will be wars and rumors of wars. Some object to this outlook. They say it is unnecessarily pessimistic. However, the person who interprets the Bible correctly is an optimistic realist. What does that mean? Is world peace possible? In what sense can the Christian be optimistic about the future?

We know this. Peace will come to this earth through one born of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."). This prophecy given by Jacob over eighteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ is amazing in what it says about Israel's coming Messiah as being Shiloh, the greater son of David, Jesus Christ. He is the one to whom all royal authority belongs. Here is a glimmer of hope. This coming one is later known as the prince of peace (Isa. 9:6, seven hundred years before Christ). It is also said of Him that, "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace" (v. 7). The possibility of peace among the nations is bound up in the One who will bring peace in its fullest sense. The Prince of Peace will proclaim peace to the nations (Zech. 9:10, "He will speak peace to the nations."). This prophecy from Zechariah bears a closer look. Its immediate context speaks of cutting off the chariot and the battle bow from Ephraim. These instruments of war will be destroyed. There will be a forced disarmament brought about by the mere word from Israel's Messiah. Peace among the nations will not come through the United Nations or any human endeavor, no matter how noble it may sound. It will come when the King of kings and Lord of lords comes in all His glory to establish His kingdom. This is possible because He came a first time to provide reconciliation between the sinner and God who "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Israel's Messiah, born of Mary, was celebrated by the angels as God's peace giver (Lk. 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, peace toward those on whom God's sovereign pleasure rests."). The appearance of an angelic host to the shepherds was the occasion to appeal to all creation to praise God. It was a celebration of peace brought to earth. Reconciliation has been provided through the perfect life and atoning death of Jesus Christ. Recipients of God's favor experience this peace (Rom. 5:1). Many have mistakenly understood the angels' words to mean that God's peace will come to those who behave. How wrong this is. Peace is a grace-gift from God. This is crucial to all human longings for world peace. Sinful, fallen human beings must experience peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. This then opens up the possibility for harmonious relationships between human beings.

The prince of peace and His peace-giving power is the message of the gospel (Acts 10:36, "preaching peace through Jesus Christ"). This truth places us at ground zero in the quest for universal peace. True and lasting peace for individuals and ultimately for the nations of the world is found in the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20). It took the innocent and perfectly righteous life of Christ given up in a violent death as a substitute for our sins to make genuine peace possible. Jesus Christ accepted the curse that was due us. It took violence to bring about peace, namely, the violence of God's wrath poured out on the sinless sacrifice of His beloved Son. Those who are searching for peace both personally and universally will have to begin their journey at the foot of the cross.

The world increasingly strives for peace and will think it has been achieved immediately before the judgment of God falls (1 Thess. 5:3, “While they are saying, ‘peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child.”). Sin by its very nature is self-deceiving. Unless the eyes of the heart are opened by God’s Spirit to see the truth revealed in God’s Word, the Bible, it will be believed that peace can come to our world if we will only understand one another. Peace treaties will be made but be quickly broken. Promises are made based on deceptive definitions of peace. Mankind’s recipe for peace is poisoned by its own ingredients.

A Christian Christmas not only celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem. It rejoices in the hope that the Prince of Peace will return a second time to establish a reign of peace. All government will rest on His shoulders. He will judge between the nations and “they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war” (Isa. 9:6; 2:4). Let us think of this when we sing that beloved Christmas carol, “Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright, Round yon virgin mother and Child. Holy infant so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace.” That infant will come again as God’s holy warrior, “And on His thigh, He has a name written, ‘King of kings, and Lord of lords’” (Rev. 19:16). Come soon Prince of peace. Come soon.

Abortion on Demand, Where are We? (January 9, 2009)

Since the now infamous U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, over 37 million legal abortions have been performed in the United States. Fifty two percent of women obtaining abortions in the U.S. are younger than 25: Women aged 20-24 obtain 32 % of all abortions; Teenagers obtain 20 %. These are only some of the statistics that reveal the extent to which abortion has become in many, if not most instances, an accepted form of birth control. Actually, according to The Alan Guttmacher Institute and Planned Parenthood’s Family Planning Perspectives, 93 % of all abortions occur for social reasons (i.e., the child is unwanted or inconvenient).

“These justices probably had no idea that they were unleashing a struggle for the soul of the nation.” These words by Robert George capture the magnitude of the moral, spiritual, and social blight of abortion on demand. The following is a brief summary of various aspects of “a struggle for the soul” of our nation. This is presented not so much as a cohesive essay but a kind of anthology of statements from both pro-choice and pro-life advocates.

“The issue of abortion is not about whether life starts at conception. There are convincing arguments either way. The issue is which carries more weight: the life that may be in the embryo, or the life and needs of the woman in whose body that embryo was conceived?” (An ordained United Church of Christ pastor). Never mind that the life in the womb is defenseless and has no choice. Where is the outcry against “shedding innocent blood?”

“Nobody has complete ownership of his or her body – or else they could make it a receptacle for heroin, ride motorcycles without helmets or sell their kidneys to the highest bidder.” (Jim Wotten, AJC). A narcissistic culture trumpets alleged rights to do with one’s body as they please. Who bestowed this right upon them? Does not the fetus have some rights?

“The only distinction between the death of that unborn child and the death of a child after its birth is that the unborn child is not yet known by others to the extent the child born alive soon comes to be known. A miscarriage, like any other natural death, is a tragedy marked by loss and grief. An abortion, like any other taking of human life, is an act of moral treachery.” (Albert Mohler). The pro-abortion community stands in embarrassing silence in the presence of this reality.

“Life begins with the mother’s decision.” (Presidential candidate Wesley Clark, 2004). This argument often used by those in the pro-choice movement betrays a horrifying world view, namely, that “the baby is not alive until the mother exerts an act of will.” By this standard infanticide is not far behind. Thankfully, the presidential candidate who said this did not gain political traction.

“In fact, I challenge you to publish two photographs side by side: one of this ‘child’ outside the womb and another of a ‘fetus’ inside the womb both at 23 or 24 weeks, with a caption that says something like: ‘We at the Star Tribune regard the termination of the preemie as manslaughter and the termination of the fetus as the personal choice of the mother.’” Pastor John Piper wrote these words in an open letter to the Minneapolis Star Tribune which endorsed abortion in a lead editorial.

“No doubt abortions spring from mixed motives. But the will to abort invariably involves an attitude toward life. Abortions are accepted because life is cheap: if it is inconvenient to bear a child to full term, destroy it; if the child will not be what we would desire, kill it. Most abortions take place because humans do not choose to be inconvenienced. Or to be deprived. Or to permit a handicapped child to live. And this, so evangelicals affirm, is a dangerous attitude that society for its own protection does not dare permit a person to act upon. Society has the duty to protect itself against actions that would destroy it. Human life is sacred, since every man, woman, and child is made in God’s image.” (Editorial in Christianity Today, 1982)

“‘The first thing I’d do as President,’ Barack Obama told Planned Parenthood in 2007, ‘is sign the Freedom of Choice Act.’ The bill would remove almost all state and federal restrictions on abortion.” (Christianity Today, January 2009). This is a chilling prospect. Let us pray that the president elect will change his mind.

Where does all this bring us? We are being told that evangelicals under age 35 don’t have the same fire in their belly regarding the issue of legalized abortion that older evangelicals have. This may very well be true. As Christians, whether young or old, we must recommit ourselves to the righteous cause of ending the evil of abortion on demand in our society. Here are a few things we can do now. Pray that God will afflict the conscience of pro-abortionists in that they will uphold the value of human life in the womb. Pray that no bill will be signed by the new president that will remove state and federal restrictions on abortion. Encourage and support Pregnancy Care Centers that are attempting to protect the lives of the unborn. Bible believing local churches must provide an environment of compassion for unwed mothers and serve as a social conscience for the protection of the unborn. Christians must refuse to cast their ballots on election-day for candidates who are not pro-life. This is not all that can be done, but if churches would be true to God’s Word, boldly proclaim God’s eternal truth, and be known for their authentic Christianity, a culture of life would displace a culture of death.

“God Sent Me Ahead of You” (January 18, 2009)

The words of Joseph to his brothers in Genesis 45:7 jumped off the page of my Bible (“But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”). After all that Joseph had endured in his few years, he expressed trust in the infinite wisdom of God. His brothers had been jealous of him (Gen. 37:11), hated him (Gen. 37:4, 5, 8), wanted to kill him (Gen. 37:20), threw him into a pit (Gen. 37:24), and then sold him into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 45:5). False charges of attempted rape landed him in an Egyptian prison. But Joseph sums it up by saying that God was working out His purposes in his life. Further on he says it even more forcefully, “You [his brothers] meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). The psalmist underscores the truth that God “had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave” (Psa. 105:17). A wonderful truth lies on the surface of Scripture like a diamond. God is sovereign over adversity. We must listen to the Bible very carefully. It nowhere assigns responsibility for evil to God. Joseph’s brothers were guilty of the evil they did. Potiphar’s wife lied about Joseph’s intentions. He was innocent of all charges. There are many other examples of this theological puzzle in Scripture.

Wayne Grudem gives a helpful analysis of verses relating to God and evil. (1) “God uses all things to fulfill His purposes and even uses evil for His glory and for our good.” (2) “Nevertheless, God never does evil, and is never to be blamed for evil.” (3) “God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures for the evil they do.” (4) “Evil is real, not an illusion, and we should never do evil, for it will always harm us and others.” (5) “In spite of all of the foregoing statements, we have to come to the point where we confess that we do not understand how it is that God can ordain that we carry out evil deeds and yet hold us accountable for them and not be blamed Himself.” Until God gives us further light, His relation to sin will remain a mystery. He is worthy of our trust and that is how we must live (Jn. 17:3; 1 Thess. 1:9).

Now let’s make all of this very personal. The very morning I read Genesis 45:7 about how God used evil to bring about His sovereign purposes in Joseph’s life, I looked at the business section of the AJC. Bankruptcy filings, job cuts, and a generally dismal financial outlook characterized the daily briefing. Think of the evil that has contributed to the economic downturn nationally and internationally. Greed, fraud, and fiscal irresponsibility have all been nails in the coffin of our economy. What do we do? Complain? Get bitter? Live fearfully? These are roads that hopeless people take. Let’s go back to Joseph. What did he do in response to the bad things others did that directly affected him? He didn’t blame his brothers or Potiphar’s wife. He served God wherever he was. Even in prison he distinguished himself by his administrative gifts. Eventually, through Joseph’s God-given understanding of Pharaoh’s dreams, Egypt avoided a national disaster by being prepared for a devastating seven-year famine. Actually, the outcome of God’s providential working in Joseph’s life saved many lives (Gen. 45:5). Perhaps even more importantly, God’s redemptive purposes through Israel were kept alive through the survival and protection of Israel (Gen. 45:7). God had told Abram that his descendants would live in a foreign land (Gen. 15:13-16). God had promised that even though there would be obstacles, His covenant with Abraham would be fulfilled.

Joseph was not only thinking of his role in the short run of human history. He was thinking of his part in bringing about God’s covenantal purposes for Israel. Joseph had an understanding of the Abrahamic covenant and Israel’s vital role in its fulfillment (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8). Jacob’s son

who had become second only to Pharaoh in power in Egypt had a robust faith that held on to the promises of God. Does this not tell us something essential about the way we ought to think and live through difficult times? If Joseph could conduct himself so admirably even before Romans 8:28 had been written, how much more should we stand strong when our trust in God is challenged. What role are you and I playing in this grand drama of redemption? That question can't be fully answered this side of the eternal kingdom, but one thing is for sure, "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his [God's] purpose." Are we living by that truth? What kind of instruments do we want to be in the Redeemer's hands? Have I forgiven that person who has made my life more difficult? Am I a joy to be around even in suffering a devastating loss? Am I planning for the future and helping other people to know Christ better? Whatever my plight and whatever disappointments have been put on my plate I will pray, "Lord, give me a heart that will only be satisfied by pleasing you, and no matter how confusing things get, help me to remember that you are accomplishing your purposes in my life for the exaltation of Jesus Christ."

God's Grace in Many Places (January 25, 2009)

I am aware that many of you got there long before I did and with some of you, multiple times. On Saturday morning, January 17 at 9:35 a.m., I felt a pain in my right side. Little did I know that a kidney stone (4.3 millimeters in size) had started its journey out of my kidney and eventually would lodge itself at the entrance of my bladder. Never in all my life have I experienced such unremitting pain. This combined with nausea and fever was not overcome by medication. More aggressive medical intervention was necessary. A urologist on staff at the hospital in Brunswick, Georgia agreed to work me into his surgical schedule on Monday, January 19. The stone was broken into several pieces by a laser procedure. The surgeon seemed especially pleased that he was able to rid my body of the unwelcomed guest.

We may wonder exactly how God reveals His grace to us in trying times. I think I have seen many evidences of His grace through this whole ordeal. There was Beth, my dear wife, by my side every step of the way. She gave up a family wedding function to accompany me to the emergency clinic, sat with me in the emergency room through the night, and drove us home on Tuesday from St. Simons, remained cheerful, encouraging, and merciful at the expense of her own energy, sleep, and time. Let's all determine that we can be thought of as instruments of grace.

Nurses. What would we do without them? Coming into an emergency room longing for some relief from pain, there waiting at the door was a nurse. Their kindnesses were many. The attending nurse before and after surgery was dependable and did all she could to make us comfortable. She said she was a believer in Jesus Christ. It was more of God's grace.

Common grace is the grace of God by which He showers upon us an abundance of blessings not included in our salvation. Believers and nonbelievers in Jesus Christ are recipients of common grace. Skilled physicians who know how to use modern medical technology to look inside the human body with little cameras are grace to us all. The whole operating room is an orchestration of grace.

Grace is a manifestation of God's goodness. We do live in a fallen world. Nature has been subjected to futility. It is not what it is supposed to be. Pain is a witness to a body that is dying. But our battles with pain and suffering can be a foretaste of God's everlasting goodness in the eternal kingdom. We must remind ourselves of God's goodness. All that He does is worthy of our approval. When we are experiencing excruciating pain, God is good. When we become disappointed over changed plans, God is good. When piercing pain refuses to stop after we have prayed, God is good. When we become ill while away from home and familiar sources of help, God is good. When we wait for help that is delayed in coming, God is good. When medical bills come that we had not anticipated, God is good. When problems multiply, God is good. When our child is diagnosed with an illness for which there is no known remedy, God is good. When the economy brings us personal financial losses, God is good. When the government pursues policies that grants license to kill the unborn, God is good. Is God's unrelenting goodness an approval of evil? It is not. An infinitely wise and trustworthy God has decreed that evil will operate in His universe. By this He will be eternally glorified. Does that leave us with any questions? It does. For now, we live by faith and see in a mirror dimly. One day God will wipe away every tear, there will no longer be any death, or mourning, or crying, or pain (1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 21:4).

Blessed Assurance or Blessed Doubt? (February 1, 2009)

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of His Spirit, washed in His blood." These words by Fanny Crosby and Mrs. J. F. Knapp have been sung countless times with heartfelt delight. What is the basis of our assurance? The assurance of the believer's salvation comes through God's eternal, inerrant, and infallible Word. Jesus said that "he who hears my word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). Is that a promise? It most definitely is and has a lot of company elsewhere in the Scriptures. Looking primarily into our hearts and obedience for assurance can be a dark hole.

There are those who are wary of the words "eternal security." One noted theologian has said this phrase "can be quite misleading." He is less than enthusiastic about this language because of the way some have abused the truth of the security of the believer. As the old saying goes, one might think that he is eternally secure while at the same time "he wants to ride to heaven on the back of a stolen donkey with another man's wife." Are there people who think they are Christians, and they are not? Undoubtedly. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). There will always be those who, like Judas, deceive others and themselves about their true spiritual condition. But the truth of eternal security is clearly taught in the Bible, and it is not wise to abandon words that carry this important theological freight. We would not want to do this with the word "grace" and all that it communicates, though there are some who use the word as a cover for their sin (Rom. 6:1).

It might help to briefly review some of the fundamentals regarding the security of the believer. All who belong to Jesus Christ have a guarantee from God regarding their predestination, calling, justification, and glorification (Rom. 8:28-30). Christ's present intercessory work in heaven for the Christian will not fail (Rom. 8:34; I Jn. 2:1-2). The Holy Spirit has sealed each and every child of God (Eph. 1:13-14). The doctrine of the security of the believer is clear and bold in the

Bible. We must never forget that our security in Christ depends upon the work of the Triune God. The believer's final entrance into heaven is guaranteed by the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is, then, a bit curious that some Christians in our day are vouching for the value of periodic doubt with regard to the believer's assurance of salvation. It is suggested that we must regularly doubt our salvation in obedience to God's command to "examine ourselves." Doubts with regard to one's salvation, it is said, are not necessarily wrong. They just must not be life-dominating. It is even claimed that "the only validation of salvation is a life of obedience." Two things must be considered. First of all, this is not what the Scripture teaches and, secondly, some bad fruit that will fall from this tree, e.g., self-absorption, instability, hopelessness.

We are told by some that 2 Corinthians 13:5 is a command to periodically doubt our salvation. "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you – unless indeed you are disqualified?" In the wider context of the book, Paul has frequently addressed the Corinthians as believers (1:1, 21-22; 3:2-3; 8:9; 13:11, 14). This is despite the fact that he has also had to address their strife, jealousy, self-righteousness, drunkenness, and immorality. Now in Chapter 13, he wants them to ask themselves whether they are walking according to the faith that they had professed. His concern is that they be "disqualified from rewards (v. 5, 6, 7, I Corinthians 9:27, NKJV). "Your restoration is what we pray for." (v. 9, ESV)

We do not make our salvation "more sure" by a life of fruit-bearing. The apostle Peter tells his readers, who already had faith, to give visible confirmation of their salvation to a watching world (2 Pet. 1:1, 5, 10). This is a far cry from the assertion that we can somehow get a better grip on our salvation through obedient living. Assurance of our salvation is both an immediate and progressive reality. The objective ground of the believer's assurance of his salvation is the promise of God's Word (I Jn. 5:12). We don't save ourselves by persevering to the end. We can be sure that we have salvation at the present moment. Jesus Christ secures us by the value of His atoning work on the cross. Our security in Christ gives us the assurance that we belong to Him now and forever.

There is also a subjective ground to our assurance of salvation (i.e., the realization that one possesses eternal life). A true Christian will bear some fruit at some time, in some way. These changes that occur in one's life will bring further assurance that we belong to Christ (e.g., keeping Christ's commandments, loving other believers, forgiving those who have sinned against me, disciplining myself for godliness). Being a new creation in Christ will not go unnoticed by me nor by others. But this does not make me "more saved" than when I first believed on the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive me of my sins and give me eternal life. We can sing of blessed assurance because Jesus said: "He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live" (Jn. 11:25).

That assurance is the essence of saving faith was claimed by John Calvin. He said: "In short, no man is truly a believer, unless he be firmly persuaded, that God is a propitious and benevolent Father to him... unless he depend on the promises of the Divine benevolence to him, and feel an undoubted expectation of salvation" (Institutes III.II.16). And let Charles Spurgeon add his thoughts on assurance: "It is part of heaven on earth to get an assurance wrought by the Spirit. You can never, after seeing the sunlight, put up with candlelight of your doubts and fears in the

dungeon of despondency.” And, finally, listen to a converted rabbi: “I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day” (II Tim. 1:12). Nothing can separate the believer from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39). My dear reader, let the sure word of the living God cast light into our dungeons of doubt, dry spells, and despondencies.

The Beatitudes for Marriage (February 8, 2009)

“Love and marriage, love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage. This I tell you brother. You can’t have one without the other.” These words for an old song are, sadly, not necessarily true. We can probably think of marriages where love doesn’t seem to be a part of the relationship. But I think we would agree that any marriage could use more love between a husband and a wife. Valentine’s Day is almost on us and thoughts go to candy, flowers, a special card (get to the card shop before the better cards are gone), and a romantic meal together. All that is well and good, but what is the real condition of your marriage? Is your love for one another growing? Has your relationship become a mere business partnership, a brother-sister relationship, or an I-will-go-my-way- you-go-your-way arrangement? This need not be, nor should it be. Marriage is to be a live drama of Christ’s love for His church and the church’s love for Christ. Children in Christian homes should not be deprived of daily visuals of the gospel story.

In order for love to exist and mature, the spiritual well-being of a husband and wife must be a life-encompassing experience. What is the kind of marriage that meets with God’s approval? The word that expresses His approval is “blessed.” The word “happy” is frequently used as a synonym for blessed, but it is too limited. Happy is most often thought of as an emotional moment of pleasure which is like a giant wave that eventually comes crashing down on the beach and disappears. The state of blessedness is much more than mere circumstantial exuberance. It is a condition of the soul that is secure and hopeful. It is a life that is enriched by God. It is soul prosperity in the best sense. But how does one get there? Husbands and wives are invited to a Valentine’s meal of truth. Savor the beatitudes for marriage. Resolve to have a marriage that meets with God’s approval.

The poor in spirit are those who recognize their helplessness and total dependence upon God. I cannot be the kind of husband or wife God wants me to be without Him. Have you come to that moment of truth in your marriage where you realize that loving someone else as God wants us to love requires supernatural help? Have you cried out to God for grace to change the way you think about and relate to your spouse?

Those who mourn are those who weep over their sin and the violence it does against God, oneself, and others. When I am broken over my sin and repent, God will give me comfort. He is a merciful God to those who seek mercy. I am able then to be merciful toward that one closest to me. When was the last time you asked God for forgiveness for having failed to love your spouse as you ought to? Unhappiness in a marriage is often directly attributed to stubbornness and a refusal to admit a wrong. God loves to comfort those who come to Him in contrition and repentance.

The meek are those who do not use what they have, what they know, or what they are to hurt others. They instead bring everything God has given them to help others. The husband or wife who uses his or her abilities, graces, and gifts for the sake of the other will rule with Christ in the kingdom. Do you tend to ride roughshod over the feelings and desires of your spouse? Meek people are not weak people. They are the truly strong. They place everything at God's disposal for the spiritual well-being of others. Have you attempted to make your spouse feel stupid for not knowing something you know (or think you know)? That's not meekness.

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness have an appetite for God. The husband or wife must first and foremost pursue God. As you seek after God, fulfillment will be given by God. Your spouse cannot give meaning to your life. Only your experience with God can do that. An insatiable appetite for God takes a marriage to heights previously unknown. The spiritual heights of intimacy, friendship, mutual sacrifice, shared goals, and a life for the glory of God will never be scaled by those whose appetite is for self-fulfillment.

Merciful husbands and wives look upon their spouses with compassion. Tender regard for a fellow sinner will be reciprocated. When you see your spouse hurting seek to ease the hurt. Don't exploit it. A husband is never more masculine than when he comes to the aid of his wife in pain. "Sometimes the manliest thing to do is doing the 'unmanly' thing" (a quote from my eight-year-old granddaughter Meredith). Notice how often the compassion of Jesus is mentioned in the Gospels. A home becomes a soft place to land when merciful people live there.

The pure in heart do not allow their thoughts to stray beyond the sexual bonds of marriage. Protect and ensure intimacy with your spouse by watching over your heart with all diligence. Intimacy with God will drive me to purity of mind. It has been said that "the heart is never neutral toward Jesus Christ. It is either moving closer toward Him or away from Him." The pure in heart are on a journey to becoming totally occupied with the person of Jesus Christ. A husband is pure in heart when he resolves day by day to live out the values of God's kingdom. A wife is pure in heart when she values what is real, important, eternal, and is unsatisfied with sham, deceit, or any hint of hypocrisy. Nothing is more beautiful than a husband and wife walking hand in hand towards heaven's gates with the clear vision of loving and living God's truth.

The peacemakers are those who refuse to live in disharmony with those around them. The husband or wife who wants to be called a son of God does not provoke strife and will not allow it to rule their home. Is it not painful to hear a woman criticize her husband to other women? Is it not an ugly thing to see a marriage break up on the shoals of anger, strife, and bitterness? What's going on behind the doors of your home, husbands and wives? Are you tolerating a lack of reconciliation with your spouse over that difference you had last week (month, year)? Sweet is that relationship that does not let the sun go down on anger.

The persecuted are those suffering hurt because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. If the husband or wife endures pain in marriage, let it be because it is a blow against Christ, not because it is a result of sin. This is kingdom living. There are married couples who live in different spiritual universes. This is not the way it is supposed to be, but it happens. And more often than not, it is the Christian who suffers because of his or her faith in Jesus Christ. A lack of compatibility in things that matter most, namely, the supremacy of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of His Word, can be a heavy weight on the heart. If you are there, resolve to be joyful in God's service and devoted to your life's partner.

Love is to go together with marriage. Make it so in your own life. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). That is the kind of marriage that meets with God’s approval. Live by God’s principles and enjoy the romance.

A God-given Mind (February 13, 2009)

The human mind is a beautiful thing. When God made man out of dirt, He fashioned a brain that worked rather well. Adam was immediately able to comprehend what God told him to do (“Be fruitful and multiply...”). Categories of thought, perceptive abilities, memory, self-awareness, other-awareness (Adam recognized Eve as a fellow human being), communication skills, God consciousness, reasoning powers, and an incredible vocabulary (name-giving to all the animals). But a tragedy of titanic proportions took place in paradise. Adam and Eve took it upon themselves to second-guess God, listened to the archenemy of God, and plunged themselves and creation into the dark abyss of the curse of sin and death. Did they lose their minds? No. But they no longer worked right. Instead of seeing God as their friend they became hostile to God and afraid of him. Adam and Eve’s minds became debased (Rom. 1:28), occupied with futility (Eph. 4:17), defiled (Tit. 1:15), blinded to spiritual realities (2 Cor. 4:4), and darkened (Eph. 4:18). Their minds became desperately in need of the light of revelation. Their reasoning powers were not to be trusted apart from God’s revealed wisdom.

On February 12 the AJC made its contribution to the celebration of Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday by running an editorial by the Rev. Patricia Templeton, rector of St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church in northwest Atlanta. The title of the article was “Study Creation with God-given Mind.” My fifty-plus years of reading editorials, especially in liberal newspapers, prompted a suspicious impulse. Was I about to read something that would have us revel in the wonders of God’s creation? It didn’t take Rev. Templeton long to inform her readers that though the Bible “contains the words of the living God,” it is not a source of authority when it comes to understanding how God’s creation is what it is. To her way of thinking, science is an independent authority and must take precedence over the Bible when it comes to knowing how the world began and how human beings came to inhabit our planet.

We are assured that science has the answers to any questions we may have about these matters. Not to worry though. The Bible, we are told, starts out giving us “stories of creation.” Rector Templeton stumbles badly here. She thinks Genesis 1 and 2 contains two conflicting stories. There is a failure here to appreciate the literary device used by Moses (and many others) of giving the order of events (Genesis 1) followed by additional content about those events (Genesis 2). It is not a matter of “which story is true?” There is only one story harmoniously written and providing a complete picture of creation events. Is the Bible merely a story book designed to tell us about the “relationship between God and human beings, between the Creator and creation?” The biblically uninformed will be thrown off balance by this kind of language. After all, wasn’t the Bible written to tell us the story of God’s provision of a redeemer for human beings? The question is, can the Creator be trusted to tell us what we need to know about origins, about ourselves, about Him, and about our responsibility to Him?

What is being served-up in this verbal birthday cake for Charles Darwin is a not-so-subtle attack upon the sufficiency of God’s Word, the Bible. The Bible tells us what we need to know about

God, His creation, and how it came about. Once science is made the gatekeeper for knowledge about human origins, the Bible becomes, in effect, a religious book to inspire good feelings about God and oneself. That, of course, is strikingly similar to Satan's first words to Eve's mind, "Has God said?" If we want to talk about a wasted mind, those three words opened the door to the greatest displacement that has ever occurred. The human mind chose to replace God with the autonomous self. The mind became darkened and prejudiced against God. The creation was given supremacy over the Creator and the rest is history. Listen to the Spirit of God through the apostle Paul; "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:21-22).

Don't fall for the high-sounding double talk that gives lip service to the Bible as a useful book while at the same time holding up fallible human beings as the final arbiters as to what is truth about human origins. The truly God-given mind submits itself to the authority of the Scriptures in all matters pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). If the Bible has it wrong about human origins, then it is wrong about human sin, our need for a Redeemer, and the outcome of human history. Beware of those who condescendingly assure us that the Bible can guide us in spiritual matters but is not our final authority in matters of history and science. If that is so, what are we to do with the Bible's assertion that "Christ died for our sins." There is a massive amount of history, science, and theology bound up in those five words.

Growing up in Christ - No Shortcuts, Part 1 (February 22, 2009)

There are certain basics for spiritual development that every Christian must know. J. I. Packer gives an excellent summary of these basics about holiness (the goal of the Christian life) in his book, Keep in Step with the Spirit. They are: (1) The nature of holiness is transformation through consecration. (2) The context of holiness is justification through Jesus Christ. (3) The root of holiness is co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Jesus Christ. (4) The agent of holiness is the Holy Spirit. (5) The experience of holiness is one of conflict. (6) The rule of holiness is God's revealed law. (7) The heart of holiness is the Spirit of love.

The God-pursuing, righteousness-hungry Christian can adopt some injurious nutritional habits which will hinder growth in Christ. In the quest for holiness (becoming like Christ) the believer must be on guard against the following erroneous views of the Christian life. Holiness is not attained by *perfectionism*. There is a teaching that would have us believe that at some point through some special kind of spiritual experience *eradication of the sinful nature is possible*. This is patently foolish, but nevertheless a naïve Christian may buy into this deception. The truth is, "If we say we have no sin (the indwelling sin principle), we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:8). Nor can holiness be *attained by emotionalism*. Non-doctrinal sharing of experiences, public confession of sins, self-discovery, total openness and freedom to be oneself can become a substitute for biblical sanctification. These ideas were especially popular in the 1970s, but they still travel in certain groups. So-called honesty sessions can be a very harmful diversion. The danger involved is thinking that an encounter with biblical truth on a feeling level is the same as encountering biblical truth in the heart. Emotions are a wonderful gift from God. They are a part of being made in the image of God, but emotions must be tethered to truth and expressed through the Christian's relationship to Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:8). Getting in touch with oneself is not the same as knowing Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:10).

The pathway to holiness is not found in *self-renunciation*. The teaching here is that denying oneself or “crucifying self” is the road to spirituality. The appeal of this idea is that it claims to be what Paul means when he says, “consider yourselves to be dead to sin” (Rom. 6:11). But it misinterprets the text. The Christian’s identification with Christ is what it means to be “dead to sin.” Bondage to the sin nature has been broken. There is no way we can crucify ourselves. The danger of self-renunciation as a supposed key to Christian growth is that it can’t be done. Self never cancels out self. Paul is referring to the threat of physical death daily in his life when he speaks about dying daily, not crucifying self.

The attainment of spiritual maturity by “*letting go and letting God*” is another path to be avoided. This is an attempt to guide Christians into spiritual growth by an interpretation of Romans 6 which turns it into steps for living the Christian life. It is alleged that Paul is answering the question, “How may a justified believer live a holy life?” The result is a teaching which turns Romans 6 into a method for Christian living, that makes Romans 7:14-25 a description of a Christian trying to fight sin “in the energy of the flesh,” and encourages a kind of passivity. You will hear such things as “Stop trying and start trusting,” “Let go and let God.” But as J.I. Packer has so accurately replied, “The Christian’s motto should (rather) be, “Trust God and get going!” Be wary of teachings on the Christian life that want to reduce the fight with sin to bland and lazy appeals that say, “Don’t struggle with it yourself, just hand it over to the Lord.” This will not be the road to Christian maturity.

Growing up in Christ - No Shortcuts, Part 2 (March 1, 2009)

How do we get there from here? The Christian, from the instant he is born again, is to press on to maturity in Christ. There will be temptations to take the wrong roads to this destination. We may hear some teaching on the Christian life that has elements of truth in it but laced with erroneous theology. Our progress in the faith can be impeded by misdirected thinking and living. Another of these “shortcuts” to holiness is *claiming a promise and moving out*. The Christian pilgrim will hear the appeal to complete surrender, confessing all known sin, seek the filling of the Spirit, claiming a promise from the Bible, and move out under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit. There are some biblical truths in this system. But the proposed formula breaks down in failing to focus on faith in one’s position in Christ. The growing Christian must stay tethered to Romans 6 and those things that are true about every believer (e.g. cocrucifixion and coresurrection). Claiming a promise (quite often taken out of context) doesn’t necessarily put one on the fast track to holiness. Acts of dedication and surrender, however well-intentioned, are no replacement for the day to day disciplining oneself for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7).

Perhaps the most appealing shortcut to holiness of life is *performance-based living*. On the surface it appears simple and attainable. “Just obey the laws of the Bible.” As one of its adherents has put it, “entire sanctification consists in perfect obedience to the law of God.” Many Christians get caught up in this kind of system. Legalism is the attempt to make oneself worthy enough to deserve God’s blessing. The problem is that it can’t be done. The fundamental failure is that post-conversion legalism is essentially abandonment of the grace of God in the gospel. How could we ever be good enough to earn God’s approval? In his monumental letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul rebukes his readers for capitulating to the error that God can be put in a position of being a debtor to us (“God owes me because of my good.”). The pride that sits in the middle of this kind of thinking is titanic. The truth is, God is the source of blessing. Works

that glorify God flow out of the spring of God's grace. Jerry Bridges has captured the issues that are at stake, "Regardless of our performance, we are always dependent on God's grace. . . Even our best works are shot through with sin – with varying degrees of impure motives and lots of imperfect performance." The legalism lane is the wrong lane in the race of the Christian life. If you want to be disqualified from receiving any rewards, just run in this lane. Stay in the grace lane to the finish line.

Another aspect of the legalism shortcut is *the taboo route*. Taboos are things that are forbidden or prohibited. Lists of things that are prohibited are part of the legalism subculture. Thoughtless and poorly taught believers can start adopting a series of things to avoid as the means to holiness of life. The thinking is that by not participating in "worldly" activities one can insure his devotion to Christ. Giving up certain amusements, adopting a certain type of approved clothing, listening only to Christian music, and staying away from certain kinds of entertainment can be intoxicating to the believer who is trying to not love the world and draw nearer to God. This is not to say that there are not things that Christians would be wise to avoid in order to keep their minds and time sharply focused on Christ. But mere acts of austerity and self-denial can stunt rigorous biblical thinking and keep us from what it means to "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2).

Shortcuts are attractive because they have the immediate appearance of "workability." *Self-discipline* is admirable and even necessary in the journey of faith. However, the well-intentioned Christian may look at prayer, Bible reading, financial giving, witnessing for Christ and other duties as the key to Christian living. What could be wrong with setting up a routine and doing the right things? The problem is that a routine in and of itself doesn't force one to go beneath the surface of behavior and deal with the heart. Solomon said, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov.4:23). A wisely planned schedule can be a very good thing. We need to pray regularly, read our Bible, give to God's work, and tell others about Christ. But true Christianity is not just about changing habits and routines. It is about changing hearts. Our motives, interests, desires, aspirations, and value judgments need a thorough going-over by the searching power of God's Word as an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Going on to maturity travels by way of love for Christ which orders one's life for godliness. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not a system of holiness.

"*What would Jesus do?*" has from time to time come forward to be the guiding principle for holy living. The statement by Peter, "leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps. . ." (1 Pet. 2:21), is used to support the WWJD slogan. The problem is that transformation into the image of Christ does not come by *imitation*. It comes by renewing of the mind and the re-ordering of the inner life by God's Spirit. Trying to copy a mental image of what Jesus was like tends to get confused with personal subjective ideas about what genuine Christianity is. Only by rightly dividing the Word of truth and the resultant mind of Christ being formed in the believer can one correctly discern how to obey Christ. Conjuring up a mental picture of Jesus and/or trying to copy someone else's personality (deemed to be a holy person) is fraught with dangers. There are no shortcuts to serious Bible study and steeping one's mind in God's holy, infallible, inerrant Word.

"What will you give up for Lent?" This question is posed each Easter season. Will giving up chocolate for lent, participation in holy communion, being baptized, singing in the church choir, or observing "holy-days" make us stronger Christians? We must be very careful here. It may be

wise to alter one's eating habits and sing in the Easter cantata. But unless one is walking in the Spirit, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and savoring Jesus Christ, *ritualism will not suffice*. A good dose of Colossians 2:20-23 is a good remedy for seasonal "holiness."

What has been said about these so-called shortcuts to growing up in Christ does not mean that there are not some biblical truths sprinkled among them. Nor is this critique a judgment on earnest, God-seeking Christians who stray into spiritual cul-de-sacs. If you have found yourself chasing some erroneous idea about the pursuit of holiness, repent of it and return to the Scriptures for the necessary corrections. And above all let us be kind to those caught in the web of deceitful devices in their longing for a closer walk with God. We must judge ourselves before we set out to reprove others. Then proceed with mercy, speaking the truth in love, and "grow up in all aspects unto Him, who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15).

Simplifying Your Life (March 15, 2009)

Just what I need. Another appeal for me to live my life more serenely and simply. Don't run away, if that was your first thought. Go to the words of Jesus. He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). To be pure in heart is to be singly focused on Jesus Christ. It is giving the Lord of lords our undivided attention. In so doing the eye of faith becomes increasingly clear and sharply focused on who God is and what He wants from me. To put it another way, seeing God is experiencing Him in the fullness of all that He is as God. Do you want that? If you do, you will be able to soar to incredible heights in love for God and usefulness in His kingdom. One way to think this through and live accordingly is to resolve day to day to live out the spiritual realities of God's kingdom.

It has been said that "the ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary, so the necessary can speak." The "necessary" is to become "pure in heart." How can purity of heart with its increasingly clear-eyed view of God be attained? Jesus told Martha that Mary, her sister, had chosen "the good part" (Lk. 10:42). What did He mean? Martha was in a lather about getting meal preparation just right for Jesus and the other guests. Mary was sitting and listening to Jesus teach. Jesus did not correct Martha because of her work ethic. It was because her work ethic dominated her. She let it keep her from doing what was the most important thing at that moment. Mary made the right choice. Martha didn't. She needed to simply her life, namely hearing God's Word and obeying it.

Martha's was an unsimplified life. What are the signs of an unsimplified life? Here are some possible symptoms: no private time of communion with God in His Word and prayer, shallow relationships (many acquaintances but no close friends), failure to have read a good book in the last two months, chronic fatigue, worry, impatience, fear. We will need wisdom to make the necessary corrections. There is a danger in simplifying. Don Whitney in his book, [Simplify Your Spiritual Life](#), has a chapter entitled "Beware of Simplifying." In it he warns of the "cult of simplicity." When simplifying becomes an end in itself, "materialistic, earthbound, and self-centered" living takes over. That is not where you want to go with simplifying your life. Where do you go? The following counsel is not a formula but some proposed points of wisdom to keep you on the right path in the pursuit of purity of heart.

- Simplifying one's life is living according to our God-given responsibilities. Fundamentally, these are love for God and for one's neighbor (Mk. 12:29-31). Is this what you really want in life?
- Simplifying one's life is a journey guided by the compass of God's eternal, infallible, and inerrant Word (Matt. 4:4). The Christian pilgrimage is one of redeeming the time (Eph. 5:16). Are material things draining you of spiritual energy?
- Life's demands must not be dictated by our energy, the demands of others, or the values of the culture (1 Jn. 2:15-17). How has God gifted you? Are you a good manager of your natural and spiritual gifts?
- Put things in their proper place that are getting in the way of the pursuit of priorities, such as television, movies, excessive internet time, etc. Are you in control of the entertainment and information you desire? What do you want to know and why do you want to know it?
- Self-discipline must become a way of life, not an elective. Pray for it. It is a grace of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Self-mastery is one of the prime achievements in life. Don't be satisfied without it. But don't get the cart before the horse. Love for God will shape my schedule. A well-oiled routine may be just that, a well-oiled routine. Do you have control over your phone? Computer? Stream of thought?
- Declare war on the habit of procrastination. It is the thief of time. Make a list of the things you have been ignoring. Arrange them in order of importance. Get to work and then enjoy the God-given sense of relief.
- Plan your schedule before others plan it for you. Beware of the self-help and success books which tell you how to get more out of your time. Packing more into your time in order to produce more is not the way to pursue a simplified life. Is more what we want?
- Insist upon the preparation for and the experience of worship with God's people. There is no better reminder of what is essential in life than worship that is Bible-based, God-exalting, Christ-centered, and Spirit-driven.
- Break away from your routine periodically to rest, reflect, renew, and reevaluate your life. A life unexamined is a life unfulfilled. The kind of life for which God has made us is one that seeks His glory above all else. Take your Bible, some Christ-exalting music, and a soul-stirring book (e.g. To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson).
- Establish and guard time with God each day. Do this somewhere, sometime, somehow. If you want to hear what God is saying to you, make sure that you are listening to what He has said in the Scriptures. A conversation with oneself is not the same as listening to God.

Well then, what are we to do? Down-size our houses, become a one-car family, stay home more, get rid of our computers? As has already been noted, simplifying one's life can become a very self-centered and materialistic venture. The first step toward genuine simplification is to become God's child through faith in Jesus Christ. It is as Don Whitney says, "The place to start

simplifying the spiritual life (and derivatively all of life) is to make sure you have one.” Dear reader, do you have life in Jesus Christ? Jesus said that “I came that they might have life and might have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Simplifying one’s life begins by passing from death to life (Jn. 5:24). We were born separated from fellowship with God. God cannot accept us because of our sin. There is no way to remedy this condition other than to receive God’s forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ. God says, “I give to you eternal life.” We are to answer; I accept. That is faith. The simplicity is not in what it cost God, the death of His Son, but in the way to accept the gift of salvation. Faith, it’s just that simple.

Let’s Take a Trip (March 29, 2009)

Jim Stout was an encourager, a faithful witness for Christ, the life of the party, and could tell stories that were unexcelled. One of my favorites was his account of family vacations taken with his parents and six siblings. Their annual drive from Pennsylvania to Florida was the stuff from which legends are made. We may all have our traveling stories. Good planning, poor planning, break downs, dead batteries, wrong turns, lost luggage, food poisoning, keys locked in the car, songs on the radio, arguments, laughter, and a whole lot more. But did you know that there is a psalm in the Old Testament that was written especially for travelers? It is even known as “The Traveler’s Psalm.” Saints of times gone by have drawn encouragement from it as they set out on journeys filled with the unknown.

Psalm 121 is the second of a group of psalms known as the songs of ascent. These songs were sung by pilgrims in ancient Israel as they journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Lev. 23). It has been said that it breathes a marvelous spirit of tranquil trust in God from beginning to end. It offers us the divine perspective that ought to serve as guiding truth for any of our travels.

The first stanza of this song for our trips reminds that the source of our protection is the Lord of creation (vv. 1-2). That would certainly be our initial concern would it not? The truth of looking to God as our true help must inform all of our travel plans. In the mind of the psalmist the hills did not represent his travel insurance. The pagan neighbors of Israel thought of the hills as places close to their gods. But the psalmist rejects the hills and seeks the God of creation Himself. Who is our helper when traveling at sixty-five mph or at 35,000 feet? It is the “Maker of heaven and earth.” James Boise said it best; “What we need is not the gods of nature, but nature’s God.” The ancient traveler was overwhelmed by the thought of God as he caught his first glimpse of Jerusalem’s city walls and the temple. My fellow traveler, let’s remember that trips should be preceded by right thoughts about God and divine providence. Worries and fears will not stand a chance in the presence of the God who rules over all the circumstances of life.

The protection of God has another quality to it. It is certain and ceaseless (vv. 3-4). How much better should we sleep knowing that God does not sleep. Overnight stays along the paths and trails that led to Jerusalem were filled with dangers; robbers and wild animals could be in the shadows ready to pounce on the unsuspecting. Confidence in God is a soft pillow upon which to lay one’s anxious thoughts. My Christian friend, you know that all traveling is subject to the dangers of living in a fallen world. But do not let fretful, complaining grumpiness rule you when that “flight delayed” or “flight cancelled” light flashes on the screen at the gate. Put your mind

on the God who “causes all things to work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

With further rhetorical flourish the weary pilgrim reminds himself that “the Lord is your keeper.” The Keeper of Israel is always on duty. Yes, even on the midnight shift. In this final stanza we are assured that the protection of the Lord means that we are kept from all evil (vv. 5-8). Does this mean that the Christian is exempt from problems in travel? If that were the plan, there would be a long line waiting to buy this kind of traveler’s insurance. The British commentator puts us on the right track when he says, “to be kept from all evil does not imply a cushioned life, but a well-trained one.” Savor that thought for a minute. It carries some essential theological freight. We are not promised that we will not have automobile accidents, water pipes that won’t burst while we are away, or traveler’s intestinal issues. The truth is that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. As Cornelius Plantinga has said, “We can come to know that it’s all right, even when everything is all wrong.” We are kept by our omnipotent Lord as we go through our problems. That makes a great deal of difference when you discover that your luggage is on its way to some unknown place or when you get to the airport and discover you have left your passport at home.

Fellow travelers, are you prepared for your next adventure? It should make a great deal of difference in the way we make our trips, if our GPS is filled with the counsel and comfort that comes from knowing that Jesus has said “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ - Some Questions (April 12, 2009)

Why is the resurrection of Jesus Christ so important to Christianity? The resurrection is one of the foundational truths of the gospel message upon which Christianity rests (1 Cor. 15:1-11, 17-18). It is the foundation stone of orthodox Christianity and without it there is no Christian faith. According to the apostle Paul, if there is no resurrection the apostles were liars, the Christian’s faith is worthless, there is no hope for the future, and the world is right, and we (Christians) are wrong (1 Cor. 15:15-19).

Can a person be saved and not believe in the resurrection of Christ from the dead? No! The resurrection of Jesus is essential to salvation (Rom. 10:9-10). There is no good news without a resurrected Savior (1 Cor. 15:12-14). The object of the gospel would be a dead man. The good news would be bad news. We are left with theological fiction.

Was the resurrection of Jesus Christ important in the church of the first century? Absolutely. It was necessary to have seen the resurrected Christ if one was to be an apostle (Acts 1:21-22). The resurrection was the main topic of the sermons preached in the early church (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30-37; 17:31). Actually, the theme of the first messages recorded in the Book of Acts runs something like this: “This Jesus that you crucified and put to death was raised up by God.” The truth was clearly and boldly presented; the crucifixion was no accident. God planned it. Sinful men executed it. The resurrection of Jesus confirmed that He was the Messiah and Lord (Acts 2:22-32).

Was the resurrection of Jesus Christ prophesied in the Old Testament? It most certainly was. Peter used Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1 to demonstrate that David could not be speaking of himself. He was speaking of the resurrection and ascension of the Messiah (Acts 2:25-31). In Psalm 2:7 it is prophesied that the identity of Jesus would be demonstrated in His resurrection. The prophet Isaiah said that the coming Messiah would have His days “prolonged” (Isa. 53:10). Having made an offering of Himself for sin and then to have His days prolonged necessitates bodily resurrection.

Did Jesus say anything about His resurrection from the dead? He did. He predicted it (Jn. 2:18-22; 10:18; 11:25; Matt. 12:38-40; 20:19; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 18:33, 34). At the very beginning of His public ministry Jesus told the Jews that He would raise Himself from the dead. Almost three years later in the fall before the spring of His resurrection, Jesus said, “because I lay down My life that I may take it again” (Jn. 10:17). Jesus was not surprised by His own resurrection from the grave. He knew He would come back from the dead to live forevermore. If He was not raised, then He lied. He then would not be the Savior from sin, but a deceiver.

Was the resurrection of Jesus an actual bodily resurrection? Some claim that Jesus’ resurrection body was an immaterial and invisible body. This represents a failure to understand the word “spiritual” in reference to Christ’s post-resurrection body (1 Cor. 15:44). The word “spiritual” means a supernatural body. Jesus actually died. He did not swoon away and revive in the cool tomb. Blood and water flowed from His side (Jn. 19:34, 35). A Roman centurion and other soldiers confirmed His death (Mk. 15:45; Jn. 19:33). When Jesus came out of the tomb, He came out physically. The tomb was examined. His body was not in it (Jn. 20:5, 7). The resurrected Jesus ate with His disciples (Lk. 24:41-45). The angels said, “He is not here, but He has risen” (Lk. 24:6-8). Christ’s resurrection body could be seen, touched, smelled, and heard. He was no ghost. The material body of Jesus was manifested to His disciples and many others in its glory.

Were there witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection? Yes. There were many (1 Cor. 15:5-11). The threefold criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of a testimony is: (a) The witness must be competent (“eye-witnesses”), (b) Sufficient in number, and (c) Of a good reputation. The witnesses to the bodily resurrection qualified on all three counts. Some of these were Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude, Mary Magdalene, and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Mk. 16:12, 13). Were they all mistaken? Did they lie? Did they really see a resurrected Jesus? They were all trustworthy witnesses.

What is the relationship between Christ’s resurrection from the dead and the hope for the Christian’s resurrection? The apostle said that Christ is “the first fruits” of those who belong to Him (1 Cor. 15:20-23). This means that because Jesus was resurrected from the dead, so will all believers be raised. Jesus’ defeat of death is the first installment of a harvest of resurrected saints. This is why Paul taught that the denial of a resurrected body is a denial of the reality of Christ’s own bodily resurrection. We who are His will live forever in bodies suited for all eternity, because He lives.

Will there be any similarity between Christ’s resurrected body and the Christian’s resurrected body? Christ’s was recognized by His disciples in His appearances after His resurrection. We will recognize one another. His body could be touched. We will not be mere spirits but touchable, glorious physical bodies. Christ’s resurrection body had the ability to eat but did not have to. There will be a luscious fruit-bearing tree of life in the heavenly city (Rev. 22:2). It will

not be a mere decoration. The resurrected body of Jesus had the same voice resonance (i.e., same system of vocal cords). We will hear and recognize one another's voices in heaven but without the imperfections that mortality has placed upon us.

What is the relationship between believers being able to stand before God as forgiven and accepted and the resurrection of Christ? Christ was raised in order to accomplish our justification. Justification is that legal act of God in which He declares us to be righteous in His sight. The justified believer can be accepted by God because His sins are forgiven, and Christ's righteousness belongs to him. No one could be justified before God if Jesus had not been raised from the dead (Rom. 4:25). None of us can earn the right to be with God in heaven. Such a privilege is because Jesus earned our justification. The open tomb of Jesus is God's stamp of approval on the value of Jesus' death on the cross.

How is the resurrection of Jesus to make a difference in the life of the Christian? It is to make all the difference in the world. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead demonstrates the power of God to save us and make us like Jesus Christ. The resurrection is proof of the power for change. It is a power that the believer already possesses in Christ (Eph. 1:20; 2:1, 6). Loving one another is possible. Freedom from the power of sin is possible (Rom. 6:4). Life dominating sins can be cut off at their roots. New desires, new motives, new aspirations, new thought patterns, and zeal for God are all possible because of resurrection power.

Dear friend, do you know the power of the resurrection? Have you experienced the life transforming power of God's Holy Spirit? You ask, "How can this come about?" The resurrected Christ died to pay the penalty of sin. He was wounded for our transgressions. Because He lives you can enjoy the freedom of forgiveness and eternal life. Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved. Let the celebration of Christ's resurrection be the day when you abandon your futile effort to earn God's favor and accept the gift of salvation which the resurrected Christ offers so full and free.

Myths about Marriage and Family (April 26, 2009)

A myth is an invented story in an attempt to explain something in life or nature. Romulus and Remus were mythical founders of Rome. It was said that a wolf nursed the twins after they had been abandoned as babies. We are amused by such myths. But myths are no laughing matter when they are accepted as truth. There are myths about marriage and family. The tragedy is that these myths are believed and acted upon by many to their own harm and loss. The following are some of myths that rule the thoughts of men and women regarding marriage and family.

Myth # 1 – Marriage is a 50/50 proposition. This myth says that in order for a marriage to work right a husband and wife must meet halfway. As each fulfills his or her own responsibilities marriage will be what it ought to be. What's wrong here? The truth is that marriage is a 100/100 effort. Each spouse is to give a 100 % commitment to the other. There is no meeting at the middle and waiting for the other to do their part. God holds the husband accountable to love Him with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love his wife as he loves himself. The same is true for the wife. Are you fully committed to your marriage? Or are you standing there tapping your feet thinking you have done your part waiting on your spouse to give equal effort?

Myth # 2 – *The basis of marriage is love.* This myth has an element of truth in it, namely, that love is a vital component in a good marriage. But the fact is that the basis of marriage is the covenant that binds a man and a woman together. Vows were taken in the marriage ceremony. Promises were exchanged. A commitment was forged. If one doesn't love his or her spouse any longer, then they must learn to love. A lack of love is no excuse for running away from marital promises. Love can and should be learned. On the surface of it that may sound cold and hard. But it isn't when it becomes understood that love is not merely an emotion. It is a way of thinking and acting. When love comes up out of the heart and makes sacrifices for the good of the other person, emotion will follow. Romance reenters a marriage when two people give themselves to love God's way (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Myth # 3 – *The goal of marriage is happiness.* This is not true. The goal of marriage is to glorify the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31). A man may say that his wife is difficult to live with (and it may be true). He says, "She makes me unhappy." So, he concludes there is no hope for the marriage, which further confuses matters. If a husband or wife just wants to be happy, then they will try to use God and talk in terms of having one's needs met (another myth). An entirely different outlook is necessary to counteract the myth of "God wants me to be happy and you are not meeting my needs." God is not against our personal happiness. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. The joy of the Lord is to be the Christian's strength. A self-serving person thinks only about his own happiness. The one who serves God obeys Him and experiences a delight that overflows its banks. The driving passion of one's heart ought to be to display the perfections of God no matter what the circumstances, yes, even if one's spouse is making life hard.

Myth # 4 – *Having children will draw a husband and wife closer together.* If a couple is living life God's way children can bring added blessing and unity. But having children is no guarantee that a marital relationship will get better. Sometimes a wife will think that she will be happier if she could have a baby. Mixed in with this desire may also be the thinking that a child will create some longed-for happiness. The reality is that children bring added pressure. A new addition to the family cannot remove bitterness. Actually, children will tend to magnify the problems that already exist in a marriage. Children are a gift from God and should be enjoyed (Psa. 127), but they will not make pre-existing attitudes and behavior suddenly vanish. It is the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in one's life that changes a relationship, not the multiplication of children.

Myth # 5 – *It is better to be married than single.* Self-deception is a tricky thing. We can convince ourselves that something will be true if only our circumstances would change. The single person who is lonely and unhappy can believe that being married will make life "all better." It is an easy trap to fall into. Looking around in a church filled with married couples the single may surmise that they are all happy. Churches can be guilty of exacerbating the problem of single discontent through preaching and body-life that holds up marriage as a goal to be pursued by all, looking with suspicion upon those who are choosing to remain single, and by creating a social culture that marginalizes single people. Nevertheless, singles must think biblically about their circumstances. Read what the apostle Paul says about the advantages of serving God as a single (1 Cor. 7:25-40). Happiness is not created by circumstances. It comes to those who are walking by the Spirit.

Myth # 6 – *Our children will grow up to be fine Christians and upstanding citizens, if we do the right things.* We must be careful in dismantling this myth. On the one hand it is important that

one's children be brought up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). But at the same time biblical wisdom tells us that godly diligence in child-rearing does not guarantee the moral and spiritual outcome of one's children. The examples of godly fathers who produced ungodly sons are abundant in the Old Testament. The supreme case of a "wounded parent" is found in God's relationship with Israel (Hos. 11:1-4). Israel's rejection of God's love is notorious in the annals of redemptive history. The proper response to the myths that surround child training is not to be one of cynicism and fear. Instead, parents are to be faithful in instructing their child in the whole counsel of God, providing abundant opportunities for learning how to live life God's way, and giving an example of what it means to be a God-pleaser. All this is to be seasoned with prayer and dependence on God.

These are not all of the myths attached to marriage and the family. But they are enough to alert us to the dangers that beset us in living in a world that treats the Bible carelessly. Living in the fast lane with brief or no encounters with what the Bible teaches is the soil in which myths germinate. Myths are best identified and rejected "by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2).

The Swine Flu and Other Plagues (May 3, 2009)

"Swine flu outbreak in 11 states; 1 dead." The headlines of this week's AJC placed everyone on alert. Some may even be in a mild state of panic. The World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control have been communicating with the public in terms of the possibility of an epidemic or a pandemic. Either way, it is a serious matter in this day of rapid international travel. A flu carrier can be in Mexico in the morning and at his home in America or elsewhere by the afternoon. Many remember the SARS scare of 2003 (severe acute respiratory syndrome) when the world community scrambled to contain what seemed to be a deadly viral threat to millions of people. In the 1300's the "black death" (the bubonic plague) swept through Europe destroying a fourth of its population. If you visit cemeteries in our own locale, you will notice how many died in the winter of 1918, at the height of World War I, from a lethal influenza virus that raced around the world. It is estimated that as many as 100 million people died worldwide from that great influenza outbreak.

The Bible gives us brief pictures of epidemics of sickness and death that have played a role in the story of redemption. The ten plagues of Egypt come to mind (Ex. 7-10). The tenth and final plague was the death of the first-born in every family that was not protected by the blood of a slain lamb on the doorposts and lintel of every house. We are not told how God's death angel administered such a sorrowful epidemic of death. But it was enough to dislodge Pharaoh from his refusal to let Israel go from his land. Whatever the disease was that killed so many, it was God's judgment on a truth-resistant Pharaoh and deliverance for Israel.

In a case of passing a hot potato, the ark of God inflicted a fatal disease on every Philistine who welcomed it into their community (1 Sam. 4-5). After about seven months of this the Philistines had had enough and worked out an arrangement to send the ark back to its rightful owners, God's covenant people. The idol worshiping Philistines even tried some "sympathetic magic" as a means of alleviating their misery (1 Sam. 6:4-5). They thought that they could remove the disaster that plagued them by using models (five golden rats and five golden swollen lymph nodes). To show that God does not play favorites, over 50,000 Beth-shemesh citizens succumbed

to the same disease that had afflicted the Philistines when some Israelites disrespectfully looked into the ark of the Lord (1 Sam. 6:19).

In what was one of the low points in King David's life, he brought a plague upon Israel through his disobedience to God (2 Sam. 24:10-25). David violated one of God's commands to Israel's kings by pridefully having Israel's number of fighting men counted. This ego trip resulted in God sending a deadly epidemic that took the lives of seventy thousand men. The attempt to organize his kingdom more perfectly like the self-promoting monarchs of surrounding nations brought about thousands of grieving widows. David, as God's surrogate in Israel, learned the hard way that glorying in numbers was contrary to trusting in God for defensive power against all enemies.

The present world population of over six billion makes the prophecy of the pale horse in Revelation 6:7-8 absolutely staggering. A pandemic will contribute to the death of a fourth of the earth's inhabitants in the Great Tribulation. Mankind's hopes for creating lasting peace, plenty, and longevity of life through global politics, environmentalism, and scientific advances will meet with great disappointment. The great day of the wrath of the Lamb will make use of viral and bacterial diseases that will defy human invention and take, at present calculations, over two billion lives.

The swine flu along with every germ and disease known and unknown to man is part of the curse of death. Sin is the mother of death. Microorganisms that cause disease stand as a witness to a creation that groans under the curse of sin. It is sin that fallen human beings refuse to acknowledge as the real villain of human existence. It is sin that has corrupted every one of us and alienates us from our holy Creator. It is sin that ruins our relationships, breaks up our homes, deceives us, and hurls us into eternal judgment. Men and women may deny they are sinners but they can't play like death isn't there. That is what is so terrifying about the possibility of a mutated flu virus that could kill people by the millions. The grim reaper cannot be denied. The fear of death creates as many explanations for death as there are spiritually dead people. Sin's grip must be broken if Satan's (the father of death) grip is to be broken (Heb. 2:14; Eph. 2:1-5). Where is this liberation that we so desperately need? Freedom from the fear of death comes in liberation from the guilt of sin. Our liability to God's wrath because of our rebellion against Him must be brought to the foot of the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation from God's condemnation are the only ones who can be free from the fear of death.

Those who have experienced the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ should not be people who are infected with the fear of death. Those who belong to Christ know that death belongs to them (1 Cor. 3:22). It takes every believer to their everlasting rest in heaven. Christians are, therefore, able to show mercy to those who are afflicted with the diseases of our mortality. It is a ministry of witness to the hope that is in Christ. The swine flu and every germ on our planet tell us that death is the penalty of sin. The mother of all plagues is the plague of sin. But the greater news is that the Gospel proclaims the death of death in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father the Leader (June 21, 2009)

Have you ever played follow-the-leader? It was a favorite game in our youth. It is not very complicated. One person leads the way by doing various physical maneuvers such walking on a wall, jumping a creek, leapfrogging over a parking meter, running backwards without falling, eating an unripe persimmon without wincing, those sorts of things. The others were to mimic the action. The intent was for the leader to try to get everyone to drop out. He would then be the winner.

Leadership, however, is not simply being able to do difficult things which others cannot. There is no shortage of books written on what leadership is and how to lead. This is especially true within the evangelical Christian community. Most of these books are written by Christians who have had some measure of success in pastoring a church, starting a Christian organization, or having written other books that have sold well. Valuable instruction can be found in such writings. Father's Day is a good time to revisit the matter of leadership. Fathers are to be leaders. But what does leadership look like in a family?

Some fathers lead by not leading. They are in the home physically but are passive regarding biblical priorities. This kind of leadership is primarily occupied with the desire for peace and quiet in the home. Other fathers think leadership is something like the military. It is command and control. Do what father says. Any deviance from this standard and wife and children will have to answer to the captain of the ship, i.e., Dad. These methods of leadership have been stated in the extreme, but they do represent too many "Christian" homes. Fathers will have different leadership styles. However, there are fundamental biblical truths that must be believed and acted upon if the family is to be led in the right direction.

Family leadership begins with the father's submission to the sovereign Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the relinquishing of all rights to the One who has provided redemption and makes freedom to serve Him possible. This truth is developed in Scriptural texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-7 and Ephesians 5:23-33. Fathers do not possess authority independent of what has been delegated to them by God. Fathers, are you taking your orders from Jesus Christ and following His lead?

Family leadership demands that a father adopt the attitude of a servant. The Head of every Christian man, Jesus Christ, said that "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). Christ-exalting leadership is the possession of a servant's heart (Eph. 4:2). Fathers, is that you? Are you focused on God and others rather than self?

Family leadership necessitates a sense of direction. A father must know where he is going and how to get there. Like Abraham of old, Christian fathers are pilgrims who are "looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11: 10). Fathers, Christ's coming kingdom and God's eternal presence is our destination. Are we living and leading like this is true? What do our children think of us when all they know about us is that the love of money and material things dominates our lives?

Family leadership requires a love of the kind which Jesus Christ has for His Church (Eph. 5:25). If we fathers are one with Christ, then others will know this is true by the way we love. We need

more fathers who lead by sacrificial, self-denying, cross-bearing, other-serving love. There is no greater gift from a father to his children than for them to see him dying daily for their mother.

Family leadership calls for a desire for unity in the home. Fathers, how important are unity, acceptance of diversity, harmony, and companionship to us in our homes? Conformity is not unity. We can demand that everyone fit into our plans but that is not unity. Unity is the experience of the bond we have in Christ in an atmosphere of truth and love. No two children are alike. We need to know our children. Love their differences. Discipline and train them accordingly. Are arguments, criticism, and name-calling methods of communication in your home? In our disagreements let us replace harshness with the law of kindness. May the flag of biblical unity fly over our homes (Eph. 4:3).

Family leadership bears the trademark of forgiveness. A father who belongs to Jesus Christ will show the way by delighting in the enormity of the forgiveness he has received from God in Christ. This sense of the magnitude of God's forgiveness will be lived out in a father's forgiveness of others (Matt. 18:21-35). Grudges, resentment, bitterness, and a pay-back attitude betray the freedom of forgiveness that should characterize a home environment. Fathers, are you a repenting and forgiving leader?

Family leadership means being sensitive to the hurts and problems of one's family. Fathers who lead God's way work at staying alert to the dangers that go with living in a world in rebellion against God and hostile to the Christian faith. Fathers, every member of our families has to do battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Do you know some of the struggles taking place around you? Why has your teenage son suddenly grown sullen and withdrawn? Have you noticed that your teenage daughter is eating very little and doesn't think she is thin enough? Leaders must be observant and discerning as they keep a wary eye on the enemy, our adversary, who "prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

Family leadership means assuming the responsibility of praying for every family member every day. All believers are admonished to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). Fathers, prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. Do you wonder how your children are going to turn out? Do you think about some of the "what-ifs" of various family members? Worry and anxiety are to be replaced with fervent prayer for our wives, sons, and daughters (Phil. 4:6). A father who leads is one who takes the time to intercede for those placed in his charge. It is a form of protection, a base-line duty of a husband and father, to go before God daily as a spiritual warrior mindful of Satan's schemes (Eph. 6:11, 18). Fathers, did you rise early this morning to seek the face of God for your family?

Fathers, God's leaders are made, not born. Actually, the truth is that leadership begins with being born again. It is then that leadership is to develop. A God-pleasing leader is one who is in hot pursuit of God, yearns for His blessing, reads his Bible, is meaningfully involved in his church, and by his example demonstrates what it means to be Christ's man. That is a leader worth following.

Are You More Loving? (June 28, 2009)

In our Wednesday evening Bible study for this summer, we are using Don Whitney's book, "Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health." It is the occasion for a probing look at the state of our spiritual health. The writer of Hebrews calls Christians to "press on to maturity." Whitney's book is a very helpful tool toward achieving this goal.

Our study this past Wednesday focused on the question, "Are you more loving?" Love is the clearest mark of the Christian. Jesus said "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:34, 35). If we are growing Christian, we will be growing in our love for others. "Love is the badge and character of Christianity."

What does the decline of love in the Christian's life look like? It is possible to regress in our Christian walk and look more unlike Jesus. It is not supposed to be this way, but it happens. Jesus rebuked the church in Ephesus for having left its first love. Losing patience more easily, increasing unkindness, becoming less courteous (especially to those closest to us), becoming more easily angered, unconcern for the lost, and not giving ourselves to hospitality are some of the ways a decline in love would manifest itself. When a diagnosis reveals a spiritual problem, we must take action. At the same time, it is to be remembered, in the words of author Maurice Roberts, "The best believers find their progress slow and their attainments meager." The direction of our growth is what is most important, not the speed.

What are some of the counterfeit loves that exist? It is possible to think we are growing in love when the truth is, we have bought into some deceptive substitutes. Many congratulate themselves for what amounts to what it means to be merely human. It is generally true that human beings will have special feelings for family members (Rom. 1:31; 2 Tim. 3:3). Christian love is more than this. "I'll love you if you love me." As Whitney says, "this is the epitome of worldly love." A relationship that works on the principle of "I will scratch your back, if you will scratch mine" is not what Jesus had in mind when He commanded us to love one another.

In which areas will growing love demonstrate itself? Love for other Christians will be strengthened (1 Jn. 3:14 "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren."). How are your relationships? Are the needs of fellow believers on your radar screen? A growing love means love for the lost. Jesus loved the young man who had made material things his god (Mk. 10:21). The unsaved do not need us as their judge (that's God's business). They need those who genuinely care for their eternal well-being. Within one's family is also a place where growing love will be seen; more gratitude shown, less anger, more physical affection, more patience, responsibility, generosity, frugality, or simply having more time for them.

How can genuine, Christlike love be cultivated? Whitney suggests six ways. Meditate on love as the most important distinguishing mark of a Christian (Love is truth in action). Let your heart be often warmed by the fire of God's love. Daily communion with God in His Word and prayer will stoke the fires of growing love. Discover assurance that God is your Father by loving as He loves ("Everyone who loves is born of God." 1 Jn. 4:7). Delight in loving God. Whitney reminds us that "love, in its essence, is likeness to God." Is this what you want more than anything else in

life? Identify those relationships where you most need to grow in love. Is it your family, a rusty relationship, a neighbor, a person at church? And finally, take the initiative in showing love, especially where you have little or no expectation of love in return.

What then can we do? Use the following questions to provoke and probe your mind to grow more in love: What crisis, however small, is taking place in your life? What is the condition of your closest relationship? Have you been hostile lately to someone who has been good to you?

We have seven more studies in “Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health.” Join us on Wednesday evenings as we “interrogate our hearts” in order to press on to spiritual maturity.

A Crushing Stone (July 3, 2009)

An ancient monarch of a world power had a dream. In this dream he saw an image. It was great in size and in significance. As it turned out the various parts of the image represented successive kingdoms. King Nebuchadnezzar did not realize the full impact of what he had dreamed. From the head of gold to the feet of iron and clay human governments will have their day but one day the coming of Israel’s Messiah will bring about “a kingdom which will never be destroyed.” A stone representing the Son of Man will put an end to the kingdoms of man. This stone is seen as cut out of a mountain without hands. It (the Lord Jesus Christ) is not another human power but is supernatural in origin. One day Israel’s Messiah will come again and bring to an end mankind’s futile attempts at creating a utopia on earth.

It is doubtful that this biblical reality will be on the minds of many people in the celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence July 4. You ask. Why should it? The birth of the United States of America thrust our nation onto the stage of human history with a form of government unknown in the history of nations. We have privileges, freedoms, and a degree of prosperity for which we can be thankful. These blessings have flowed over their banks to benefit the entire planet in varying degrees. However, as citizens of this land of the free we must not forget some fundamental truths about the nations of this world. Human government derives its right to exist from the sovereign God of the universe (Rom. 13:1). Nations possess no intrinsic authority to confer rights upon individuals. Human rights are divinely determined, not humanly determined. When governing powers seek to deny God His sovereign rights, scoff at His moral law, trample upon human freedom, and scheme to create an earthly utopia, they are driving nails in their Statist coffins.

America (if it still exists as we know it today) and all other nations will pass away when the Stone comes to set up His kingdom. When will this be? The Bible doesn’t tell us, but it does reveal how we are to live in these last days leading up to the Second Coming of Christ (the rapture of the church and the Great Tribulation are included in this). Last days’ thinking is not preoccupied with dates, times, and newspaper headlines, but is instead focused on strong minded, Christ-exalting living.

Last days’ living understands God’s kingdom purpose as explaining the sweep of human history (Dan. 2:44; Rev. 11:15). History is going somewhere. We are not bits and pieces of chance in a chance-driven universe. God is working “all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). The theory of evolution is but a little god pretending to be a legitimate philosophy of history.

Last days' living will not allow its worldview convictions to be shaped by the utopian schemes of a fallen race. Communism, socialism, and Darwinian evolution are attempts to perpetuate the kingdom of this world. They are all doomed to failure because of their refusal to come to terms with Jesus Christ.

Last days' living views pain and suffering as being invested with the meaning of the suffering and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:11). Pain and suffering are witnesses to a sin-cursed world, not an inadequate God. When angry sinners nailed Jesus to the cross, they were killing the only one who loved them with a perfect love. Jesus Christ suffered and was raised from the dead so that we, who helped hang Him on that splintered cross, would not have to whistle our way through the graveyard of life. Instead, as forgiven sinners, death becomes the door into Christ's presence.

Last days' living is supercharged by the mandate to sow the seed of the gospel (Matt. 13:11, 19, 23). Everything we are, have, and do is to be seen as the circumference of a life filled with the passion for the good news that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

Last days' living is not daunted by the battalions of evil marching through the streets of time (Rev. 6:10, 11). In the infinite wisdom of God evil is being given its day. The sinful heart of man concocts its evil schemes, but God uses the wrath of man to praise Him (Gen. 50:20; Rev. 17:17; Psa. 76:10).

Last days' living steels itself during the days of spiritual darkness by the power of God's infallible, inerrant Word (2 Tim. 3:1, 16). According to Scripture we should expect an increasing ferocity in false teaching and deception leading to the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming (Matt. 24:24; 1 Tim. 4:1). Tares (counterfeit Christians) will grow alongside of wheat (God's people) during this age. Those who belong to Christ are not to be taken in by clever denials of the truth of God's Word. The Bible is without error and profitable for maturity in the faith.

Last days' living requires mental and spiritual sobriety (1 Pet. 1:13). Christians are to keep their minds clear while pursuing maturity in the faith. We are to resist the siren's song of promised security through material possessions.

Patriotism has its place in the life of the Christian citizen. However, we must never forget that the kingdoms of this world are passing away. We can pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, but our ultimate allegiance is to the Savior, Jesus Christ. There are disturbing signs of the moral decline of our nation. Too many are willing to trade liberty for promises of security. It appears that the present administration in Washington is on the attack against historic Christian moral teachings with regard to homosexuality, gay-marriage, and abortion. Marriage vows do not seem to be all that important to a steady stream of elected officials. Within the church doctrine is disdained. Entertainment is exalted. Lavish amounts of money are spent on church buildings and functions while missionaries have a difficult time raising support to go to places where the gospel has not been proclaimed. One day the crushing Stone is going to come, and the judgment will begin. Too much of the world has made its way into the life of the church. The judgment seat of Christ will give attention to that. The kingdoms of this world blithely go about building their own versions of the tower of Babel. That will end. The crushing Stone is coming.

The Lions' Den (July 12, 2009)

Sleeping in a lions' den. That is not a pleasant thought. But Daniel was able to do it. The Bible doesn't actually say that Daniel slept during his time, but it was, after all, an entire night. We know this because Darius the Mede passed the night fasting and the Bible text says, "neither were instruments of music brought before him: and his sleep fled from him" (Dan. 6:18). What was it that led to the contrast of a contented Daniel and miserable king? For any who are new to this story in the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, Daniel was thrown into a den of hungry lions and lived to tell about it.

When the Medes and Persians passed a law, it could not be rescinded by anyone, not even the king. What law was passed? A few high-level bureaucrats were jealous of Daniel who had distinguished himself as a servant of God in a pagan government. Daniel's adversaries could not tolerate the devotion he displayed to God. It has been said of this that "an honest man of conviction in the midst of government or ecclesiastical politicians stands out like a fair flower in a barren wilderness." A conspiracy was devised to get Darius the king to sign an edict which prohibited anyone from praying to any god, but the king (Dan. 6:7). The strength of the strategy lay in taking advantage of Darius' vanity. The penalty for violating the law was to become lion's food.

Daniel was rock-solid in his commitment to God. He was not intimidated by any law that tempted him to be disloyal to his God. He knew that faithfulness necessitated being in the presence of God in prayer. Daniel didn't, however, grandstand his prayer life. He prayed privately without hiding. We are told that Daniel "got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously" (Dan. 6:10). King Darius had no choice. He was distressed that he had to send Daniel off to the den of lions. He liked and respected him.

After a night of insomnia, the king hurried to the door of the lions' den and to his relief heard the voice of Daniel. He told Darius that God had sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths. He was unhurt, not a mark or a scratch upon him. Why? "Because he had trusted in his God." That kind of statement doesn't mean that everyone who puts his confidence in God will escape harm. In Daniel's case God's sovereign plan called for physical deliverance.

Daniel included the account of his experience in the lions' den in order to encourage Israel with the truth of God's sovereign control over the life of His covenant people. No matter what the moral conditions God will enable faithful Israelites to endure for His glory. The church of Jesus Christ in America would do well to remember this as it increasingly contends with societal hostility, suspicion, and slander. The next generation of Christians faces unprecedented challenges to their convictions regarding gay-marriage, abortion, and euthanasia. "Are you willing to put your job on the line over ethical issues?" is an intergenerational question. What are you prepared to do if you are expected by your employer to lie for the "benefit" of the company? You may face a "lions' den" of consequences if you stand your ground on biblical truth.

Dear reader, if you are a child of God, can you pray that God would send you affliction if it would drive you closer to Him? Those who belong to Jesus are to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him. What kind of lions' den are you resolved to endure for the sake of

the gospel and self-abandon for the glory of God? Loving God more doesn't come merely by an emotion, drinking coffee, sitting in a soft chair, and reading one's Bible. Love is an action word.

The following poem was written by Grayson Chambers, a senior at Gordon-Lee High School, in Chickamauga, Georgia. Ponder its probing thoughts and consider what you are willing to do for the sake of love for your Redeemer God.

The Lions' Den

If I'll cry out for You in the lions' den
 With the voice of frightened, helpless men;
 If it's a must to draw me close again
 I pray to You, God that you'll throw me in.

If to fall to the swelter of the furnace flame
 Is the only way that I'll make the claim
 That deliverance comes from the cry of Your name,
 I pray that You'll place me amidst the flame.

If I'm led to the alter in a distant land
 With my son at my side, and knife in hand
 With no lamb in sight, may Your will command;
 Take Your place on the throne of my heart as You planned.

If I must be afflicted with a burst so bright
 That my days are stolen and in return given night;
 If it's the only way that I'll see Your light
 I plead for You, Lord, to please take my sight.

If the currents increase to rob me of air,
 If the water must rise, so I'll boldly declare
 That I'll reach for Your hand in the sea of despair,
 I plead for You Lord to put me there.

Health Care – A Theological Assessment (August 14, 2009)

Health care debate is at a fever pitch in our nation. Proposed health care bills designed to change the way individuals pay for health insurance, town hall meetings to discuss the same, and conflict over “socialized medicine” seem to be on everyone's mind. Is there a Christian position on these issues? Are there any guidelines for thinking through the national health care debate in a biblical way? There is the danger of laying down absolutes where there is room for disagreement. At the same time a Christian worldview should inform believers in Jesus Christ in the critical matters of health, finances, citizenship, and government. The following is a modest proposal for thinking wisely, having truth-informed conversations, and making changes in a health care system laden with problems.

Perfect health was given to our first parents, Adam and Eve. The record of creation's dawn is filled with hope and ideal conditions. There was no death, disease, influenza, infections, cancer, and no pain and suffering to be found anywhere. The human body had been created by God and it was declared by Him to be very good. A perfect environment promised the hope of a world filled with the worship of God and unending delight in paradise.

Perfect health was lost through Adam and Eve's disobedience to God (Gen. 3:6, 7). The hope of a perpetual paradise vanished. Satan was able to insert himself between God and Adam with an offer that wasn't refused. God's clear warning about not eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was brushed aside for the deception that Adam and Eve could be like God. Eating the fruit did, indeed, transform the couple but not in the way imagined. Their bodies became impaled on the sentence of death. Death was the penalty of their sin. It was no longer a perfect world. Their health began to deteriorate. Pain and suffering became attached to conception. The aging process with its supporting cast of innumerable physical maladies became the plight of man. Whatever we have to say about personal health, sickness, disease, and dying, the reason for it all must not be ignored. The penalty of sin is death. Every cold and sore throat ought to be reminders of cosmic issues. We are all dying and our sinful condition before a holy God needs immediate attention. A Savior has been given. What have I done with Him (Jn. 3:16)?

Relatively (compared to what it could have been) good health was promised to Israel as God's witness nation to the world. During the time of the earthly theocracy, God demonstrated His omnipotent, sovereign control over Israel's overall health (Ex. 23:25). In addition to health benefits that were bestowed supernaturally (e.g., food from heaven, Ex. 16:35), there were measures the covenant people were to take. Obedience to God's law would help protect the people of Israel from epidemic diseases that would threaten their survival (Ex. 15:26). The health of the nation was implemented through conservation of natural resources (Deut. 20:19-20), through rest and relaxation (Lev. 23; 25), sanitation, and specific laws governing contagious diseases (Lev. 13). All of these procedures, however, rested upon a base of individual morality and obedience to God. Two lessons may be drawn from this. A nation can rise no higher in its view of health care than the moral character of its citizens. People who refuse to take proper care of themselves, fail to carry health insurance and then want others to pay their health insurance premiums have abandoned their responsibilities to themselves and others. Secondly, those who are determined to live without the moral constraints of self-control, community responsibility, and self-sacrifice consign themselves to an increasingly complicated life.

The prevention component in a nation's health care system is vital. Sickness and dying cannot be stopped but there is more. A balanced diet, exercise, and avoidance of habits that erode personal health go a long way in cutting health care costs. This emphasis is to be preferred over a plan based on rationing and denying care. A Stanford University study reported to the Associated press reached the conclusion that, "... overweight, diabetes, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, or even tobacco use were not as good an indicator of longevity as fitness. The study, involving 6,200 men – with or without heart disease – took progressive treadmill test results and found that the least fit had the greatest risk of early death." This does not deny that one's family history plays a role in good health (chronic physical conditions can be outside of one's control) but Americans must make a commitment to the prevention aspect of health care as much as possible.

It is the judgment of many that the United States has the best overall health care system in the world considering its size and population. We have a range of freedom and choices unparalleled in human history. However, some problems do exist and need to be addressed by a nation's collective conscience of justice and compassion. Catastrophic illnesses (e.g., long-term cancer care, spinal injuries, brain damage) need a financial safety net. The cancellation of health insurance during a personal health crisis needs legal attention. State legislators need the courage to address some kind of tort reform. Not all malpractice law suites are without merit but too many are attempts at using a jury lottery system to get rich. It is a known fact that many physicians order a wide range of tests, though often not necessary, in order to protect themselves from lawsuits. Those with preexisting conditions should not be penalized with insurance costs beyond their financial means or insurance denial. The uninsured who incur medical expenses need some degree of accountability. These and other issues beg for the attention of those who desire an equitable health care system. This does not mean that our present health care system needs to be replaced. Changes? Yes. Another system? No. Is a government-controlled health care system the answer? The evidence says a resounding no.

Health Care proponents must be prepared to answer the following five questions:

1. Can you promise me that I will not lose my current plan and doctor?
2. Will members of Congress enroll in the public plan?
3. Can you guarantee that Obamacare will not lead to higher deficits in the long term?
4. Will there be rationing of health care for patients on the public plan?
5. Can you promise that my tax dollars will not fund abortions?

It is astounding how much freedom people are willing to give away for the sake of feelings of security. Those who propose some form of government-controlled health care system is a case in point. Many centuries ago, the nation of Israel became weary of having an invisible king (God). In other words, they wanted more human government. They desired a visible king to act as God's surrogate. The mistake they were making was not in longing for a monarchical form of government (that will come one day when the Messiah will rule on earth) but rather it was the asking for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:19-20). This is not an argument adopting a theocracy or a monarchy but rather a lesson in human nature. It is to our peril when we forget the "tendencies ... which are inherent in all government under sinful men." (Alva J. McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom). Government for its own sake, burdensome taxation, political corruption, and totalitarian control are but a few of the natural drifts of human government. As wisely noted by Alva J. McClain, "It is to the lasting credit of the founding fathers of our own American system that they regarded all highly centralized government with a deep and cold suspicion, holding that the less we had of it, the better off we would be." It is the judgment of this writer that any form of a nationalized health care system is a move toward "loss of liberty, economic distress, and political despair."

Is there a definitive Christian answer to the health care problem in America? There is if one looks at the total picture through a biblical lens, the purpose of government, our founding documents, the value of personal liberty, justice and compassion, individual responsibility, the sacred value of human life, the sovereignty of God over the State. We have good reason to be concerned about how government policies will treat abortion and end-of-life decisions. When the Supreme Court can find the right to an abortion in the Constitution and State legislatures can legalize suicide in the name of death with dignity, we have every right to ask hard questions. All

branches of government must have their feet held to the fire of public scrutiny. It has been pointed out by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., as reported in *World* magazine, that “buried in the 1,017-page health bill is language making it clear that federal standards would preempt any state law. That could put 200 state laws aimed at protecting life in jeopardy.” These and the related issues of entitlements, end-of-life counseling and taxation are subject to the wisdom of Holy Scripture. Let the church speak with humility, compassion, and wisdom forged on the anvil of biblical truth.

A Faltering Economy (September 6, 2009)

“Falter - to move unsteadily; stumble; totter.” That is the way the dictionary defines a term that most often is used in relation to people (e.g., the soldiers faltered for a moment as their captain fell.). However, it is an appropriate description of an economy that keeps stumbling. Some are calling our present economy the great recession. That may be right. It has been said that a recession is when your neighbor loses his job, and a depression is when you lose your job. No doubt, that is an oversimplification. The fact remains, however, that things are not going well. Banks are failing. Unemployment is approaching 10% nationally. Businesses are struggling to turn a profit. Mortgage foreclosures keep mounting. Commercial loans are difficult to get. The list could go on. One must be careful about making the claim that God is saying a specific thing through some current event (e.g., “it is the end of the world.”). Another extreme is the benign assessment that this is just a part of the overall economy cycle through which we must pass, a self-correcting nuisance that must be endured. I would like to offer what I believe to be a biblical analysis of our current crisis.

A faltering economy is a divine reminder that we live in a fallen world. Sin has polluted the stream of economic history because men and women are sinful by nature. The brightest among us cannot forestall human folly bound up in financial systems. The problem is not some fatal flaw in our free enterprise system but in the hearts of those who function within it.

A faltering economy lifts the roof off waste, fraud, and greed. Hard times have a way of flushing out bad habits and bad people. We hear a lot about conserving, “greening,” and cost controls. It is easy to spend other people’s money, too easy. Communities are finding out that careful oversight of how taxes are spent, and necessary belt-tightening is the way government should be run all the time. It is astounding how many Ponzi schemes and con artists are being smoked out by the state of our current economy. People are asking unscrupulous investors for their money. The crooks are found out and prosecuted. That’s a good thing.

A faltering economy is the opportunity to learn the value of living within our means. As government must learn how to cut back on spending, so do individuals. When our income is cut or lost altogether, it’s amazing how creative we can become in cutting fat from budgets. Being forced to reassess our spending habits is a profitable course of action. Americans are notorious “wasters.” Christians should lead the way in wise buying and conservation of our resources.

A faltering economy can be an excuse for government to take away freedoms and acquire more power over its citizenry. Our founding fathers cast a suspicious eye toward centralized government. So should we. Watch out when government starts declaring emergencies, restricting freedom and not giving it back. Socialism (government owning and operating industries) makes

promises it cannot provide. When a people lose their moral fiber more laws are created to fill the gap. There are those who are waiting in the wings to accommodate the fearful and insecure by imposing their will upon them.

A faltering economy stirs up human insecurities, fear, and worry. Within each of us is a God-shaped vacuum. We were made for a relationship to our Maker. When that relationship does not exist, self-made gods rush in to rule the life. These lesser gods are impotent in the face of pain and suffering. When times are lean, jobs are scarce, and income is uncertain, fears haunt those without a confidence in God. Is anxiety over the economy robbing you of your joy in Christ?

A faltering economy can ignite anger toward government and political leaders. Deficit spending, higher taxes, and joblessness are not small matters. Such conditions can lower the threshold for anger and bitterness. The Bible tells us to be angry and sin not (Eph. 4:26). Righteous anger over unrighteousness must not be allowed to become sinful anger.

A faltering economy can be the cover for the ascendancy of demagogues and power seekers. There are those who are more than willing to take advantage of a crisis and use it for their own selfish purposes. Refuse to be manipulated by those politicians who stir up the populace by appealing to their emotions and prejudices in order to get money and power for themselves. Class warfare is a favorite weapon in the arsenal of those whose only concern is achieving and maintaining political power. Nothing is gained and much is lost when one economic class is pitted against another (e.g., taxing the rich to give to the poor).

A faltering economy is the breeding ground for get-rich-quick schemes, swindlers, and scam artists. Be on the lookout for those who want your money up front before they resurface your driveway or reroof your house. Get references. Simply because a contractor or salesperson claims to be a Christian is not a good enough reason to let them do the work. Smooth talkers with great financial investment plans must be checked and double checked. If the monthly financial report on your investment is coming only by email, your investment may be in serious trouble.

A faltering economy reminds Christian pilgrims that this world's commercial utopian dreams, promises of boundless prosperity are doomed to ultimate failure. Revelation 18 describes the collapse of the world's stock market in the Day of the Lord. Prior to Christ's return to earth the economies of this planet will go up in smoke. This is not a call to take one's money out of the bank and hide it under a mattress. It is rather a needed sober outlook on where this world is headed. Judgment will fall on the religious, socioeconomic system that has refused to worship Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Endurance (October 4, 2009)

A cross country race reveals the importance of endurance. On a recent beautiful fall afternoon, I witnessed a gathering of scores of high school cross country teams competing for team championships. The horn sounded and they charged over a grassy field to complete a challenging 5K (3.1 miles) course. The leader of the pack ran an amazing race. He averaged about five minutes per mile and finished over four hundred yards ahead of his nearest competitor.

There is a word in the Greek that describes the Christian life as one of “enduring” a race. The word for endurance in the Greek language is *hupomone* (*literally, remain under*). “It is facing pressures and trials that call for a steadfast commitment to doing right and maintaining a godly life” (Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*). In its noun form it is used over thirty-two times in the New Testament. Endurance is the Spirit-enabled power to wait and work through afflictions in a biblical way. We need staying power through hardships. Why? Good things happen as we keep on living joyfully and resiliently in the midst of difficulties. Even a well-trained runner deals with discomfort and pain as she keeps her eye on the finish line. The Christian puts his eye on the fulfillment of the promises of God. Jesus Christ is coming. He will bring rewards with Him for those who have been faithful in running the race.

Some confuse the idea of endurance with the possibility of losing their salvation. The Christian’s security in Christ is not determined by winning the battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. There are those who think that the believer must “persevere” in Christ to ensure their final salvation. This is partly due to a misunderstanding of Matthew 24:13 (“But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.”). This passage teaches the welcomed deliverance of persecuted Christians who survive the tribulation period. Nowhere does the Bible teach that the Christian must keep on believing in order to keep their salvation. The evidence is overwhelming that those who belong to Christ are secure in Him (Rom. 8:35-39).

Disciplining oneself for godliness produces spiritual endurance (1 Tim. 4:8). However, we need suffering in order to produce endurance (Rom. 5:3; Jas. 1:3). Our endurance commends us to others as servants of God (2 Cor. 6:4). Runners are inspired by champion runners. The Christian has a champion “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). Therefore, as we run with endurance the race that is set before us, we fix our eyes on Jesus. The example of Jesus should motivate us to finish well in the Christian life.

How is your spiritual endurance? Has illness, financial pressures, a disappointment reduced your pace in the Christian life? Have you dropped back and ceased to run effectively? The Hebrew Christians had a history of having “endured a great conflict of sufferings” (Heb. 10:32). They were encouraged to persist in running hard after God through a new set of sufferings. Dear Christian friend, don’t give in to the temptation to become angry and withdraw from the fellowship of believers. There are mysteries associated with affliction. Running well is made possible when we entrust our souls “to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet. 4:19). Our God is trustworthy. Let us run with endurance.

Enduring for the Sake of the Gospel (October 25, 2009)

Enduring is possible and impossible. Non-Christians can endure through difficult situations in the pursuit of personal happiness. This does not bring God glory and honor. This does not take away from admirable behavior. God’s image in fallen man is not completely eclipsed. However, those who are God’s people through faith in Jesus Christ have a call to endure life’s hardships for the sake of the gospel. William Carey, “the father of modern missions,” is one of those who exemplifies what it means to spend and be spent for the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

William Carey was born in a small village in England in 1761. His father was a poor weaver and school master. William became a cobbler and shoemaker at the age of fourteen. It has been said that this “impoverished English shoemaker was an unlikely candidate for greatness.” In his teen years he taught himself Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and Danish. He could read the Bible in six languages. Carey married at the age of twenty to Dorothy Plackett. While pastoring two relatively small congregations, he developed a philosophy of missions that would change the Christian world. It was not easy. The Christian culture of England in the 1700s was antagonistic to missionary effort in reaching the unsaved. By God’s grace Carey endured opposition from fellow Christians, the British government, and his wife to sail for India with the precious gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” These words from a memorable sermon delivered by Carey in 1792, capture the passion for God’s fame that kept him enduring through a hazardous five-month voyage at sea, fevers, cobras, crocodile infested rivers, a hostile Hindu population, and hundreds of other hardships and hazards to impact India for Jesus Christ. Within four decades of Carey’s arrival in India, thirteen new missionary societies were formed in Britain. Missionaries, inspired by his example, sailed from Europe and America to distant lands. The Bible was translated into over forty-four languages and dialects. Christian schools were established, and hundreds of Hindus were won to Jesus Christ.

William Carey endured because of a strong biblical theology. He was a Calvinist, holding to the belief of the sufficiency of God’s Word, that man is a sinner unable to save himself, God’s predestinating love, and the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit to bring lost sinners to salvation in Jesus Christ. It was Carey’s driving impulse that the greatest need of men and women was God’s forgiveness in Christ. His own words testify to this; “It must undoubtedly strike every considerate mind what a vast proportion of the sons of Adam there are who yet remain in the most deplorable state of heathen darkness... utterly destitute of the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ, or of any means of attaining it.”

Life in India was hard. The tropical climate, malaria, the East India Trading Company, and the collapse of major banking institutions in Calcutta all conspired to stop William Carey’s zeal for the gospel. But he did not give up. He endured for the sake of Christ. Then there was the fire of March 11, 1812. For years Carey had labored in the arduous task of translation. He had mastered the Bengali language and Sanskrit, the queen of India’s languages and dialects. Printing presses and fonts of Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Arabic, Nagari, Telegu and other vernaculars worked together to disseminate the gospel through the printed page. The cause was not known, but a fire broke out in the print shop and burned for three days. The loss was incalculable. Valuable manuscripts, years of hard work, and Carey’s magnum opus of his linguistic life, the dictionary of Sanskrit and its Indian cognates, all went up in flames. Carey’s thoughts the day after the awful blaze are a testimony to how endurance thrives. In a letter to his nephew he wrote, “This is a heavy blow, as it will stop our printing the Scriptures for a long time. Twelve months’ hard labour will not reinstate us; not to mention loss of property, MSS., etc., which we shall scarcely ever surmount. I wish to ‘be still, and know that the Lord is God,’ and to bow to His will in everything. He will no doubt bring good out of this evil, and make it promote His interests; but, at present, the providence is exceeding dark.”

Those who endure for the sake of the gospel drink deeply from the cup of “all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Oh, how our

world does need those who persevere through hard times with joyful zeal for the glory of God. “God, grant us the tenacity to live in such a way that when we have finished our course and fought the fight of the faith that it will be said of us that we loved Jesus Christ more than life itself.”

William Carey died on June 9, 1834, at the age of 72. The inscription on his tombstone read, “William Carey, born August 17, 1761: Died – ‘A wretched, poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall.’”

Hard Hearts (November 15, 2009)

Running around barefoot in the summertime was one of the perks of childhood. How wonderful it was to kick off those hot shoes and feel the cool green grass under your feet. But barefoot season did not start out that way. Tender feet were met with stones, sticks, briars, and hot streets. After a while the discomfort gave way to calloused feet. By the end of summer, we could fly around the yard, streets, and woods with natural “soles” on our feet. This didn’t stop nails and stubbed toes, but it did offer some pain relief.

The Bible warns of the danger of developing a hard heart. In Exodus it is said ten times that Pharaoh hardened his heart. Ten other times it is reported that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. This presents something of a theological conundrum. Which happened first? We will hold that question for the moment. There is the matter of what it means to harden one’s heart. This is no small matter. To harden one’s heart toward God is to become unreceptive and insensitive to God and His word. When an unsaved person hardens his heart toward God there is a callousness of soul which resists the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. This hardening process, if not reversed, leads to eternal damnation. There is nothing more serious than this (Rom. 9:22; 11:7).

Hardening the heart is a metaphorical expression describing an insensitive, unresponsive, stubborn rejection of God’s Word. It is a will set in cement in response to God’s revelation.

Hardening the heart is possible in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unbelievers can harden their heart (e.g. Pharaoh, Ex. 7:13, 14, 22; Acts 19:9). Hard hearts will look for ways to reject, discredit, malign, and even stop the gospel message from being preached.

Hardened hearts can be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit in the new birth (Eph. 4:17-20). The apostle Paul is a classic example of how a hard heart toward the gospel developed by religious zeal can be reversed (Acts 9:1-19; 1 Tim. 1:13). Though a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ, Paul was shown mercy. The “foremost” of sinners was transformed into an ambassador of the gospel of reconciliation. No spiritual case is too hard for God. Remember this, dear Christian, as you pray for the unsaved.

Hardening the heart is possible among God’s people. The Hebrew Christians are warned of this danger (Heb. 3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). When the believer refuses to obey God and complains because of trials, watch out! When God’s promises are dismissed and trampled under one’s feet there will be a price to pay. God will lovingly chasten His children to call the disobedient to repentance (Heb. 12).

Hardening the heart operates along a defined pattern. There is an opportunity to respond to the revelation of God (i.e., to obey Him). Resistance to revering Him and disobeying Him results in increasing insensitivity. The hardened heart develops and eventually encounters the judgment of God. For the non-Christian this means a self-produced incapability of belief in Christ. The loving witness of family members, pain and suffering, repeated opportunities to hear the gospel are all like a drop of water on a brick. The awful consequences of rejecting Jesus Christ are mocked. What a terrible thought.

Hardening the heart is possible on a national scale. How dark is the day when great numbers of people in a nation or any people group hear the gospel and reject it and become openly hostile to believers in Jesus Christ. Jesus looked out over the city of Jerusalem with great emotion and lamented the spiritual hardness that characterized the nation of Israel (Matt. 23:37). It was this hardness of heart that brought the apostle Paul to exclaim, "I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh..." (Rom. 9:3). This self-induced blindness that afflicted the nation of Israel was in itself the judgment of God for unbelief (Isa. 6:10; Matt. 13:14, 15; Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10; Jn. 12:40; Acts 28:26; Rom. 11:8).

Hardening the heart takes a heavy toll upon the divine institution of marriage (Matt. 19:8). God permitted Moses to write certificates of divorce in Israel because of its spiritual obtuseness. There was no command to divorce. Marriage was designed by God to be lifelong and monogamous. Hard hearts become unreceptive and disobedient to God and His Word. Marriages suffer as a result.

We come back to Pharaoh. It is said that God hardened His heart. How does this fit into the theology of hard hearts? Some are quick to say that Pharaoh hardened his heart before God hardened his heart. However, Paul says God hardens "whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18) and in the Exodus account there are two predictions that God will harden Pharaoh (4:21; 7:3). This prediction preceded Pharaoh's hardening his own heart. Are we left hanging on the horns of a dilemma? Not really. Two observations are necessary. Pharaoh was fully responsible for his actions. He had been living with the gospel at his doorstep in Egypt since he was a child. Israel's worshipful presence as a witness nation was an opportunity for idol worshiping Egyptians to put their trust in the salvation of the one true God. Pharaoh sinned because he chose to sin. He resisted God and hardened his heart. God hardened the heart of Pharaoh as an act of judgment against a sinner who was already in rebellion against God.

If you have been patient enough to read to this point, you should be sobered by the gravity of hardening one's heart against God. Sinful human beings are responsible for their ultimate condemnation. We can never excuse ourselves from God's righteous judgment with the plea that God has not been fair. Have you heard the gospel and yet have not put your trust in Christ for eternal life? That kind of push-back comes with grave consequences. With what hearing you may have left, hear this, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5). Hard hearts get hard treatment.

Unconditional Election - Some Questions (November 22, 2009)

The teaching of Scripture is not always easy to grasp. It is true that the Bible is a clear book (the perspicuity of Scripture), but at the same time we are encountering the mind of God and that is a humbling experience. In the context of the pardoning of sin and God's grace it is said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord" (Isa. 55:8). There is no revealed truth that challenges our thoughts more than the truth of unconditional election. Unconditional election is that sovereign act of God (His decision only) in eternity past whereby He chose all believers to salvation with all its accompanying blessings and obligations (Eph. 1:4-7; Jn. 15:16; 17:2; Rom. 9:18).

The wonder of the distinguishing grace of God bestowed on some sinners and not others is not based on any condition man must meet before God chooses to save him. This election occurred before the foundation of the world, is unmerited, and finds its ground, cause, and guarantee in Jesus Christ. A host of objections and questions have been presented in response to the truth of unconditional election.

Is not the election of believers based on foreseen faith as the product of "prevenient grace" (divine grace turning the heart toward God) and is not, therefore, unconditional? This is probably the most common explanation given to why some are saved, and others are not. On the surface it seems plausible, namely, that God knows who will believe and elects individuals only because He foresees their faith. But there are serious flaws with this view of election. It misinterprets the word "foreknowledge" to mean just "to know beforehand." On closer examination when foreknowledge is used with reference to people, it means God's special favor. Further, if it is true that God elects on the basis of foreseen faith, then God elects on the basis of human belief. Man is placed at the center rather than God's sovereignty. It should also be emphasized that so-called foreseen faith still makes salvation and damnation certain. The problem is with certainty and free will, not with election and free will (Acts 2:23). It was "foreknown" (if you believe in foreseen faith), foreordained (if you believe in unconditional election), but in either case certain that the soldiers would not break Christ's legs; that He would be buried with the rich, etc. It was certain from the foundation of the world, yet all involved did as they chose to do. Those who believe in foreseen faith as the basis of election to salvation are still left with the determination that some are not going to be saved. In the words of Augustine, "God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe."

"Is not election based on one's acceptance of Christ?" This is closely akin to the foreseen faith view but goes on to say that Christ only was elected in eternity past, and the believer is elected when he receives Christ as Savior. The theological defect here is that it ignores the plain statements that individual believers were chosen before the foundation of the world. God does not choose on the basis of human choice which is a violation of the grace principle. God's freedom and sovereignty cannot be placed in the service of a human decision.

"Is not election to service for Christ only?" This view says that the believer is not elected to salvation but rather has been chosen to be "conformed to the image of Christ." A question remains, however. How can one possibly distinguish between salvation and the obligation for service? This view evades the issue.

“Is God not unfair in electing some and not others?” This question assumes God has to be fair. If it is justice that we want, we are all in trouble. If salvation is based on justice who would be saved? No one.

“Why doesn’t God elect everyone to salvation?” We don’t know. This is locked away in the infinite mind of God. The number of the elect may very well be larger than imagined. Those who die while still in the womb and infants, if covered by the atoning work of Christ as some believe, would take their place among the elect of God. For all others it can be said that whoever desires to be saved can be.

“Doesn’t election discourage evangelism?” The truth of unconditional election is taught in the Scriptures to have just the opposite effect (Rom. 9-11; Jn. 10:27). Our responsibility is to carry the gospel to all men everywhere (2 Tim. 2:10). God has ordained our proclamation of the gospel as the means of bringing the elect to salvation. This is a great encouragement in evangelism. By God’s grace we will always be successful in our witness. God does the preparing of hearts. We are to be obedient and witness.

“Doesn’t election violate human freedom?” It does not. The Bible teaches that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible. It has been pointed out by many theologians that men make choices according to their own desires. We do what we want to do and are held responsible for our decisions. Man’s choices are not coerced but are real ones. Erwin Lutzer has identified a core issue in saying, “Not only are we born with a sin nature, but we are also under condemnation. We are therefore held accountable for sins we did not personally commit.”

“Doesn’t unconditional election make God the author of sin?” No, it does not. The Bible distinguishes between what God does and what God permits. God has designed a plan that includes evil. We will have to face this fact as difficult as it may be. It was essential to gain the desired goal, namely, the glorification of God in all His attributes. We know that God hates sin (Psa. 5:5). The responsibility of committing sin is always placed on man and acknowledged by man. We must praise God that by His grace and in His infinite wisdom He has chosen to save some from the vast sea of sinful and rebellious humanity.

“Does it do any good to pray if God has elected some to be saved?” Yes, we must pray. For, like evangelism, prayer is ordained by God as a means of accomplishing His purposes. It is consistent with the plan and wisdom of God that we pray for the unsaved (Rom. 10:1). God uses the prayers of the righteous to bring the elect to salvation.

“Does unconditional election mean that some of my loved ones may not have been chosen to salvation?” The only way we can know who the elect and non-elect are is by who puts their trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. To try to venture into the mind of God about who are the non-elect is not open to us. We must remember that those who desire to be saved can be. We are responsible, as Christians, to pray for and share the gospel with our loved ones.

“How can divine election be reconciled with human responsibility?” The Bible presents both truths and offers no final reconciliation for us now. We do not know how this seeming paradox fits together, but God knows. So, we are wise to leave it in God’s hands (“The secret things

belong to the Lord, our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” Deut. 29:29).

“How can I be sure that I am one of the elect?” Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16; Acts 16:31). If you die without Christ’s righteousness credited to you, there is nothing left but eternal damnation. Today, God is setting the way of eternal life before you. What will you do? If you belong to Jesus Christ, praise God for His grace.

The Weight of Words (December 6, 2009)

Our words are weighty things. We can carry hurtful words spoken to us an entire lifetime. Taunts on the playground in the second grade, a harsh criticism from a parent, a discouraging comment from a teacher can come back to us like the sting of a hornet. The problem is that we can be guilty of inflicting verbal wounds ourselves.

Biblical wisdom tells us that our words are weighed by God (Prov. 10:19-21, 31-32). This is a sobering thought. The words that we use are not leaves that float to the ground and return to the soil. They are carriers of messages that either help or hurt. Proverbs is filled with wisdom in the use of our tongue.

In Proverbs 10:19 we are told that “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” With our use of words, fewer is often better than more. This is another aspect of the truth that controlling one’s tongue helps avoid sin (Jas. 3:1-12). The world of the internet has created a torrent of words that pour out through blogs, emails, Facebook, and web sites. Text-messaging and twittering also play their part in non-stop conversations. Never in the history of mankind have so many been able to speak to so many so much of the time. This is not necessarily a bad thing but given the shared experience of fallen human nature the potential for lying, slander, gossip, and wasted time is massive. A word to the wise. Think before you speak. For all Facebookers, when we write on our walls, is it encouraging to others? Is it necessary, too much about too little? When you twitter to a host of hearers, is it true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable?

Are your words worth their weight in precious metals? “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth” (Prov. 10:20). Our words can have great value. A text message thanking a friend for the help they have been to you can turn a cloudy day into a sunny day. Never underestimate the nourishing effect of words (“The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for a lack of sense.” Prov. 10:21). Bruce Waltke has summarized the truth of this very well; “though the fool is surrounded by the life-preserving words of the righteous that nourish many, he starves to death because he lacks the good sense to feed on them. He can neither receive life nor give it.” May God give us the grace to pass along health-giving comments and godly counsel to that distraught parent struggling with their children’s rebellious behavior.

Our words can be worthless, wasted, and deadly. Is your guard down when you speak to those you love the most? The guided missiles of harshness, sarcasm, and the judgment of motives do untold damage to marriages. The better news is that our words can be like delicious fruit, sweet to the taste and nutritious for our spiritual well-being (“The mouth of the righteous brings forth

wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off.” Prov. 10:31). Is my communication healing and healthy? Do I talk too much about myself? Do I talk back to my parents? Is bathroom humor my default mode when I am trying to be funny? “The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked, what is perverse” (Prov. 10:32). How we verbally respond to disappointments should receive our full attention. Our words should be fitting or appropriate to the occasion (e.g., not uttering a complaint or profanity but talking to myself in terms of the promises of God instead).

Let us become our own best counselors so that our words are weighted by divine wisdom. (1) We are to set our minds on the things of the Spirit. Our thoughts should not be allowed to take us wherever they want to go. (2) Ask God for the grace to utter kind words. (3) Declare war on self-serving, negative, and critical remarks. (4) Learn how to ask people questions and ask God for the grace to be a good listener.

“Lord, make my tongue an instrument for what is right in your sight. May it be used to praise you, for passing on truth to others, for prayer, for witnessing to others about Christ, and honesty. Keep me from deception, lying, gossip, profanity, slander, boasting, and flattery. Give me the grace of discipline so that I will not say whatever comes to my mind. Teach me how to talk about people and to people without sinning against them. Please grant me the sense to remember that my words are messages that can’t be recalled. ‘Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.’ So that when you weigh my words in the day of judgment they will be as gold, silver, and precious stones and not wood, hay, and straw.”

Saving Unborn Children (January 22, 2010)

Abortion is a critical moral issue in our time. Previous generations have had to overcome the evils of slavery and segregation. The culture of death with abortion as its centerpiece is an evil that must be exposed, resisted, and defeated. On January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court found the right to abortion on demand in the Constitution. It was an appalling decision which has led to an average of 1.6 million abortions annually.

Abortion is the extraction or expulsion of the immature human fetus from the mother’s womb prior to natural birth. The pro-life movement has called attention to fundamental moral issues that are involved in the protection of innocent human life in the womb. First, every human life is sacred. Its value is absolute. Secondly, the deliberate killing of an innocent human being is wrong. Thirdly, the fetus is a complete person possessing a soul from the moment of conception. Fourthly, the purpose of law is to protect human life. After all is said and done, abortion is about God.

God has made it very clear that the developing fetus is already human life (Jer. 1:4; Psa. 139:13-16; Ex. 21:22-24; Lk. 1:24; 2:1). The embryo is a human life and must be accorded the same rights as life outside the womb. It has been noted that “at eight weeks all the organs are present—brain functioning, heart pumping, liver making blood cells, kidney cleaning the fluids, fingerprints formed, etc. Yet almost all abortions happen later than this date.”

Fetal life is defenseless and will be vindicated by God (Psa. 10:17-18; 146:9; 68:5; Deut. 10:18; Amos 1:13; Prov. 6:16-18; Jas. 1:27). God was committed to the care and protection of the

fatherless in Israel. He promised blessings upon those who shared His care for orphans. This responsibility has been committed to the church as well. In ancient Israel children who had no father were to be protected. The motherless were also objects of God's compassion (Ezek. 16:4-6). A nation that legitimizes, through its legal system, the destruction of innocent human life is in for hard times. God holds that nation responsible for its moral failure. Woe be to a nation that declares war on the defenseless (children in the womb, child abuse, pedophilia). The judgment of God fell upon Ammon for ripping open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders (Amos 1:3). It has been said that "societies that have nothing sacred, especially not human life, die."

The arguments that are used to justify the destruction of fetal life are morally and ethically flawed.

"A woman alone has the right to choose what is done to and in her body." Other versions of this argument are articulated in terms of "reproductive freedom" or "a free society should not invade the privacy of a woman's body." In response, let it be said that that so-called "freedom of choice" can never justify freedom to take innocent lives at will. What about the rights of others? What about the rights of the innocent fetus the mother has chosen to conceive? Who gives the unborn child a choice? Who is his or her advocate? It was Lewis B. Smedes, the Christian ethicist, who said, "a free society does not allow people to follow their consciences if their consciences lead them to kill an innocent human being."

"What right do the pro-lifers have to impose their particular view of morality on others? It is said that you can't legislate morality in a pluralistic society." The issue is really whose morality will be reflected in our law and public policy. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg ([Ethics for a Brave New World](#)) effectively sully this popular argument by pointing out that "the issue...is not whether a morality should be imposed, but whether the one being imposed is the correct one. We are not embarrassed to impose a morality on society that requires us not to kill another human being on whim. Why, if abortion is wrong, should we be afraid to impose on society a ban against it?"

Answering the flimsy and morally vacuous arguments of the pro-abortion movement is not enough, however. There are measurable and meaningful things that we can do to challenge and correct the culture of death in which we live. In the first place, we who are pro-life are to live in such a way as to be a purifying influence on the moral corruption in our society (Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:11-17). We are to take responsibility for our own lives to live God's way ("abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul"). Our lives are to be placed on display for all to see the presence of God. Love one another. Be kind. Show compassion. Keep ourselves morally pure. Don't go to bed with your boyfriend/girlfriend. Tell the truth. Secondly, we are to live in submission to divinely ordained cultural institutions (the state, one's employer, family). This is to be done for the Lord's sake. The world is suspicious of Christians. Our teaching unsettles the unbeliever. Any charges of treason (being un-American, anarchists, rebels, etc.) are best dispelled by godly living.

Thirdly, we are to identify, resist, and denounce the evils that exist in our fallen world (Eph. 5:11, "And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret."). Pro-life Christians have a right and responsibility to speak out against the evils of our age. The evils of racism,

adultery, pornography, illegal drugs, abortion, etc. must have the light of truth cast upon them. The moral evil of abortion on demand ought to be challenged by the persuasion of a greater power, namely changed attitudes and values. Finally, we are to be a merciful community by providing assistance to those who are crying in the darkness. Love for God and others translated into good deeds can speak volumes to a watching world. The unsaved can't understand the language of truth but they can observe lives that practice the truth. Unwed mothers considering abortion need loving counsel and prayer. Saving unborn children is a cause with God's stamp of approval.

A Disaster in Haiti (January 29, 2010)

The recent earthquake in Haiti is a disaster of incalculable magnitude. Haiti, a nation only a few hundred miles from the coast of Florida, is in another struggle for survival. Life in Haiti is not easy. It lacks many of the institutional structures that provide for the basic well-being of the population. A devastating earthquake has rocked the island nation which is already the poorest in the western hemisphere.

History is littered with natural disasters. Earthquakes, tsunamis, forest fires, floods, drought, and hurricanes plague the human condition. We live in a world under the curse of sin and death. When Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator, the planet on which we live became a hostile environment. Thankfully, nature did not become totally ruined but it is broken badly enough to make us yearn for a better world. Even creation itself is said to be one great symphony of sighs waiting for its redemption (Rom. 8:22). God has not abandoned a fallen sinful human race. There is hope.

How can hope be transferred to the broken and bleeding people of Haiti? It starts with immediate expressions of compassion. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that we are to love our neighbor and our neighbor is the person we encounter who is in need (Lk. 10:25-37). We love our neighbor when we show mercy. The Haitians need our mercy. There are multiple ways we can direct our mercy. Find a reputable mission agency which has a history in Haiti of day-in and day-out Christ exalting ministries that is making a difference. Give your money to these missionaries and ministries. We can pray for Haiti. Pray that a good and stable government will rise to lead the island nation. Pray that the Christian community in Haiti will show Christ's love through its gospel witness and mercy ministries.

One thing Haiti doesn't need is more U.S. aid without accountability. There are many who, wanting to feel better about themselves, think that American tax dollars thrown at a problem is the solution. True compassion does not ignore truth and real long-term solutions. Nation building, which is what is needed in Haiti, requires a foundation of character strength, liberty, a strong work ethic, a government that works for the good of the people, justice, entrepreneurial capitalism, and a high view of God. This is not to say that Haiti lacks these qualities. They must be more widespread. Here is a report received recently from Haiti.

But let me change to something more encouraging. Even though a food delivery had been promised, and about 5000 people waited patiently until 4 pm, no food arrived today.

"So the people do not get fed. What do they do? They hold an outdoor praise session! They have

been singing songs of praise for about two hours now. Hungry, tired, suffering people praising the Lord. I wish you could hear it - songs that say: 'I am not afraid because I have Jesus in my heart.' Or 'Thank you, thank you Lord because I know you.' The songs were upbeat, joyful. Some people were dancing, arms raised in the air to God. I am so humbled.”

Cynics may scoff at this and say much more is needed than prayer and singing. The truth is that such resilience in a time of calamity is the stuff from which a better future is made. Was the earthquake in Haiti an act of God’s judgment? This question in one form or another always seems to enter the public conversation about natural disasters. Some think that we are better off, as one Opinion columnist in the AJC has stated, “When God and Satan are given a holiday from the news cycle.” Attempts at immediate explanations for earthquakes, hurricanes, and other such eruptions in nature are fraught with hazards. Jesus’ disciples tried to get Him to explain why a tower fell over and killed eighteen people. He “dodged” the question and went to the important issue, namely, that disasters are warnings to everyone. We assume that God owes us a good turn of events when the truth is, we all deserve death because we are sinners. The message of God in all calamities is that we all need to repent. If the Haitians are suffering because of generations of Voodoo, then why isn’t America experiencing catastrophes for having slaughtered millions of innocent babies in the wombs of their mothers? It is best to leave those questions with God. In the meantime, we must pray that Haitians and Americans will abandon their idols and turn to God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

Creationists Beware (February 7, 2010)

Christian creationists live in a very hostile world. The theory of Darwinian evolution has captured the academic world, the media world, the entertainment world, and to a large extent popular culture. It has even affected the Christian church. Students (elementary, high school, and college) who profess faith in Jesus Christ are under special assault from an educational system wholly given over to a worldview alien to their own. Is God the Creator of all things or is He not? There are those who claim there is a middle way by trying to construct a compromise called theistic evolution (“God is big enough to use chance through time,” i.e., evolution). A young Christian or, for that matter, any believer who is not well grounded in the Scriptural truth of God as the Creator of all things must beware. There can be the temptation of abandoning confidence in the Bible and worshiping a lesser God. This need not be. The following are some guard rails for living as a creationist (that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, in six literal days, supernaturally, suddenly, and with the superficial appearance of history. This is my interpretation of the biblical data, recognizing that there are “old earth” creationists.) in a world given over to Darwinian evolution.

Know God. There is a danger of pursuing knowledge about God and His wonderful creation and yet not getting to know God. “Let now a wise man boast in his wisdom...but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23-24). The Creator has made us to have a relationship with Him. God doesn’t need us to defend Him against the onslaughts of evolution. The truth is, “He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them” (Psa. 2:4). Since the Lord is not frightened, neither do His people need to be. Speak up for the truth about the Creator and His creation and love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Know what the Bible teaches about origins. Give yourself to personal study and become informed regarding biblical creationism. Study Genesis, read books by scientists who are creationists. The Institute for Creation Research, Answers in Genesis, John Whitcomb's ministries and others offer excellent resources for studies in creation issues. Attend conferences sponsored by biblical creationists where you can develop an information network and hear well-trained theologians and scientists committed to the biblical account of creation.

Stay closely involved with a strong Bible believing, Bible teaching church. What does your church believe about creation? Does it take the first eleven chapters of Genesis seriously? Sadly, there are pastors and churches which refuse to take a strong biblical stand on the subject of creation versus evolution. When young people are searching for answers to the questions evolutionists raise about biblical creationism, they need a truth-rich environment in their local church. Students, when you go off to college find a church that teaches the Word of God. You need protection, encouragement, and the support of fellow believers.

Don't be intimidated by the dogmatism and bluster of evolutionists. They would have you to think that true science and belief in evolution are one and the same. This is not true. There are biologists, for instance, who for various reasons have to publicly align themselves with the "party line." The reality is that some biologists have their doubts about Darwinism but are under tremendous peer pressure to defend evolution. This is not to say that there are no evolutionist bullies. Many are persuaded by their educational experience and ignorance of biblical creationism. In the classroom they have the upper hand. The best advice is to listen and learn but don't believe everything you are being told. Ask questions in a respectful way. Don't try to embarrass a teacher in front of the class. There are teachers and academics, though firm believers in Darwinism, who are courteous and open to discussion. Even then you will hear such assertions as "most scientists believe" or "many theologians and pastors agree that belief in evolution and God are not incompatible." It seems to have been forgotten that science is not conducted on the basis of consensus ("Scientific truth is never determined by majority vote." Dr. Henry Morris). Also, there are dozens of fully credentialed biologists in the Creation Research Society and other creationist organizations.

Beware of certain vocabulary traps fostered by evolutionists. One of those is the use of the word "evolution" as a synonym for change. The two concepts are not the same. For example, it may be said that a certain kind of business has "evolved" through the years to become something else. This is a misuse of the word evolved. Did the business become a kangaroo or an ape? Another term that has caused some confusion is "microevolution" (adaptations and variations within a species, e.g., adaptation of insects to pesticides). The fact is that creationists believe in what is called horizontal variations (e.g., the different beaks on the Galapagos Island finches). The creationist believes that such changes, adaptations, are not a proof of evolution but evidence of an infinitely wise Creator's forethought. Macroevolution is the *belief* (note the verb here) in the transmutation of reptiles into birds and mammals, or of apes into men, or other "upward changes" (Henry Morris, "Willful Ignorance"). Macroevolution is a myth devoid of any scientific proof.

This does not exhaust the evolutionist traps that are set for unwary creationists. The Book of Proverbs warns seekers after God's wisdom to beware of remaining or becoming "simple" or "naïve" ("The naïve believes everything, but the prudent man considers his steps." Prov. 14:15). Christian creationists, know what you believe and why. Is your God big enough? Are you

strengthening yourself in what the Bible teaches about God's stupendous work of creation ("The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." Psa. 19:1). It has been said that "a man who is empty-headed will end up wrong-headed." A word to the wise is sufficient.

The Offering Box (February 21, 2010)

As this is being written the headline of the day is an Austin, Texas plane crash. It appears at this point that the pilot of the plane posted some kind of manifesto on the internet, set fire to his house, and crashed his private plane into an office building. The pilot was killed. Clarity on the meaning of all this will undoubtedly unfold. It seems that anger at the IRS was a motivation. Daily we hear dire predictions of where the US economy is going if responsible measures are not taken. Some are saying that inflation (more money for less in return) will skyrocket. The national debt is the Titanic headed toward the iceberg. Spending is out of control. Many Americans are outraged at this. However, it is conjectured that an equal number are spending, borrowing, and up to their ears in debt. This is no time for panic. We need to engage in some God-revealed wisdom.

The churches in the region of Macedonia at the time of the writing of 2 Corinthians were experiencing economic hardships. However, this did not deter the Macedonian churches from giving generously to needy fellow Christians in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-2). The Corinthian congregation needed to be stirred by the bold example of their brothers and sisters to the north. Follow Paul's thinking as he challenged the Corinthian church.

He says that all true giving begins with the grace of God (8:1). Generosity is not based on human resources. It derives its motivation from God's work in the hearts of his children. Grace giving cannot be coerced. It flows out of a willing spirit (8:3). Grace giving is a fruit of love which looks for ways to sacrifice for the eternal well-being of others (8:7). It is not without planning and order (8:10-11). Grace giving is consistent (not impulsive) and proportionate (according to what one has and has left). It is administrated with the highest integrity for the glory of God (8:18-19). Blessing for the giver is part of the overflow of grace giving (8:6-11). It is an investment in the Lord's work with eternal spiritual dividends. Most of all grace giving displays the perfections of God (9:12-15). Christian giver, do you want to make God look good? There is no doubt about God's beauty. His children reflect the beauty of grace when they give as they have received grace from Him.

Our church has the tremendous privilege of sending out some of our own families in obedience to Christ's Great Commission. What a joy. What an honor. It is God's doing but we have responsibilities. As God's church we must choose to live in a way that makes generous giving possible. Our missionaries must be able to count on us. They are living and serving in places where we cannot go. They need our generosity and consistent giving. How can we pray for them and at the same time withhold our contribution to their financial support? It is time to recommit ourselves to the joy of grace giving. It is a special moment of worship when we approach the offering box with our gifts. "Lord, here is my gift for your kingdom and the spread of the gospel. May your fame be carried to the ends of the earth." The offering box is the place from which our investment in the lives of others will take wings and fly to Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Senegal, and North Africa.

“I Confess” (February 28, 2010)

He committed adultery. Tried to cover it up and finally resorted to having the husband of his bed partner killed. It is an ugly picture. It gets worse. The adulterer goes on as if nothing has happened, for almost a year. Well insulated by his high political office, he thinks he is protected from any accountability. Then his guilt is exposed. A man of God shows up and, on behalf of an offended, righteous God, says to King David, “You are the man.” The king had committed a grievous evil. Finally, David confesses; “I have sinned against the Lord.” The sharp pain of a stricken conscience produces an acknowledgment of the seriousness of what had been done. Though belated, it was not too little, too late. Adultery is not simply a wrong committed against another, though it is certainly that, it is rebellion against Almighty God. This is what drove David to say later in his psalm of confession, “Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight” (Psa. 51:4).

David’s confession of adultery is in striking contrast to Tiger Wood’s recent public confession regarding his serial adultery. To his credit he did say, “I was unfaithful. I had affairs. I cheated.” However, his Buddhist faith shaped his assessment of the gravity of the sin he committed. There was no “Godwardness” in it. The familiar words, at least to an audience influenced by Christianity, of repentance, sin, forgiveness, and God were nowhere to be found. In the end all were asked “to believe” in him (Tiger). True, Tiger Woods cannot be blamed for not using Christian terms. He is a Buddhist. His explanation of his wrongdoing was that he had failed to suppress his desires. By Buddhist standards it was solely a personal and internal matter. Suffering, according to Buddhist teaching, is caused by craving. It is the craving that got the world’s best golfer into trouble. He has indicated that he is currently undergoing “therapy” to get his life back in order.

It was journalist Brit Hume who publicly advised Tiger Woods to look to Christ and Christianity for the forgiveness and redemption needed in his life. For this, Hume was verbally lynched by many in the media for his attempt to foist his Christian beliefs on Tiger. What does Christianity believe about confession of sin and forgiveness? Psalm 130 offers one of the best summaries in the Bible of the offer of forgiveness by God’s grace apart from human works. Though it was written before Christ’s death on the cross, it nonetheless rests upon Christ’s atonement (Lk. 24:27).

“Out of the depths,” the psalmist cried to God (v. 1). The sin of the poet had overwhelmed him. The truth revealed is that sin and its misery is a dark hole from which only God’s grace and mercy can deliver us. Sin creates a sense of distance and alienation from God. It’s like descending down in the depths of the sea feeling helpless and hopeless. That is why depression is often a symptom of sin. Is your adversity related to sin? It can be. Are you covering up something? Is your pride resisting contrition and humility? The first move in confessing sin in a biblical way is looking to God for the grace needed. This grace must come from outside of ourselves.

“There is forgiveness with Thee” (v. 4). No more consoling words can be found. They are filled with hope. For that reason, it must be proclaimed from the housetops, God’s forgiveness is the only hope for sin. This forgiveness is free for the asking. You don’t have to buy it. It has already been paid for. Christian, do you need it now for some sin that has been hidden from the sight of others? God sees it. It’s known to him. Perhaps it is a lie that has been told that has not been

confessed. Maybe it is some bitterness that is poisoning the well of your heart. Find freedom. Ask God for the forgiveness you need. God will be become nearer and dearer to you as you taste the sweetness of His forgiving grace.

“My soul waits for the Lord” (v. 6). Fellowship with God is restored when our sins are forgiven. The psalmist was waiting for God Himself, not forgiveness. He had already received that. Intimacy with God is like a jug of honey that spills over the soul. That sense of God’s pleasure comes with the certainty of the hope that is in God. Sin is a muddy, messy business. You will leave tracks wherever you walk when you fail to confess it. Renew your joy in the Lord. Delight in Him.

“He will redeem Israel” (v. 8). Forgiven people are liberated people. When God’s forgiveness is experienced, we are liberated to praise God and to proclaim the Lord’s redemption to all who will listen. That is what the psalmist does. What was good and true for him is good for everyone who comes to God for the grace of forgiveness. The forgiven person will want to spread the good news. In this way the psalmist anticipates the Redeemer who was still unrevealed to him. The scent of Romans 3:24 was in his spiritual nostrils, “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”

That is what Brit Hume wanted Tiger Woods to know. For that matter, all who are without the hope of God’s forgiveness in Christ are candidates for that insuperable grace. Do you, my friend, know that God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is available to you? Dear Christian, do you know that parental forgiveness is offered to you? When sin comes between you and God, confess it. You have His word that “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). That is a jug of honey.

Full of Ourselves, Part 1 (March 7, 2010)

We are all afflicted with it. It comes naturally. It does not discriminate. It has its male form and its female form. It is intoxicating, distorts one’s perspective, keeps one from pleasing God and, if unattended, will lead to personal destruction. It marches down the streets of life for all to see. It is pride. Pride is an unrealistic and unbiblical opinion of oneself. A man may think he is God’s gift to women. A woman becomes obsessed with her appearance, her weight, and her perceived rivals. The strange thing about pride is that it has the audacity to sit in judgment on God. God, according to the proud, is supposed to dance to our tune. He owes us good health, money, and a long life.

Pride comes in many disguises. Not only does it think God owes us something, but it is also a know-it-all. Proud people love to talk about themselves, talk too much, and talk down to others, try to control others, and are consumed with what others think about them. The proud think more about what others can do for them than what they can do for others. They also argue a lot because they have to always be right. Disrespect, thanklessness, manipulation, impatience, lack of compassion, defensiveness, and a refusal to ask for forgiveness are manifestations of those who are having an affair with themselves.

By now we are probably all reeling and staggered by how much pride is a part of our very being. It is ugly. The Bible hammers pride unrelentingly. It was Satan’s downfall (e.g., the “I wills” of

Lucifer's attempt to become God, Isa. 14:12-17). Pride creates strife (Prov. 13:10), boasts (Prov. 25:14, 27), rebels against authority (Prov. 10:17; 15:12; 1 Tim. 6:3-4), and treats God's Word with disdain and out-right rejection (Deut. 8:11-20). Nations that have flaunted their pride through arrogance and haughtiness have paid a bitter price; Babylon, Moab, Assyria, Edom, and even Israel were taken to the woodshed for strutting across the stage of human history worshipping their little idols.

Pride in the realm of religion is seen in self-righteousness (Matt. 23:6-11; Lk. 20:46). Prayer, giving, and reveling in human titles of honor are the stuff of the religiously proud. God hates pride and resists the proud (Psa. 101:5; Jas. 4:6). The proud have their own hall of shame in Scripture; Haman (Est. 5-7), Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23), Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:16-19), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:30-34), and Diotrefes (3 Jn.) are a few who preened themselves on their own self-importance.

What do we do? Is it hopeless? Does pride that lurks in the human heart win the day? It does not have to. Satan, the father of the evil of pride, has been defeated at the cross. God the Son humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. In a cosmic act of supernatural judo (using the strength and weight of an opponent to his disadvantage), Jesus Christ showed that the way up is down. Satan's pride and his attempt to destroy Jesus became the occasion for his own defeat. By taking the form of a servant, Jesus Christ gave pride a lethal blow (Phil. 2:7-8; Heb.2:15). The cross of Christ is God's answer to the sinner's self-worship. The Savior came to serve, not to be served. He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Lk. 19:10). We guilt-laden sinners can come to the one who is gentle and humble in heart and find rest for our souls (Matt. 11:28-30). The grace of God (we don't get the judgment we deserve) knocks pride in the head. For the Christian pride is seen for what it is. It no longer exercises its tyrannical rule. The overcoming weapons of Christ's righteousness and the power of the Holy Spirit are in the hands of the children of God. There is still a battle to be fought. But a winnable fight it is.

Full of Ourselves, Part 2 (March 14, 2010)

Can you imagine a high school football team being matched up against the Super Bowl champions, the New Orleans Saints? It would not be a pretty sight. It won't happen. The sports world would not let it happen. But that match-up pales into insignificance compared to human beings attempting to outdo God with their philosophies concerning the meaning of life - evolution as the explanation for the origin of human life; self-assured, Bible-rejecting ideas about God; and chest-thumping, self-congratulatory living that makes God irrelevant.

The problem is that pride is not the domain of an arrogant few. The motives, thoughts, actions, and words of every man, woman, and child are polluted by the poison of pride. Everything we put our minds to and our hands upon is infected by a self-exalting disposition. This reality takes us to the core of what it means to be sinful human beings. Theologian Millard Erickson has correctly identified the essential nature of sin. He says, "...the essence of sin is simply failure to let God be God. It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his." It could be put this way. From God's standpoint, the core of sin is displacement of God. It is unbelief. From man's standpoint it is idolatry. Erickson says, "Anyone who truly believes God to be what he says he is will accord to him his rightful status. Failure to do so is sin." Pride insists on being one's own master.

The dragon of pride must be slain. It was slain on the cross of Christ. The Savior, the Servant of God, submitted to the Father and bore our sins in His body. Listen to the humble Servant, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). Faith is the empty hand of the heart that receives, by God’s grace, eternal life. As a new creature in Christ humility is to be the new way of life. It is possible because Christ’s righteousness, not our own, makes us acceptable to God. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit cuts the legs out from under self-reliance.

Now that the weapons to defeat pride are in our hands, how are they to be used in the day-to-day battle with this foe? Prayer is the expression of our dependence on God. Ask God to enable you to put off pride and grow in humility. We must start there. Read and meditate upon the magnificence of God and His beauty. Know what He is like and what pleases Him. The better you know God the clearer your vision will be to see how pride disguises itself. Identify ways in which pride most frequently manifests itself in your life. Is it pride of achievement, success, looks, abilities, parentage/upbringing, moral strength or intellect? Take daily doses of Scriptural medicine like Jeremiah 9:23-24, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the Lord.” Committing verses like these to memory is good for keeping life in perspective.

Resolve to pour contempt on your pride. Slay vain thoughts (e.g., “what can he or she teach me?” “She owes me more attention than I am getting.” “I need to improve my self-esteem.”). Reading the Gospels to study the example of Jesus will yield the dividends of knowing what humility looks like in life situations. Evaluate patterns in your life that may be influenced by pride. For example, am I avoiding certain people? Do I fail to start or finish important projects? Do I talk about myself excessively? Do I fail to read my Bible and pray regularly? Is there lack of or minimal involvement in the lives of others? You may want to ask others if you come across as proud or vain in certain ways.

Enroll yourself in the New Testament curriculum of “one-anothering.” Take a Bible concordance and look up the ways in which we are to live out the “one-another” principles. There are at least eighteen of them in the Epistles of the New Testament. Read a Christian biography that will throw biblical water on the flames of vanity. We need to know how other believers have sacrificed and served God. A recommendation: To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson by Courtney Anderson. For the men a special recommendation: Read chapter thirteen in Stuart Scott’s The Exemplary Husband and work through carefully the twenty-four manifestations of humility.

Pride will not take “no” for an answer. It can attach itself to just about everything. So, therefore, it is a life-long battle. It can be overcome, but it will not happen overnight. To make matters worse we live in an “ego-centered culture.” In the words of Cornelius Plantinga, it is a culture where “wants become needs (maybe even duties), the self replaces the soul, and human life degenerates into the clamor of competing autobiographies. People get fascinated with how they feel – and how they feel about how they feel. In such a culture and in the throes of such fascination, the self exists to be explored, indulged, and expressed but not disciplined or restrained.” The conclusion about ourselves is that we are by nature full of ourselves. But thank God, we don’t have to live under pride’s tyranny. We can be free to humbly serve God and

others. “Lord, give us the sense to see our pride and not make friends with it. Forgive us for excusing our self-will by treating it as a virtue. Give us the grace to be filled up with your fullness and less full of ourselves.”

Dancing with Death (March 21, 2010)

Open caskets at funerals are a dance with death. The waxen look of a dead loved one or friend presents a strange sensation. We may wonder. What happened? The animation of life is gone from them. We are sure of that. There can be no conversation, only our tears and memories. Our adjustment to that phase of the death experience is helped by family and friends who gather around us. We talk, comfort, reminisce, cry, and laugh while we dance with death. But is that all there is? Is that the only time we sit alongside death? It is not.

We are a dying race. We live with our own dying every moment whether we realize it or not. We read the obituaries to see who has died, why they died, and were they older than we. But as we know death gets more personal than this. A visit to the doctor, an MRI, blood work, and a diagnosis may very well bring death very close. A family member calls and tells us that they have cancer. Another kind of dance with death begins. How do we talk about it? How long will they live? What are we to do? Should we pray for God to work a miracle of healing, a prolonged time of remission, or a second opinion?

God created a world in which death is the penalty of sin. God was not surprised when Adam and Eve chose to savor the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil instead of obeying him and live happily in fellowship with God forever. Our first parents witnessed the death of an animal in order to cover their nakedness. They began their dance with death. Nature became hostile to them. They were expelled from the garden. Life became hard. Their son killed their other son. They grieved. The world they inhabited gradually became a cemetery. Eventually they had to attend their own funeral.

The Bible tells a story. Death is one of the leading characters. The hero of the story is the Son of God, Israel’s Messiah, and God incarnate. He does an amazing thing. He lives on this earth for about thirty-three years, never sins, performs thousands of miracles, and teaches. But death stalked Him. Satan, the villain, had the power of death and intended to defeat God with it. Satan’s self-deception clouded his mind and distorted reality. Jesus Christ was hoisted above the ground and hung on a cruel Roman cross. Had the devil trapped and killed his prey? It was not to be. The Son of Man had come to earth to seek and to save that which was lost. This truth had been lost on the Evil One. The penalty for the toxic weight of sin fell upon Jesus. Our punishment became His that “we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). The cross crushed the head of the Serpent and death was crushed to death. To top it all off, the Hero came out of His grave and lives forevermore. Because of Jesus Christ those who put their trust in Him walk through the door of death into His eternal presence.

That is a good story. There is more to it but it is enough to tell us what has happened to death. It has been defeated in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers in Jesus Christ are not exempt from dying but their dying is different. How different? It is gain not loss. That’s the testimony of Paul who heard death knocking at the door (Phil. 1:21). Elsewhere he says that death “belongs” to the believer (1 Cor. 3:22). Death works for the advantage of those who are in Christ. Its sting

has been removed (1 Cor. 15:55). This is true because, as has been said, “where sin is pardoned, death has no sting.” Death is without its fangs because it ushers the child of God into the presence of Christ (2 Cor. 5:8). Bound up in this victory over death is the hope of a resurrection body and reunion with fellow believers.

There is tension involved in the dance with death. On the one hand the Christian wants to be with Christ but on the other hand there is the desire to go on living and be useful for Christ (Phil. 1:23-24). There is pressure that comes from two equally profitable alternatives. What will bring the most glory to the Lord? We must leave the timing of our death in the Lord’s hands. It is normal to want more earthly time with those that we love. It is a good thing to want added days to serve God this side of heaven. God is sovereign. Because we belong to Christ, death belongs to us. Death may strike suddenly - an automobile accident, a stroke, a heart attack, or a blood clot. Cancer or dementia requires prolonged dying grace. Our confidence must be in an all-wise, loving heavenly Father who does all things well.

How and when we die can cloud the believer’s attention to living each day for the glory of God. Peter was given some specifics about his death (Jn. 21:18). He immediately let this distract him by wanting to know how his fellow apostle, John, was going to die (Jn. 21:22). Jesus rebuked Peter by reminding him that faithfulness was to be his primary concern. Whether it is martyrdom or a long full life the believer’s dance with death is to be for the exaltation of Christ in all things.

Death portrayed as the grim reaper, a robed skeletal figure with scythe in hand, is a frightening image. It should be for those who live and die without knowing Jesus Christ. Death is not a friend to the non-Christian. Self-deception is not limited to Satan. It is the plague of all who try to convince themselves that death is either without consequences or that good deeds can insure some kind of heaven. To die without God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is the beginning of an everlasting dance with death in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). Dear friend, if you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life now is the time.

“Let’s go on to Maturity” (March 28, 2010)

My father landed upon many beaches in the South Pacific during World War II. He was a Marine and that meant engaging the enemy under the barrage of relentless gun fire. Landing assaults facing withering fire on a beach demanded doing everything possible to get off the beach. It was not the place to stay. “Let’s go!” was the call to move forward and press the fight against a dug-in enemy.

It is that same call that the writer to the Hebrew Christians used in urging his readers to move to maturity in the Christian life (Heb. 6:1, “Let us press on to maturity”). It is our command as well. We have to leave the basics of the Christian life and fight the fight of the faith. We have no other option but to grow in Christ. There are hindrances to be removed, sins to be defeated, and Christ-exalting living to be won.

We have the opportunity to recommit ourselves as a church to move on in the pursuit of holy living. That is the desire behind the church member covenant. It is a means of encouraging one another to go on to maturity in the faith. There are eight short paragraphs that summarize this quest.

Let's go on to be stronger Bible people, more faithful intercessors, and bold witnesses for the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's go on to active involvement in the body-life of the church. Let's go on to the building one another up in the faith through the use of our spiritual gifts. Let's go on in energetic "one-anothering" as we love as Christ has loved us. Let's go on to be peacemakers and quick forgivers. Let's go on to strengthen our church and make it a lighthouse of truth in the community. Let's go on to lavish grace-giving so that the gospel can go to all nations. Let's go on to being authentic Christians before a watching world.

If you are a member of Berachah Bible Church, you are invited to join your fellow believers to follow Christ wherever love for Him takes us. Come, let's move on together.

Because Christ Lives (April 4, 2010)

Hollywood movies deny it. Theologians try to explain it away. Popular books fabricate lies about it. Society ignores it. Our culture trivializes it. Islam, Judaism, and a host of other religions don't believe it. Like a mountain of stone with howling winds blowing against it stands the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Christ's physical resurrection is a fact. Ample evidence is recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament: an empty tomb, grave clothes, the seal, the Roman guard, post-resurrection appearances, no refutation from the enemies of Christ, and the transformed lives of Jesus' disciples. In a perfected physical body Jesus rose from the dead, interacted with man, ascended to heaven, and will return to rule on this earth one day.

How did the apostles of Jesus Christ, those who actually saw the resurrected Christ, interpret the resurrection? What does it mean? How is it to impact our lives? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the supreme sign of the success of His atoning sacrifice on the cross. The theological fingerprints of Christ's resurrection matched His claims. It gives us proof of His identity. He was "declared to be the Son of God with power" by His resurrection (Rom. 1:4). Because of this truth a famous agnostic of the nineteenth century, Colonel Robert Ingersoll, said, "Christianity cannot live in peace with any other form of faith. If that religion be true, there is but one Savior, one inspired book and but one little narrow...path that leads to heaven. Such a religion is necessarily uncompromising." Though Ingersoll was no friend of Christianity, he was right. Everything that Jesus said and did was validated by the fact that "He has risen, just as He said" (Matt. 28:6). There is no other way into God's heaven other than through faith in Jesus Christ.

You may be one of those people who believe the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that is not enough. Do you understand what it means? If Jesus was raised from the dead, then He really did bear the legal penalty for our guilt. We are all sinners. Christ's resurrection proves that His death was a sufficient and effective offering for sins, pleasing the Supreme Judge of us all. The sacrifice of the Son of God was accepted by His Father in heaven. This is very good news. It means that no penalty for sin is left to be paid. There is no more wrath of God to bear.

My friend, if you have never called upon God to forgive you of your sins and to give you eternal life, now is the time. The tomb of Jesus Christ is empty. The price for our guilt before God has been paid. Have you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ? He is not on the cross. He is not in

the tomb. He is saying to you, “He who hears my word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (Jn. 5:24).

Fading Memories (April 11, 2010)

Beth and I sat with my Aunt Betty this past week trying to help her remember the house in which she used to live. It was a poignant moment. My aunt’s eighty-nine years have taken their toll on her ability to visit her past. We told her where the house was located, where the piano was in the living room and other such things. In our conversations it is often necessary to explain who some of her nieces and nephews are, where they are, and what they are doing. One thing Aunt Betty does remember is that she sorely misses her husband, my Uncle Jimmy, of sixty-four years. She will tell you repeatedly that in all those years he never said an unkind word to her. Is this a lapse of memory? I don’t know. But what I do know is that he was a quiet, patient, and kind man. As the memory fades it is a cherished gift when the sweetest memories are the ones that linger. At least it is so with my Aunt Betty.

Memory is a gift from God and is to be used for His glory. God wants us to remember things. Memory can be a very good thing. The nation of Israel was to remember their exodus from Egypt, the Passover, the Sabbath, and other truth-rich events in her history. These remembrances were not merely exercises in recall. They were to be the occasion for deliberately bringing up the past for the purpose of affecting their present feelings, thoughts, and actions. For example, the Passover was an annual memorial to cause Israel to live in the present in light of God’s past action on her behalf. Egyptian idolatry and the misery of bondage were put behind them by God’s grace. Israel was to be a holy nation set apart as a witness of God’s gospel to all the nations.

We are to remember God and His wonderful works. Do we do enough of that? Probably not. Let’s take the counsel of the psalmist, “He (God) has made His wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate” (Psa. 111:4). How can we go about this on a day-to-day basis? We need to use our memory system to store away the Word of God (“Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee” (Psa. 119:11)). The daily discipline of Scripture memory yields rich dividends. We should also use our memory to call up God’s Word to speak to and guide our thinking about problems that need to be solved, setting goals, relating to people, and critiquing our motives and ambitions.

We can train ourselves to use memory to praise God for who He is and what He has done in our lives. We can choose to reflect on the past in such a way that our minds become flooded with thanksgiving and a determination to speak to others of His kindness to us in Christ (Tit. 3:4-5). If all other memories disappear, that is a sweet one to take into His presence at the end of the faded memories of this life.

A Shared Grief (April 25, 2010)

Our church family is grieving. Grief is not new to most of us. But grieving in such a broad and deep way as we are over the death of Lucas Gangi is painfully shared grief. Of course, there are different degrees and kinds of grief involved. Lucas’s family grief is immeasurable. Those of us

who have lost loved ones in sudden violent ways can empathize with this kind of emotional trauma. It is a mental, emotional, and physical storm that disorients and devastates. We weep. We cry out to God. We become awash in memories of our loved one or friend. It's hard to think clearly. What does the future hold?

What is grief? It has been defined as that "inward desolation that follows the losing of something or someone we loved." Notice the word "loved." The greater our love for someone, the greater the grief. In his book, *A Grief Sanctified*, J.I. Packer offers a closer examination of the pain of grief, "We lavish care and affection on what we love and those whom we love, and when we lose the beloved, the shock, the hurt, the sense of being hollowed out and crushed, the haunting, taunting memory of better days, the feeling of unreality and weakness and hopelessness, and the lack of power to think and plan for the new situation can be devastating." Packer goes on to discuss how "bereavement becomes a supreme test of the quality of our faith." It is by drawing near to God, trusting Him explicitly, that we are able to navigate our way through the storm of grief. We are tested when he or she is no longer there. They will not be there the next day or next year. "Dear Father, how am I to think? What am I to do? I need you, Lord."

Packer's book offers welcomed guidance in living through grief. It is subtitled, "Passing through grief to peace and joy." Packer has spent a great deal of time examining the thoughts and writings of the English Puritans. The Puritans were Calvinistic believers in seventeenth century England and North America. The Bible was their compass through life. They took God very seriously and immersed their minds in Scripture. It is one of these Puritans, Richard Baxter, whose memoirs of his wife's life and death that Packer offers for a study in Christian grief. It is from this work that the following extended quote is taken. It is worth our attention.

"Grief, the experiential, emotional fruit of the bereavement event, is, as we have seen, a state of desolation and isolation, of alternating apathy and agony, of inner emptiness and exhaustion. How may this condition be sanctified- that is, managed, lived with, and lived through, in a way that honors God? No Puritan to my knowledge addresses the question in this form, but the Puritan answer would be this:

Starting from where you are, do what you can (it may not be much at first) to move toward the thanksgiving, submission, and patience of which we have just heard (the book will have to be read in order to appreciate this thought more fully).

Do not let your grief loosen your grip on the goodness and grace of our loving Lord.

Cry (for there is nothing biblical or Christian, or indeed human, about the stiff upper lip).

Tell God your sadness (several of the psalms, though not written about bereavement, will supply words for the purpose).

Pray as you can, and don't try to pray as you can't. (That bit of wisdom is not original to me, nor was it distilled in a grief counseling context, but it is very apropos here.)

Avoid well-wishers who think they can cheer you up but thank God for any who are content to be with you and do things for you without talking at you.

Talk to yourself (or, like Richard, write) about the loved one you lost.

Do not try to hurry your way out of the inner weakness you feel; grieving takes time.

Look to God as thankfully, submissively, and patiently as you can (and he will understand if you have to tell him that you cannot really do this yet).

Feel, acknowledge, and face, consciously and from your heart, all the feelings that you find in yourself at present, and the day will come when you find yourself able, consciously and from your heart to live to God daily in thanksgiving, submission, and patient hope once again, as did Richard (Baxter), and Lewis (C.S.), and millions more.

Grieving properly leads back to thinking properly, living properly, and praising properly. God sees to that! ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted’ (Matt. 5:4).”

This wise counsel from the past and present is tender and true to the Word of God. It is included here for our church family and all who are trying to make their way through a life where one that we loved so dearly is missing. However, this is not the end of our story if we belong to Christ. We have that joyful reunion awaiting all who are in Christ when the trumpet sounds and death is abolished. It will be then that “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

Darkness (May 16, 2010)

What is the darkest place you have ever experienced? Our family once visited Mammoth Cave in central Kentucky. The Park Ranger led us with artificial lighting into this enormous hole in the ground, part of the world’s longest known cave. There were wonders to behold. But then all the lights were turned off. The dark was so dark you could almost feel it. Thankfully, the lights came back on and we continued our tourist walk.

“Darkness was over the surface of the deep... Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). Darkness was created by God. It became the basis for the establishment of the “Day” and “Night” cycle which has characterized our planet ever since. Darkness, as the absence of light, is often used in the Bible to describe the condition of fallen, sinful human beings. Apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit no one is able to experience fellowship with God who is light (Jn. 1:5; 8:12). The unsaved, those without God’s forgiveness in Christ, are characterized as being in the dark (“for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Eph. 5:8). At conversion those who are blinded by sin and ignorant of God are delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred “to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). What a wonderful escape from a realm over which Satan and his demons hold sway, a realm in which the grace and mercy are not known (Eph. 6:12; Acts 26:8).

Have you thanked God lately for not having to live in the darkness any longer? Think of what the absence of light means. We can’t see things as they actually are. We were convinced that we really didn’t need God. Our reasoning process was disabled when it came to understanding spiritual realities. We had no pleasure in the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:28). We could not do any good that was acceptable to God. The sad fact is that a sin-darkened mind uses religion as a

defense against God (2 Cor. 4:4). Living in spiritual darkness has its pleasures. Why else would condemned sinners love it so much? Jesus knew why His offer of eternal life was rejected so vehemently. He said, “And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19-20).

A new day dawns when a lost sinner is born again. The light of God’s revealed truth, the Word of God, gradually eliminates the darkness that once ruled our lives. The reality of love that is found in Jesus Christ sweeps away the darkness of this present world. As Christians we send a message to the world with our Christ-centered love. Growth and change in our lives signals the coming of a new age. Christ’s kingdom is coming, and we are privileged to be forecasters of that day (1 Jn. 2:8). How vital it is that we love another. Christian friend, let’s be about the work of rolling back the tide of darkness in this world by faithfully living out the light of Christ’s presence in our lives.

A former President of the United States was ridiculed by the media for speaking of the importance of citizens being “a thousand points of light” working for the good of the nation. Political changes have swept that phrase into the dustbin of history. However, a greater truth remains. Sons of light are to be points of light, as gospel messengers, so that all those who are enslaved in spiritual darkness will repent and flee from God’s wrath to come. Eternal outer darkness is waiting for all who refuse to put their trust in Jesus Christ, the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12).

A Visit with Job (May 23, 2010)

Some of us are in the middle of our annual reading of the book of Job. What a catastrophe this man endured. Losing material goods is one thing but the sudden death of all ten of his children at the same time, what unimaginable grief. What does Job do? He worships God. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Could I have said that? I hope I would.

Suffering. We don’t enjoy it but life is full of it. Job lamented that our days are few “and full of trouble.” We listen as Job fends off his miserable comforters and deals with his own grief at the same time. He says that God was “assailing” him (16:9, his face “is red with weeping” (16:16), his “spirit is broken” (17:1). It seems that he had resigned himself to hopeless, shortened days filled with emotional struggle and an I-am-no-match-for-God attitude. However, this is only part of the picture. When we step back and look at Job’s full story the following assessment can be made about pain and suffering in the life of God’s child.

Satan’s aim is to destroy our confidence in God. The devil himself may not show up at our doorstep. He has those who run errands for him. Two basic weapons are used in Satan’s attempts to take us down: pain and pleasure. Job enjoyed the good life until his world collapsed. God-given prosperity did not drive a wedge between Job and his fellowship with God. Then there was pain. But pain was bitter and threatening. So it is with us. What does it take to keep you from being enthralled with God and trusting Him every step of the way through life?

God aims to magnify His worth in the lives of His people. He wants us to value Him above all else. Job worshiped God after he had lost everything. Are you going through some terribly difficult times? What effect is this having upon you? God is infinitely worth our confidence and praise. “Lord, I do not understand why I am visited with so much pain, but I love you and do not doubt that you know what is best for me.”

Satan’s work is ultimately God’s work. The eye of faith sees behind Satan and reaches up to an infinitely wise, loving, and sovereign God. The devil and his minions may assault us, but this is not the whole story. Satan is always on a divine leash. He can go no further nor do any work that is beyond the purposes of God.

Sufferers do not need shallow answers and a condemning spirit. The counsel of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar is believed by many in our day. It is found, among other places, in the popular prosperity theology (e.g., “God does not want His children to be sick.”). Job’s “miserable comforters” set out to defend the honor of God. They thought Job was maligning the character of God. They were wrong. Do not be surprised when in your own time of affliction well intentioned people come to you with bad counsel in the name of helping you. It has been said that “True theological statements can be false. There are times when right answers can be wrong answers.”

We can be perplexed about our suffering and ask God questions without sinning. Job thought that he had suffered undeservedly. He tried to defend himself in the wrong way. Pride, unbelief, and self-righteousness surfaced. Dear fellow sufferer, don’t smother your desire to talk candidly to God with grim stoicism. God delights in the trusting pleadings of His children.

God’s love endures forever, no matter how great our suffering. Job finally rested in God as his refuge. There is something, though, that Job didn’t know that we know. God’s love has been visited upon us on a splintered, wooden cross. The value of that love has been told through an empty tomb. What do we learn from the saga of Job’s suffering? Our suffering can have meaning. Job’s story anticipates another story. Suffering can have meaning because the greatest story, the cross of Christ, has been written in the blood of God (Acts 20:28).

Whose Body Is It? (June 27, 2010)

“It’s my body I can do with it as I please.” This is the thinking of many in our day. Combine with this the belief that man is by classification an animal and you realize the degree of confusion about the origin of the human body.

The human body is a marvelous gift from God. We are, in the words of the psalmist, fearfully and wonderfully made. Each human being is unique because of God, not because of chance. From the raw material of dirt (a humbling reminder), our body chemistry was created. The physical recipe for the body is 65 percent oxygen, 18 per cent carbon, 10 per cent hydrogen, 3 per cent nitrogen, 1 ½ per cent calcium, 1 per cent phosphorus, and 1 ½ per cent of other elements. About seven tenths of the body is water.

God’s language, “dust of the ground,” is a glorious reminder that the human body is the result of direct creation, not evolution. Theistic evolution (the belief that God has used evolution to create man) says that the “dust of the ground” symbolizes the animal kingdom. Such an interpretation

contradicts the clear teaching of Genesis 2:7 which says that “man became a living soul.” Until that moment man was inanimate, lifeless matter. Man does not have an animal ancestry. God “formed the man from the dust of the ground” as a potter fashions clay into a particular shape.

Adam’s body received the breath of life. Suddenly there was a fully formed adult male with complete self-consciousness, physical mobility, able to think, talk, and observe his environment. This meant that man was dependent on his Creator for his physical life. Elihu, one of Job’s counselors, knew this when he said, “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). In addition to this, man is accountable to God for what he does with human life, his own and that of others. King Nebuchadnezzar, due to his arrogance, had to be rebuked; “But the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored” (Dan. 5:23). It is a perilous thing for the creature to exalt himself above the Creator.

Human beings do not have authority over their physical bodies. When man attempts to usurp such authority, he is acting as a rebel and must bear the consequences. The ethical issues of abortion, euthanasia, murder, and suicide are subject to this divine principle. Those who preen themselves on the thought that they have a right to do whatever they wish with their bodies are blinded by their conceit.

Men and women do not have autonomous rights over their own bodies. Our eyes, ears, mouths, feet, hands, brains, and sexual organs are God-given and are to be used to fulfill their divinely ordained purposes. Christians, especially, must not forget that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

The physical body, as a gift from God, is to be an instrument of righteousness. With our ears we can hear God’s eternal, infallible, inerrant Word. With our mouths we can proclaim the good news of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ. With our feet we can go to those who have never heard about eternal life in Christ. With our taste, touch, and sense of smell we have the ability to understand and enjoy God’s creation. With our minds we can understand God and know Him better.

Dear Christian friend, never let this truth be far from your next thought; “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

The Gift of Summer (July 11, 2010)

Ah, the lazy, hazy days of summer. Long hot days, cicadas serenading, lightning bugs, cold watermelon, peaches, fried okra, fresh corn, butterbeans and tomatoes, thunderstorms, camping trips, swimming in the pool, sunburn, grape popsicles, homemade ice cream, a trip to the beach.

I have fond memories of the summers of my childhood. Swimming to cool off was always welcome. There were days spent at Spring Lake (some apartments are in its place now) with a big picnic lunch. It was so good to dive down deep and feel the cold spring water coming up. On

the way home from the lake we would stop and pick wild plums. One of the big events of a summer's week was the arrival of the vegetable man. A farmer in his old straw hat would drive slowly down the street announcing his presence, "Vegetables!" Soon the women of the neighborhood would be gathered around his improvised pickup truck loaded with corn, squash, green beans, tomatoes, cantaloupe, okra, butter beans, and watermelons. His farm was located way off down in the country at a place called Riverdale. We didn't know what existed beyond that.

Our summer days were spent in creative outdoor play. The summer of 1954 was especially memorable. It was extremely hot and dry remaining the high nineties for days on end (though we kids didn't care about the numbers). Of course, our house was not air-conditioned nor was anyone else's house. Evenings were spent squeezing out every bit of daylight we could. Fox and the hounds, May-I, swatting lightning bugs, and reading on the front porch were better than entering a hot house.

Church in the summertime had its special challenges for a boy. The church auditorium was hot. Funeral fans helped some of the adults. Bugs came in the windows in the evening service and performed some dazzling aerial displays over the preacher's head. The preacher always wore a coat and tie. We all sweated. I looked forward to that big vegetable Sunday dinner with fried chicken and iced tea.

Summer is God's idea.

When the waters of the global flood receded and Noah and his family of seven came off the ark a seasonal climate awaited them. Cold and heat, summer and winter were God's surprises (Gen. 8:22). This was evidence of His dominion over creation, not the capricious behavior of "mother nature." Spring and summer occur because God determined that it would be so (Psa. 74:17). Israel's pagan neighbors attributed the seasonal cycle to Baal's liberation from the underworld ruled by death. The truth is that God established the principle of uniformity for the post-Flood world. The seasons of the year are gifts from God in a sin-cursed world. The curse upon nature brought the miseries of oppressive heat and humidity, mosquitoes, malaria, and hurricanes. God promised that there would never be another universal flood but did not eliminate nature's enslavement to decay and death. Summer and winter will continue until the earth is renovated and the curse removed altogether (Rev. 22:3).

The psalmist tells us that God made summer to remind us of His infinite wisdom and power (Psa. 74:17). When times are bad and we feel abandoned by God, we need to get a faith grip on spiritual realities. Go outdoors on a summer day or night and find delight in the thought of God's creative, sovereign power. Think about what our Creator has done. Let the chorus of katydids on a summer's night lead you to worship the Lord who rules over the sounds and sights of nature's summer season. The thunderstorm is God's doing. The lightning bug is God's gift. What a marvelous creature. They light up the darkness looking for a mate and we are entertained by their yellow blinking lights. The same God who has given us the seasons knows what He is doing in our times of suffering.

Summer also serves as time to prepare for winter (Prov. 6:8; 30:25). We are to learn from the ant. Preparing for the winters of our life demands the wise use of time and self-discipline. The harvest ant has an economy which depends largely on seed gathering. They collect seeds in the

growing season for use during the dry season when food is not available. Therein lies a lesson. It's easy to let your guard down in the summer. Laziness is making the easiest choices which result in procrastination. Students, are there some things you need to do this summer to prepare for the coming school year; a book to read, money to earn? Is Dad's firewood needed for those cozy winter nights? Are repairs on the roof necessary for the coming cold, rainy season?

Ah, summer! What a sweet time it can be even though nature sings in the minor key. "Thank you, Lord, for the katydids that sing me to sleep, for soft warm air of a July night, for the vegetables that are growing, for the humming birds whirring around the feeder on the back porch, for the sweet corn and tomatoes to be eaten. But most of all thank you, Lord, for the reminder that one day nature will be the perfect summer when the Son of God rules over His earthly kingdom, for that day when the rivers will run crystal clear, when fruit will be bountiful, when the plowman will overtake the reaper, when we will make gardens and eat their fruit. So, savor the summer.

"I Now Pronounce You..." (August 8, 2010)

On Wednesday, August 4, 2010, Federal Judge Vaughan Walker took it upon himself to redefine the institution of marriage, God's creation order and thousands of years of human history notwithstanding. The San Francisco Chief U.S. District Judge advanced the homosexual agenda in declaring in the name of justice that denying gay couples the right to marry is a violation of the U.S. Constitution. Make no mistake about it this is a major turn in establishing the normalization of homosexuality.

Contrary to moral fence sitters (e.g., "What threat is homosexual marriage to your marriage?") much is at stake in the twisted reasoning of Judge Walker. He claims that "Religious beliefs that gay and lesbian relationships are sinful or inferior to heterosexual relationships harm gays and lesbians." This kind of thinking travels under the guise of legal reasoning. Another "finding" in the Judge's 138-page opinion is the assertion that "Gender no longer forms an essential part of marriage; marriage under law is a legal union of equal." This is astounding. Moral truth is turned on its head. Those who disagree with the Judge's conclusions are viewed as irrational bigots. Even more brazen is the implication that the God of the universe is in serious error. What we are living to see is another shameless nail in the coffin of human civilization.

Undoubtedly, Judge Walker's ruling will be hailed as a moral triumph by many. The truth is, however, that homosexual activists will not be content until marriage, the central institution of human civilization, is deconstructed and replaced with whatever is right in one's own eyes. Moral anarchy will be proclaimed as love and tolerance. Evil posing as good continues to strut across the stage of human history. As it does, we must not forget God's eternal truth and what the real story is.

- (1) We live in a sinfully fallen world brought on and perpetuated by human rebellion against a holy and righteous God.
- (2) The evil of sin will not triumph. Rulers take counsel against the Lord and attempt to cast away the "fetters" of allegiance to the King of Kings. But God is not intimidated by His creatures. Man will answer to his Creator on judgment day (Psa. 2:2, 3; Rev. 20:11-15).

- (3) All rebels against the Lord and His Anointed, the Son of God, can find pardon by bowing before the cross and the empty tomb. Sin blinded minds have their only hope in redemption through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-22).
- (4) The impertinence of protestors against God's moral law construct their own gallows upon which they hang themselves by the rope of self-conceived moral and ethical values. Sin cannot bear its own weight. The gravestones of past civilizations bear witness to the price of human folly (Rom. 1:18-32).
- (5) The true enemy in life is sin and death. Homosexual desires, adulterous desires, stealing desires, and all covetousness can be conquered and put to flight by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The only unforgiveable sin is unbelief. Our lusts, greed, envy, murder, strife, gossip and a host of other sins nailed Jesus Christ to the cross.
- (6) Same-sex marriage may become accepted by society. But it will not be without a terrible price to pay. Religious liberty hangs in the balance. How will those be treated who view homosexuality and same-sex marriage as harmful and sinful? What if society agrees with the legalization of polygamy?

There is hope. The power of the gospel of Jesus Christ can change lives. Christians must not forget that the church was born in an idol worshiping, pagan world. Jesus will build His church. Sin cannot overpower it. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Pride – A Fight to the Finish (August 15, 2010)

What fault is it in human nature that makes those perceived to be guilty of it very unpopular? What fault is it that we are more unconscious of in ourselves than any other? The answer is pride. C. S. Lewis in his essay on "The Great Sin" offers the unsettling assessment that "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison" to pride. Some theologians have even gone so far as to assert that pride is the very essence of sin. That's close. The essential nature of sin is best understood as, in the words of Millard Erickson, "failure to let God be God." In other words, unbelief is the ultimate spiritual felony. Erickson says further, "Anyone who truly believes God to be what he says he is will accord to him his rightful status. Failure to do so is sin." Where does pride fit into this? It is the other side of unbelief. Pride is an attitude of independence from God. It is self-worship. It is the sin that makes God seem irrelevant.

The question with regard to pride, according to Stuart Scott, is not "Do I have it?" but "Where is it?" and "How much of it do I have?" One of the reasons the degree of our pride may elude us is how it is camouflaged. It can hide under the cover of serving others, giving, church attendance, witnessing, and even prayer. Jesus unmasked the pride of those who practice their righteousness before people to be noticed by them (Matt. 6:1).

Pride is a devilish thing. It brought about Satan's fall (Isa. 14:12-17; 1 Tim. 3:6). Peter denied his Lord because of pride (Jn. 13:37). Haman was hung on his own gallows because of it (Esther 5-7). Uzziah spent the last years of his life with leprosy because of it (2 Chron. 26:16-19). Nebuchadnezzar was afflicted with a serious mental disorder because of it (Dan. 4:30-34). Pride deceives the heart (Jer. 49:16), hardens the mind (Dan. 5:20), brings contention (Prov. 13:10), ruins churches (Rev. 3:17), stirs up strife (Prov. 28:25). God hates it (Prov. 16:5, 17).

Like an infectious disease pride creates discontent, ingratitude, presumption, rudeness, bigotry, and the lust for power. That is why C. S. Lewis said that "there is nothing that makes a man feel so superior to others as being able to move them about like toy soldiers." Are you getting the picture? Pride is a dragon that must be slain. It stands in the way of the kind of humble service required of Christ's followers. It is vicious in that it "recognizes neither sin nor grace, in fact, pride hammers them flat and discards them" (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.).

"God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 4:6). How is the Christian to go about waging war against the pride bound up in the heart? In the first place, it must be admitted that one is afflicted with it. You may not know how much or where it lurks, but it is there. Ask God to flush it out. Call out to God to search your heart. Mean it and humble yourself before Him when the serpent crawls out from under the rock of self-contentment. Lewis rightly says, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed."

Secondly, you can look around the corners of your mind and see if you are overestimating yourself, your talents, abilities, your perceived good job of parenting, your success as a teacher, organizer, you name it. Then consider the possibility that your pride may be disguised as feigned humility. Are you under estimating yourself ("I am useless." "I am worthless.") waiting for a pat on the back to affirm that you are much better than you think?

Thirdly, resolve to pour contempt on your pride. Repent of it, wherever you find it. Slay vain thoughts (e.g. "what can she teach me?" "I possess special talents that could be helpful in this church." "I am prettier than she is and I am going to get more boys to like me than she has."). Fourthly, evaluate patterns in your life that may be influenced by pride (e.g., avoidance of certain people or kinds of people, failure to read the Bible and pray, lack of meaningful involvement in the lives of others). Pride, like beggar lice, can attach itself to just about anything.

But we must go beyond the dredging work. It is not enough to discover all the muck of pride in our lives. Jesus calls His people to humility. Read the Gospels. Marvel at the humblest man who ever lived. How did He relate to people? What did He do for those who hated Him? What did He say when He was criticized? How did He assess Himself as the Servant of God (Mk. 10:45)? What did He do when His men were competing with one another for position and power (Jn. 13:1-20)? What did Jesus do when the pressures upon Him were overwhelming (Mk. 1:35; 6:46)? Look at Jesus long and hard. See yourself as God sees you. Don't try to embellish it with more or less. And, finally, be ready for the long war. All of our motives, thoughts, words, deeds, and relationships are honeycombed with the tunnels of pride. We are in for a fight until we see the Servant of God face to face.

Go to the Polls (October 31, 2010)

This Tuesday, November 2, we will again be able to participate in a fundamental principle of representative government, namely, being governed by those that we choose in the voting process. This is a privilege of living in a representative democracy. Voting, however, is not as easy as it looks.

Be informed. Know something about those for whom you are going to vote. The newspaper can help. The various candidates' views on issues are frequently laid out in a helpful way. Political ads can be more of a hindrance than a help. Those who put these ads together can cleverly weave disinformation in with facts so that a significant distortion takes place. Lesson: Don't rely on television ads to make up your mind. Seek out those who seem to be well informed and get their assessment of the candidates. But as you do, vote your own mind and informed judgments, not those of someone else.

Remember the big picture. What is your worldview? What are the most important issues? Are you a conservative, liberal, or independent? Why? Does the candidate believe in God? Not many politicians, if any, would run for office as a declared atheist. In a society like ours they know it would be political suicide. But believing in a Supreme Being is not enough. Why press this point? Because belief in a God who is personal and to whom we must all give an account impacts one's morals, values, and character. Human beings must ultimately answer to God and not to the State. Woe to the nation which becomes governed by those who believe that matter is all there is and that ethics are manmade.

What are the moral values of the candidate and how has he or she adhered to these? A life that has been lived in disregard for honesty and fidelity to one's marriage vows is not a good sign. Yes, we all sin. But someone who has a record of not keeping their word brings serious flaws into leadership. There are no perfect candidates for political office. However, this does not mean that we should disregard the importance of right and wrong, and good and evil. Voting for someone based merely on their personality or political pork they can get for their constituents is mentally shallow and selfish.

Know key index issues. There are certain political and moral issues that tell a lot about a candidate and how he or she will govern. What is his view on the value of human life? Is it alright to take the life of the unborn for the sake of personal peace and prosperity? Are embryonic stem cells merely the stuff of laboratory experimentation? Every human being was called an embryo for about the first two months of development before birth. What are the candidate's views on marriage? Can a male "marry" a male or a female "marry" a female? This is not inconsequential. How one defines marriage sets a moral compass for the survivability of civilization as we know it. Raging against God's moral law dooms a nation to the judgment of God.

Do not overestimate the potential of political victories for reversing the moral decline of a nation. Human government is ordained by God to help preserve order in a fallen world (Rom. 13:1-14). It serves God to restrain uncontrolled evil. Some governments are better at this than others. In the final analysis, it is only the gospel of Jesus Christ that offers humanity the hope for the better world man desires. That better world can come in limited measure on this earth. But ultimately the coming kingdom of God is the only hope for perfect government. The rule of the King of

kings and Lord of lords will guarantee that. Reformation and revival in the church of Jesus Christ bring stability and freedom to a nation. The church alive with gospel proclamation and gospel living is what our nation needs more than political triumphs. A Christian should vote with the understanding that no political candidate or political party will be able to establish God's kingdom on earth or create the rule of God's peace in redeemed lives.

An Undivided Heart - Psalm 119:1-8 (November 5, 2010)

Every word in the English language is made up by some variation of twenty-six letters. That is astounding. Think about it. Thousands of vocabulary words each having its own important part in verbal communication made possible by A to Z. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The psalmist used these letters (Aleph to Tav) to arrange his thoughts about the Word of God. He did this by creating an acrostic Psalm; "an alphabet of prayers and reflections on the Word of God, giving each Hebrew letter its turn to introduce eight successive verses on the subject" (Derek Kidner). This special poetic touch highlights the fact of the all-sufficient Word of God. There are ten synonyms for the law or Word of God used throughout one hundred and seventy-six verses (law, testimonies, ways, precepts, etc.). With the exception of only three verses, every verse mentions at least one of these terms. Psalm 119 tells us that the pursuit of the knowledge of God is the pursuit of devotion to the Word of God. If kingdom warriors are loyal to God, they will be loyal to God's Word.

The Bible contains everything we need to know about God and how to live in His world. This is a fallen, broken, and sinful world. In order for the Christian to navigate through it, time must be spent reading, memorizing, and meditating upon the Scriptures. The teaching of the Word of God makes it possible to exalt God and please Him in the few years we are given on this earth.

The Aleph stanza (119:1-8) declares that an undivided heart is what God wants from those who know Him. Life in the Word yields a treasure of personal benefits (vv. 1-2). The truly happy person ("blessed") determines to walk a God-ordained path through life. Specific instructions ("law," "testimonies") show us how God is to be loved with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength. Is it your daily pursuit to search out those commands, examples, promises, and instruction God has given?

Life is filled with dangers that sin puts in our way. Life in the Word establishes a defensive perimeter against the enemies of the soul (v. 3). The Scriptures give us "night vision" lens through which we may see and avoid the sins that will ruin us. We must meditate on the Bible on a regular basis to develop our alertness to what does and does not please God. I like Doug McIntosh's definition of meditate; "Meditation is the adoring believer's interaction with the God of the Bible by means of the Bible."

Meditation on the Word requires thinking. Life in the Word demands a mind that stands at attention (vv. 4-5). God's commands are expressions of His love. Keeping them "diligently" is the appropriate response. Yawning through a few verses in order to beat back guilt is not a mind standing at attention. The true "reality show" in life is awareness that though one is a new creature in Christ there is still a long way to go in spiritual growth (Rom. 7:15-25). There is thinking that needs to be changed, old habits that must go and new ones to replace them, and God-seeking desires that need to be fanned into a flame.

Nothing is worse than bringing disgrace to the Lord. The psalmist anticipates freedom from shame when he looks upon “all Thy commandments” (v. 6). Life in the Word will keep me out of the jail of shame. There will be adversity on the path of obedience (Dan. 9:7, 9). This should make us all the more conscious of our accountability for all of God’s commandments, not just those that we can remember. Pornography offers the life-weary a promise of escape and pleasure. Don’t believe it. Guilt and shame await the sinner. Shame (“our disappointment with ourselves that we are not other than what we are,” David Wells, Losing Our Virtue) can be avoided by building our spiritual immune system, and resisting the temptations which hide personal ruin.

Learning and living by God’s righteous rules is the life for which we were designed. Life in the Word is a life of praise (v. 7). We were made to be worshipers of God. True worship is truth-based. It is not merely an emotional high. It is a truth-saturated experience with God. There is a righteous, moral order God has created. Those who find it (“learn Thy righteous judgments”) are walking, talking, God-praising people.

The undivided heart, filled as it is with praise to God, remains resolved to obey God’s decrees. Life in the Word is a commitment to guard the castle of truth (v. 8). Following God’s commandments requires His enablement. We can’t do it alone. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” May this truth never be far from your next thought. Are you looking for a resolution worth living by? Make it this, “I will keep your statutes.” But as you do, remember, God must make it possible.

Take a moment.

1. Is there some competing loyalty (a habit, money, pleasure) that is making obedience to God’s Word of lesser importance?
2. Are you memorizing Scripture? What are some of the things that are keeping you from it?

Meeting with God in the Coming Year (January 9, 2011)

“Two ice-bound Russian ships freed.” This news report indicated that ice-breaking vessels had to rescue ships and crews trapped in the Sea of Okhotsk. There are times in our lives when we can become “ice-bound.” We get locked into circumstances of our own making which need change.

We are to read, study, and memorize the Scriptures if we are to grow stronger in our Christian walk. But there is more. We are not only to be hearers of the Word of God. We are to be doers of the Word (Jas. 1:25). To be a doer of the Word requires meditating upon what God has written. The following are some examples of what meditation for application might look like. These are taken from passages we have been reading in our 2011 Bible Reading Plan. The questions used have been taken from Don Whitney’s Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, p. 60.

Example #1 – Genesis 3:5 “For God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

- *Does this text reveal something I should believe about God?* God expects me to obey Him and resist the temptations of Satan.

- *Does this text reveal something I should pray about for myself or others?* I will pray that Satan’s deceptions will not bring me down, nor my family, friends, church, and nation (“Lord, in what ways am I being deceived about you? What deceptions have taken over my motives, plans, relationships, desires, and interests? Expose them, banish them and replace them with the crystal-clear truths of your Word.”)

Example #2 – Genesis 6:6 “And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to his heart.”

- *Does this text reveal something I should believe about God?* God is deeply moved by man’s universal depravity. He is not amused by it or indifferent to it. Man’s choices, granted by a sovereign God, bring a sense of loss to Him.
- *Does this text reveal something I should have a new attitude about?* Is there sin in my life whereby I am grieving the Holy Spirit of God? Do I laugh at sin and am I amused by it? “I need to be less tolerant of sexual lust, jealousy, and lying.”

Example #3 – Genesis 11:3 and 11:7 “Come let us build ourselves a city....Come, let us go down and there confuse their language....”

- *Does this text reveal something I should praise or thank or trust God for?* I should thank God for His power over the sinful intentions of the human race, that He protects us from the triumph of coercive utopianism. God will allow evil to proceed to a point but will not allow it to ultimately succeed. God is in control of all our circumstances, even the wicked schemes of others.
- *Does this text reveal something I should do for the sake of Christ, others, or myself?* I need to assist those for whom I am responsible (children, grandchildren, Sunday school class, etc.) in understanding God’s plan in human history, the role of government, the danger of power seekers in human government, the wisdom of God in the scattering of mankind, idolatry, etc.

This is a brief summary of what is involved in meditating on Scripture. God has given us His Word so that we might be changed for His glory. Let’s work at making the New Year a time for loving God with greater energy. Do we have “ice-bound” ways of reading and studying the Bible that need to be broken up? “Lord, open our eyes that we may see wonderful things from your law and do those things that are pleasing in your sight.”

The Racial Divide - Can it be Overcome? (January 16, 2011)

“Whites from front to rear. Colored from rear to front.” This sign glared at the passengers in the buses of the Atlanta Transit system in my youth. It is unsettling to realize how easy it was to accept the social norm of racial segregation as just a way of life. In Woolworth’s Five and Dime store in downtown Atlanta separate water fountains were marked “white” and “colored.” If an African American was traveling through Atlanta the University Motel on Northside Drive was the only place allowed for overnight lodging. Sadly, we did not think about the absence of African Americans in our community swimming pool and ball fields. They were largely invisible

to the white community. One who was not invisible was “Lije” (short for Elijah) seen at church every Sunday. He was relegated to the basement to carry out his janitorial duties.

It was possible to grow up in the racially segregated South and think everything was just fine. The reality was that an ugly, socially immoral condition was woven into the culture and it went unchallenged. But things changed. The so-called “separate but equal” doctrine in regards to public education was challenged in the courts. It was ruled constitutional on May 17, 1954. There was massive resistance to court-ordered racial integration in the schools. One would have thought that Western civilization was hanging in the balances. In Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 there was a violent reaction on the part of whites to nine black students integrating Central High School. I well remember my tenth grade American History teacher, an ardent segregationist, using a rubber stamp on all the students’ papers. The image of children being marched to school at the point of bayonet-wielding National Guardsmen was a strange sight on one’s returned book report.

The days of racial segregation were numbered. Leading the way in overcoming evil with good was the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. protested, marched, wrote, and preached eloquently against racial segregation and racial discrimination. Dr. King’s courage and self-sacrifice demonstrated how loving one’s enemies is the best response to their hatred. The following is taken from a sermon he preached on November 17, 1957.

Another way that you love your enemy is this: When the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it. There will come a time, in many instances, when the person who hates you most, the person who has misused you most, the person who has gossiped about you most, the person who has spread false rumors about you most, there will come a time when you have an opportunity to defeat that person. It might be in terms of a recommendation for a job; it might be in terms of helping that person to make some move in life. That’s the time you must do it. That is the meaning of love. In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It’s not merely an emotional something. Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all men. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system.

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That’s why Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they’re mistreating you. Here’s the person who is a neighbor, and this person is doing something wrong to you and all of that. Just keep being friendly to that person. Keep loving them. Don’t do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with bitterness because they’re mad because you love them like that. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love, they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is

redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So, love your enemies.

Loving our enemies is the way good overcomes evil. More specifically, it is the power of the gospel expressed in the lives of Christian people. This love cannot redeem those who hate us, only the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit can do that. The sin-forgiving, life-giving salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ unleashes God's love in transformed lives. Of all people, it is God's people who should bring down the racial divide. It is in the church of Jesus Christ where all races can sit side by side and worship the One in whom "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

A Day of Infamy (January 23, 2011)

January 22, 1973, a day that will live in infamy. On that date the U.S. Supreme Court determined that a woman had a constitutional right to an abortion. This was more than pulling a legal trick out of the hat of alleged constitutionality. In the decades since the now infamous *Roe v. Wade* ruling, over fifty million babies have been dismembered and killed in the name of a "woman's right to choose." How long, O Lord, how long? It is mind-boggling the degree to which our culture has become comfortable with the slaughter of the innocent.

The story this week is almost too grotesque to restate; "Doctor faces 8 counts of murder... Dr. Kermit Gosnell is accused of killing babies who were born alive." According to charges brought by Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams, Gosnell, "induced labor, forced the live birth of viable babies in the sixth, seventh, eighth month of pregnancy and then killed those babies by cutting the back of the neck with scissors and severing their spinal cord." This is horrific. But it is equally unconscionable that preborn children have been ripped apart, for the most part, as a means of birth-control (euphemistically referred to as "the health of the mother") while an apathetic society looks the other way.

Could things be changing? There are signs that our society is waking up to what is being allowed to happen. With rapidly developing medical technology more scientific information on the distinct personhood of the preborn is emerging. The obvious is becoming more undeniable. Photographs of a fetus inside the womb leave one with the breathtaking image of the formation of a human being, not a mere mass of flesh and blood. John Piper in an open letter to *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in 2001 made this very point; "Are you aware of the fact that the Senate Health and Human Services Committee approved the unconditional permission to terminate the lives of 24-week-old fetuses, the neonatology unit at Abbot Northwestern was caring for a 22-and-a-half-week-old (500 gram) preemie with chances of healthy life?" Piper further challenged the *Star Tribune* with, "In fact I challenge you to publish two photographs side by side: one of this 'child' outside the womb and another of a 'fetus' inside the womb both at 23 or 24 weeks, with a caption that says something like: 'We at the *Star Tribune* regard the termination of the preemie as manslaughter and the termination of the fetus as the personal choice of the mother.'"

We who believe in the sanctity of human life must not give up. There is much good work to be done on behalf of the unborn. We need more churches that will keep the theological and moral

issue of abortion on demand before their congregations. Young people who are contemplating a career in the medical field need to be grounded in the worldview of a pro-life conviction. Churches can support a local Pregnancy Care Center. The Christian community should declare and offer the forgiveness and hope of the gospel to women who have had an abortion. At election time Christians should cast their votes for pro-life candidates.

Prayer, instruction in the Scriptures, and a vibrant, loving church congregational life will go a long way toward helping to establish a culture of life in our nation. Those who follow Christ and are committed to the authority of the Scriptures are to take the lead in protecting the unborn. That day of infamy four decades ago and all the evil it has unleashed can be reversed. Let us pray that it will be.

Jesus Wants You (January 30, 2011)

My generation grew up with the ubiquitous poster of Uncle Sam pointing his finger and saying “Uncle Sam Wants You for the U.S. Army.” The piercing eyes, the set jaw, and the starred top hat were enough to make you think of duty, honor, and country.

When Jesus walked the land of Palestine two thousand years ago, He drew a following. There were those who were interested in Jesus. His miracles and teaching were mesmerizing. How could a mere mortal do such things? No one taught with such authority as the Rabbi from Galilee. The crowds were fascinated with the message of Jesus. They enlisted to follow Jesus for the purpose of learning more about Him. However, even though they were called disciples they had not believed in Jesus (Jn. 6:60, 64).

From among those who were curious about Jesus some believed (Jn. 2:11). Their spiritually blinded eyes were opened. They saw Him as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. They were forgiven their sins and walked out of the tomb of unbelief into the bright light of eternal life. Jesus’ words offered them hope, and by God’s Spirit, they took it (Jn. 3:16; 5:24). It was to this group of believing disciples that the call to follow Jesus was issued. Deny oneself, carry one’s cross, leave one’s family, count the cost, give up everything. This is the kind of believing follower Jesus wanted. Don’t hang back making excuses about being unable to press on to radical living for the King. These conditions were not conditions for salvation. That would be impossible. The apostles whom Jesus personally tutored made it absolutely clear that they and all others pass out of death into life on the basis of faith alone (Rom. 3:24). The gospel is not what we offer to God. It is what He offers to us.

The demands of the Master for born again disciples are met by loving Jesus. The disciples Jesus wants are called to death (Mk. 8:34). The denial of self is a turning from the idols of the heart. There are more of these than we might imagine. More than likely, the next round of suffering into which the Lord will guide us will reveal some of those things or people we cherish more than Jesus. With this comes the necessity of taking up of one’s cross. This is more, much more, than coping with a disagreeable in-law or neighbor. The splintered and painful cross we are to bear is the rejection we receive for our sober intoxication of delight in doing the will of God.

The call of Jesus to His disciples is a call of gain through loss (“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it

profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?" Mk. 8:36, 37). This is not a condition for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. That has been settled when the disciple puts his faith in Christ. Eternal life is free. But following Jesus is costly. Self-centered living is loss. The pursuit of personal comforts, financial security, wanting to be liked by everyone and other such world-sanctioned values are a bad investment. Disciples that love Jesus run hard after a gospel-spreading way of life. Their money and possessions are at the disposal of Jesus Christ. Christ-centered living is the gain of glorifying God on earth and in heaven forever.

Berachah, Jesus wants us to go on to mature discipleship. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). The wonderful mysteries of God as revealed in Christ are revealed to us by His Spirit. We can know them now. God blesses the church with followers of Jesus who are searching the Scriptures to know Him more deeply, obeying His commands carefully, advancing the gospel creatively and seriously, loving one another genuinely, giving generously, and worshipping joyfully. Jesus wants you.

Marriage Assessment (February 13, 2011)

Has your marriage become stale, routine, rusty? No, this is not a commercial announcement, but an invitation to assess your marriage with the help of Mike Emlet. He led the workshop, "Subtle Intimacy Killers" at the 2010 National Christian Counseling and Education Conference (www.ccef.org). His pop quiz given below is designed for "yes" or "no" answers. They are meant to be conversation/assessment starters between you and your spouse. If your response is "yes" to each one, Emlet said that *you* could come, teach the seminar, and he would sit down. With openness to change in your life for the glory of God, enjoy these together.

- I am aware of and talk with my spouse about his/her greatest sorrows.
- I am aware of and talk with my spouse about his/her greatest joys.
- I pray with my spouse on a regular basis
- We share with each other on a regular basis how Scripture and the practices of corporate worship are impacting us.
- We express thanksgiving for each other verbally on a regular basis.
- Our marriage has a proactive rather than a reactive feel to it.
- There is a good balance of fun and seriousness in our marriage.
- I am satisfied with the quality and depth of our one-on-one times together.
- We are not afraid to fail before each other.
- I feel free to raise issues of concern with my spouse and believe we work through such discussions and conflicts well.
- If we have children, we are on the same page in our parenting approaches and welcome the other's feedback regarding our parenting mishaps.
- I continue to learn new things about my spouse.
- We still hold hands frequently.
- I remember what we did on our last three date nights.
- Bonus question: The best word to describe my marriage is _____.

Men, are you slightly perspiring and thinking of a way to avoid this? Ladies, are you looking forward to an opportunity to grade your husband? The above is a tool for a from-the-heart appraisal of the way things are in the most important relationship you will have on this planet. Here are a few ground rules to help in what is intended to be a thought-provoking, love-directed evaluation of your marriage.

- You are doing this to help each other, not grade each other.
- Write down specifics that will work for positive change.
- Don't try to do too many things at once. Be patient. You are going somewhere. Unity takes time.
- Don't play the blame game. Humble yourself before God. Thank Him and one another for the changes and growth already experienced.
- Ask for God's help. We are dependent on Him to make our love flourish. Love, after all, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

A Reminiscence – An Update (March 17, 2011)

Shared memories are powerful in their effects. When these memories are of experiences of God's grace, they are like a vista of fall colors or a scenic overview of majestic mountains. When a community of Christian people, a church, shares a history that has been filled with God's workings, they are renewed in their praise to God and love for one another. It is with this in mind that the following reflections on the founding and growth of our church are presented. May it encourage us in what God can do in the years to come.

This is not a tightly bound history of Berachah Bible Church, but rather thinking about some of the past experiences in its thirty-seven years of existence. The thought of starting a church came to mind in the summer of 1970. At the conclusion of a Sunday morning worship service, I was sitting next to one of my students from Carver Bible College. He had been attending church with me which had raised some eyebrows in an all-white congregation. But this particular Sunday was different. At the end of the service my African American friend went forward during the public invitation to present himself as a candidate for membership. This might not seem like a major event in the post-segregated South, but in 1970 it prompted a social, moral, and spiritual earthquake. Space does not permit the full story. However, after deliberation by the board of deacons a called conference of the church revealed a startling announcement. Tony Evans, the student, would not be accepted into the membership of the church. It was decided that he would be better served if he worshiped with fellow African Americans. Such a conclusion seems so preposterous that it is embarrassing to repeat it. But that is what happened.

Our family could not remain in a church that was willing to compromise biblical truth and insult fellow members of the body of Christ. Beth and I withdrew our membership and contemplated what to do next. Out of this crisis came the thought of starting a church where God's Word would be preached and no one would be excluded based on skin color. That seems like a very simple and unquestionable standard for a new church. But there were few churches that were committed to rigorous Bible exposition and racial inclusion. So, the journey began. Bible studies were held in the home of Lew and Deanne Rabbitt in Red Oak. From there the developing church rented a school, and then leased an office building in East Point. It was in 1978 that thirteen acres were purchased in northeast Fayette County. It took another four years to start the

first building. We did not want to incur any debt, so some years of patience were necessary. A new addition to our original building was completed in 1994. Six more acres were purchased, and plans were begun for construction of a new fellowship hall and classrooms. It is with thanks to God that all this has been completed and paid for by His grace and the faithful giving of His people. The fact that debt has been avoided is not in praise of our church family, but a testimony to the way God has enabled us to give “not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God’s loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Grace giving is not a celebration of the giver but of God who provides. It has been the desire of our church to exemplify how Christians should handle their finances. Saving money, exercising patience, giving generously to the work of the gospel, and living within our means have been exercised through two land purchases and three building programs. Our personal finances and our church finances are to be governed by a passion to live in such a way as to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

Laying up treasures in heaven means a lavish support of world missions. On Saturday, November 5, 1983, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin conducted a Great Commission Workshop for our congregation. During this time, we evaluated our church’s involvement in world missions. We all agreed: there was a lot of work to be done. We were encouraged by Dr. McQuilkin’s messages on the Sunday following the workshop. We were challenged to prayer for missions and taken to Matthew 9:13 to be reminded of God’s compassion for sinners. These themes moved us to enlarge our commitment to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. By God’s grace, since the founding years of our church, hundreds of thousands of dollars have flowed into the support of missionaries and special projects. Families and individuals, such as the Sherwoods, Dawn Scherer, the Jarnigans, and the Heinzes, have gone to the Philippines, Haiti, and Kazakhstan. The church has sent the pastor and usually his wife to seven different countries. Short term missions’ teams have ministered in Trinidad, Costa Rica, Kazakhstan, Mexico, and Bosnia. At the present time three young couples in our church are involved in missionary work in Senegal (the Flintoffs) and Bosnia (the Bells and Works). For all this we are supremely thankful to God for working in hearts and lives and setting before our eyes a world in desperate need of the hope of the gospel.

In order to carry out the work of the ministry these many years, God has generously supplied pastoral staff assistance. Paul Curtas gave invaluable help for nine years before he was asked to become the Director of the Fellowship of Christian Airline Personnel. Many in the church family were able to celebrate Paul’s marriage to Claudette, the answer to his prayers regarding a helpmate, by traveling to Switzerland in October 1995. Two of our young men, gifts from Nelson and Jody Wallace, Rob and Seth, gave us valued service in working with the youth and in pastoral assistance. In 2000 Bryan Ryan became our Minister of Youth and served us well through his commitment to the Scriptures and his love for God. In 2001 Justin Culbertson, newly graduated from the Master’s Seminary, joined the church staff as an associate pastor. He not only brought himself but gave us Brook, his wife, who fears the Lord and loves His Word. Justin and Brook are an answer to this pastor’s prayers. Wade and Natalie Grubbs took their places among us in 2007, as Wade serves on the pastoral staff with youth, Sunday School, and worship. Beth and I are the only charter members remaining at Berachah. A new generation is taking on the responsibilities that go with proclaiming the excellencies of Christ. That is as it should be. Praise God for faithful believers who carry on the work of God’s kingdom.

Beloved, there is much work to be done. My continuing prayer for Berachah is that we will be a Bible-loving, Christ-centered, missionary-sending, gospel-proclaiming, mercy-giving, Spirit-

energized, God-exalting, worshiping community of rock-solid believers. Reminiscing counts for something. It can be a way of reviving our zeal for God. Come. Let us go on to maturity and new frontiers with God.

A Cry of Imprecation (March 27, 2011)

What is an imprecation? An imprecation, in the biblical sense, is the calling down of God's judgment upon one's enemies. Does that disturb you? You are probably thinking of Jesus' command to love our enemies. And we should. However, there is to be a place in our prayer life for asking God to bring vengeance upon evil doers. This must be handled with care, but it is nevertheless an important part of overcoming evil with good.

The psalms of the Old Testament are filled with imprecatory prayers. Interestingly, they are often found in lament psalms which are appeals to God for help in a time of great personal misery. You can see the connection. Frequently the pain and suffering inflicted upon the composer of the psalm came from bad people. This is seen, for example, in Psalm 69 where David cries out to God to judge his enemies who were ultimately God's enemies. There were people who wanted to destroy David, God's anointed king of Israel.

Is it Scriptural for Christians in this present age to use the imprecatory psalms in their prayer life? The answer is yes. But not only is it the right thing to do. It is the required thing to do. Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ ought to pray that justice might be done. We are to pray that God will bring about a just remedy to the problems which sin has created. When evil tyrants march across the stage of life defying God and slaughtering Christians in the name of false religion, zeal for the vindication of the righteousness of God is demanded.

In Psalm 137, perhaps the most stinging of all the imprecations uttered in the psalter, we find these words; "O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, how blessed will be the one who repays you with the recompense with which you have repaid us. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock (vv. 8, 9). Babylon had committed terrible atrocities against their enemies. They had slaughtered babies by the thousands. The psalmist prays that God will bring on Babylon's head the same savagery they themselves had committed in Judah and elsewhere. They (the Babylonians) would be so defenseless that they would be unable to defend their infants.

How can such an imprecation be translated into passionate praying for the justice of God to be done today? The following biblical principles are offered as tracks upon which we may run our God-pursuing thoughts. (1) A cry of imprecation is a plea for God's judgment on sin. It is the plea of a world-weary, sin-hating, servant of God for justice to be done. (2) A cry of imprecation is righteous anger jealous for the holiness of God. It is righteous anger trained in spiritual warfare recognizing the gravity of hating God and His moral law. (3) A cry of imprecation takes the log out of its own eye before it proceeds to call out the sins of others. It refuses to indulge in personal hatred and vindictiveness (Matt. 5:44.). (4) A cry of imprecation longs for the repentance of those who are rebelling against God and who hate God's people (Psa. 83:9-18). (5) A cry of imprecation leaves the process of judgment in the hands of an all-wise and just God. God will execute judgment in His own time and way both in the time and eternity. Justice delayed is not justice denied. (6) A cry of imprecation has its eye upon the kiss of righteousness

and peace at the cross of Christ (Psa. 85:10). The horror and ugliness of sin is written in the blood of Christ.

We stand with good company as we pray for God to defend His holy name. Glorified saints slain at the beginning of the Great Tribulation cry out to God saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). Prayer for God to judge sin and set things right finds its source in the hearts of those who are intoxicated with His holy name.

The Land of Israel (May 1, 2011)

The land of Israel. How relatively small it is sitting as a land bridge between Eurasia and Africa. Upon this sliver of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean God has chosen to carry out significant turning points in the story of redemption. It was promised to Israel over four thousand years ago as part of God’s covenant with Abraham through his son Isaac. Over the centuries much blood has been spilled in struggles to control what came to be called Palestine. One of the most astounding events to occur in Palestine in modern history was the declaration of Israel’s statehood on May 14, 1948. The famous Balfour declaration (November 2, 1917) set forth the British government’s policy intentions toward Israel. It reads as follows:

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

On May 15, 1948 the day after Israel’s declaration of independent statehood, the armies of five Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq) declared war on Israel. This space does not permit an accounting of Israel’s rise to her international status. One thing is clear at this time and that is the intention of the Arab states surrounding Israel to destroy her. All eyes are on the Middle East and especially upon the nation of Israel.

Israel is a fascinating geographical playing board. There is so much variety in such a limited land area: mountains, desert, rolling hills, a seashore, the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee (a fresh water lake), and the famous Jordan river. From Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, the distance is only 145 miles. From the coast to Jerusalem, it is 32 miles, and from Jerusalem to Jericho it is 15 more miles. It is a small stage upon which the biblical drama has been played out.

On Saturday, May 14, 2011, Beth and I will have the opportunity to attend the Jerusalem University College (The Institute of Holy Land Studies as I knew it 1981). We will travel with John and Rachel Sherwood to Jerusalem to begin studies in *The Geographical and Historical Settings of the Bible*. We have already been engaged in map work and reading in preparation for our field studies in Israel. These will consist of nine “Regional Field Studies” lasting for three weeks with a special two-day field trip in Jordan to visit Petra (ruins of the ancient city of the Edomites) and Jerash, an ancient Roman city of the Decapolis. This will not be a typical tourist trip, stopping off at gift shops and buying souvenirs. The following are some of the itinerary highlights: Careful study of Jerusalem, regional trips throughout Israel, hikes and biblical walks,

scenic overviews, nature reserves, archeological sites, museums, and lectures on contemporary issues.

We thank the church for allowing us this time away (May 14 to June 7). It is our desire to fold this learning experience into our teaching and overall ministry at Berachah. The land of Israel offers a multitude of biblical vantage points: Old Testament and New Testament backgrounds, the places of the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, and contemporary issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. We want God to use our time in Israel to deepen and broaden our knowledge of God's Word.

The Liberated Woman (May 8, 2011)

At first thought the words, "liberated woman," seemed somewhat outdated. For those who weren't around or may not remember, they were a tag for the kind of woman the feminist movement sought to produce. Such issues as reproductive rights (i.e., abortion), equal pay, maternity leave, domestic violence, and sexual violence were a part of the agenda of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Picture the World War II poster of Ruby the Riveter flexing her biceps with the announcement, "We can do it." This is not to imply that there weren't women's cultural issues that needed to be addressed. The deception was that such humanistic fallacies as self-centered individualism and moral relativism led the parade. Could it be possible that a Jewish Rabbi who lived over two thousand years ago has the definitive answer to questions about the liberated woman? Jesus Christ was that Rabbi. Listen to His words about human freedom; "If therefore the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). He added further, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." It is ironic that for women their liberation comes through a man. He is not just any man, however. Freedom from the curse of the law, the penalty and power of sin come from the saving work of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

The woman who is truly liberated is the woman who knows God's forgiveness and has received eternal life through the Lord Jesus Christ. What will this liberated woman look like? The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is helpful. The book of Proverbs in a special way reveals God's wisdom regarding women.

The liberated woman trustfully submits to God's authority. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Prov. 31:30). The fear of the Lord is the appropriate response to the character of God - His majesty, integrity and glory. The liberated woman is awed by God not by her own perceived beauty. She thinks and conducts her life in the presence of God whom she worships and serves in reverential love. Bound up in her fear of the Lord is an abhorrence of sin (Prov. 8:13 "hates evil"). Are you there, ladies? Are you fighting and rebelling against God? Nothing is more anti-feminine. Are you trying to live your life by your plans, rules, and desires? You will not find freedom in a stubborn determination to do things your way.

The liberated woman does not place outer beauty before inner beauty (Prov. 11:22, "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion"). A woman who places external appearance over the condition of her soul, her character, diminishes her true femininity. The liberated woman pursues the graces of the Spirit. Knowing the signs of misplaced values is a

mark of spiritual freedom. A woman who spends more on cosmetics, tanning booths, clothes, and hair than she does in grace giving is not pretty.

The liberated woman expresses her sexuality in God's way (Prov. 2:16-17, "wisdom will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God."). Bondage to lust drains the soul dry of spiritual vitality and a desire for God. Freedom is experienced in a wife's faithfulness to her husband. Her marriage vows are important to her. She keeps her word (Mal. 2:14). The freedom to love is freedom indeed. Liberated women love their husbands. Complaining about one's spouse is a symptom of diseased thinking. Sexual liberation is not found in the trysts of immorality foolishly thinking that a meaningful relationship can be created in the bed (Prov. 5:1-14; 6:24-29; 7:1-27; 30:20). The liberated woman keeps herself a virgin before marriage and is faithful to her husband after marriage. She has the discernment to see through men of low character who try to seduce her.

The liberated woman, as a wife, is a gift from God to her husband (Prov. 18:22, "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord." Prov. 31:10, "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies."). Encouraging her husband, praying for him and looking for ways to help him are marks of a woman who belongs to Christ and who is growing in the faith. Men, if this describes your wife, she is your crown (Prov. 12:4, "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.").

The liberated woman, as a mother, brings blessing to her home (Prov. 14:1, "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down."). The woman who lives by God's revealed wisdom in His Word enables her household to thrive. She is to be respected by her children. They are to respond to her sacrifices by taking care of her when she is no longer able to take care of herself. One of the best Mother's Day presents is God fearing, spiritually wise children (Prov. 23:24, 25, "The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him. May your father and mother be glad; may she who gave you birth rejoice."). The mother who has sought to live by God's precepts is most honored when her children love God. Sons and daughters, the best thing you can do for your mother is cherish God above all else.

The True Story (June 26, 2011)

"The Truman Show" is a clever movie about a man who is the star of his own TV show. The problem is that Truman doesn't know it is happening. He was an unwanted child who was selected without his knowledge to live his life twenty-four hours a day before a worldwide television audience. Everyone in his life is an actor. The city in which his life unfolds is an elaborate movie set. Everything is controlled; his school, friends, the woman he marries, his father and mother. The script calls for the tragic death of his father in a storm which leaves Truman afraid of the water. Of course, his father doesn't really die but fear of the water keeps Truman on the island and captive to the story. Like a detective solving a murder mystery, our hero begins to figure it all out. He attempts escape on a boat. The director flips the switches and brings on a storm that almost ends Truman's life. He survives and is "consoled" by being told that there is no more truth in the real world than what he has experienced in his make-believe world.

Is there a subliminal message here? Are we to think that God is like the producer/director of our life's story? Is it all scripted? Are our decisions not real ones after all? Have we been set up to miss the freedom that could have been ours? Are the people around us complicit in a charade of choices? A movie is a movie. It's entertainment. Is there a hidden agenda behind the story? Who knows? One thing is for sure, the Creator of us all is not playing games with us. The world we live in is bound by time and space. God has a plan. It is overwhelmingly complex. However, it is not indecipherable. There is genuine good in the world. Creation inspires awe. Human beings have amazing capabilities. Civilizations develop and fold into one another. Progress through discoveries, ingenuity, and increased knowledge is breath-taking. At the same time the human race is infected with a moral plague. The Creation is worshiped rather than the Creator. Human intelligence is employed in the full-time task of self-deception. We are all sinners having rebelled against the God who made us. The pain and suffering everywhere apparent is either blamed on God or seen as only the result of chance through time. The Creator, in the mind of man, is either defective, limited or doesn't exist at all.

There is no mention of God, sin, church, the Bible, or worship in "The Truman Show." Though this is not unusual for Hollywood scripts, it does reveal the worldview of many. The hollow story of a daily routine filled with commercials about products to be bought, friends who are fooling us, and personal freedom denied is tragically the story being written by unbelief. Where is God in my daily life? Has He been written off as some wimpy Supreme Being who is unnecessary? Is He a cruel Creator playing with our lives like a child swatting fireflies on a summer's evening? These are not inconsequential questions. We were not created to walk away from the stage of our lives into another world of pedestrian existence. God has created us for Himself. Truth is not determined by minds prejudiced against a holy God. God has spoken. We are not being tricked. Cancer, strokes, famine, floods, tornados, murder, child abuse, rape, fraud, corruption in business and government, adultery, lying, cheating, and stealing are screaming for us to take note. Something is desperately wrong. We have turned our backs on a loving, holy, wise, and Almighty God.

The freedom to be what the Lord of creation wants us to be is not hidden. There is a hero in history who has come to rescue us from our self-inflicted wound of separation from the God who loves us. This is a story told by an infinitely wise Creator revealed in the only book He has ever written, the Bible. This is "The True Story."

A Jury Trial, Marriage in New York, and the Atlanta Public Schools (July 17, 2011)

Is it possible that something is desperately wrong with human beings? Following the daily news is empirical (conclusions based on observation) evidence that evil exists. This presents some challenges to the belief that man is basically good. It is astounding that one could be so persuaded, nevertheless, foolish thought dies hard. Naturalists (God doesn't exist) explain bad behavior in terms of a broken machine. In the evolutionary development of men, so the argument goes, the interrelation of chemical and physical properties malfunctions. Given this belief, one wonders how there can be any coherent, transcendent, universal moral or ethical code.

Christian theology gives the only reasonable and correct view of human nature. (1) Man is radically sinful. We all do bad things because we have bad hearts. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Everyone is infected with a disposition and potential for action that does not

measure up to God's perfect standard of righteousness (what is right). (2) Sin has affected man's total being (intellect, will, conscience, affections). (3) We can do nothing to please God in ourselves. We can do helpful things for our fellow human beings but when it comes to pleasing God, we are helpless and hopeless. (4) Man hates God and without the restraints of God's government he would go from bad to worse. (5) We all have the ability to commit the worst possible sin (under favorable conditions). (6) Man is not as bad as he has the potential for being. We have not all made the same progress in sinning.

What witnesses to our sinful condition do we encounter? The list is endless. Especially noteworthy are some current news stories. A child is murdered while her mother parties, lies to the authorities, and escapes responsibility for her actions. In New York State it is now legal for men to marry men and women to marry women, becoming the sixth state to commit itself to such moral insanity. The Atlanta Public Schools are tarnished by a cheating scandal. Thousands of children have been robbed of a quality education by adults they thought could be trusted.

The number of people involved in these moral tragedies points to the complicity of entire communities. How does this happen? Individuals and institutions lose their moral reference point. Lying and immorality become useful ways of pursuing one's success and happiness. Human nature is a poisoned well. Jesus Christ has told us that from the heart come, "evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness (Mk. 7:21, 22).

Thankfully, sinners don't commit every form of sin of which they are capable. There are restraints which God, in His grace and mercy, has set in place. Government acts as a restraint. Laws and penalties for breaking them help hold back the tide of evil. The presence of a societal moral conscience is a protection from moral anarchy. Also contributing to moral restraint is a collective moral conscience. The image of God is found marred though it is by sin, in every human being. We all have God's moral law written on our hearts. This inner sense of right and wrong keeps much sin in check. The presence of Christians living according to biblical standards, however imperfect they may be, work as salt and light in the culture. Even sin itself and its awful consequences can frighten some away from the pursuit of evil. One's own conscience, that internal referee we all have, if it is properly informed, can create a fear of getting caught.

What then is happening to us as a nation? Evil has always been with us but the news media puts us there as soon as it happens. However, this is not the whole story. We are living to see a dying civilization. To the extent that God's moral law is marginalized and out-right rejected we insure the collapse of freedom, security, and prosperity. We are working hard to take our place among the "has-been" nations of history. Arrogance blinds us to the societal suicide we are committing.

What are we as Christian people to do? This is no time to run up the white flag of surrender. We don't need to build monasteries or set up Christian communes in the mountains. Parents, lawyers, judges, legislators, school administrators, principals, and teachers are us and among us. Nothing short of gospel declaring, and gospel living Christianity must exist in our cities and urban areas. Christians need to show up in the public square, not as self-righteous critics, but as compassionate, loving, involved citizens. Are you there?

Pleasing One Another - X-ray questions (July 24, 2011)

The church is to be a gospel place. At the center of all suffering, conflict, and interpersonal relationships the good news of Jesus Christ must pulsate. One of the most important questions that could be asked about our church is, “Are we declaring and living out the truth bound up in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?”

A rehearsal of Romans 15:1-6 reveals how the great river of gospel truth flows into the life of the congregation. Like-mindedness to Christ is the key to how believers are to relate to one another when differences threaten peace. For this reason, it is vital that we ask ourselves questions to assess the degree to which we are gospel people.

Are many of the things I do designed to please others rather than myself?

Is the gospel at the center of my interpersonal relationships? Do I sacrifice for others? Is worship of God more important than my feelings?

Does the way I relate to members of my family or church family picture a person who believes that he is in daily need of help?

Do I seek the help of others in carrying out my tasks, assignments, and responsibilities?

If Jesus were standing at my elbow listening to my descriptions of difficult people would he be pleased?

Do I exclude certain people because I don't like them? Am I uncomfortable around some people?

In what ways am I living as if I were more independent than I actually am?

Does anyone I know offer loving constructive criticism of the way I relate to people?

Does the attention someone else receives bother me?

Do I gossip at times?

Have I given insincere compliments to others?

Is it difficult to hurt my feelings?

Whom must I please? Whose opinion of me counts? From whom do I desire approval and fear rejection? In whose eyes am I living? Whose love and approval do I need?

Do I avoid people who tend to disagree with me or who have hurt me?

Are there certain people to whom I refuse to speak even when I am looking at them? Do I extend common courtesies?

Has answering some of these questions made me feel uncomfortable?

The above questions are offered as a means of examining the changes and growth in the gospel work of pouring yourself into the spiritual completion of another. Sitting on the lower shelves of our minds should be the truth that the gospel is all about harmony.

*Some of these questions have been lifted from various sources.

Return from Camp Week (July 31, 2011)

A week of camp has come and gone. Meetings, activities, Family Group sessions, Gladiator games, hanging out on the steps at Lee Hall, meeting students from other churches, excellent grub, and Tedashii & Lecrae (did Lecrae's concert really start at 10:00 p.m.?). Summer camp (we use to call them retreats) can be a wonderful time for getting your mind set on the things that really matter. I remember those days well. I was converted to Jesus Christ at the age of fourteen and almost immediately got involved in youth activities at my church and Youth for Christ. Challenging messages, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and the call to serve Jesus Christ with all of myself for all of my life were used by God to set me on a higher path. My high school became my mission field. The Bible with its life changing wisdom was to be read, memorized, and searched to know how to live a God-pleasing life.

Now here it is four years of college, seven years of seminary, thousands of prepared and delivered sermons, forty-seven years of marriage, two children, and six grandchildren later. Have I learned anything? I hope so. Hopefully, you will keep reading. The bumps and bruises, disappointments, failures, pain and suffering will not be enumerated, but hindsight will be offered to all who have spent a week at camp and face the rest of an unknown future.

Start with your heart. The Bible says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23). The heart is the place of willing, longing, thought, and planning. This is me determining what I want to be, to do, and to get. For this reason, we are to love God with all our heart. You are back from camp. The new school year is a few weeks a8/way. Get up every morning resolved to please God in the very core of your being. Love Him in English class. Love Him when you do your homework. Love Him when you text message. Love Him when you listen to music. When you do this every day you will have lived the way God wants you to live.

Read your Bible every day. Read it through once a year. You will never regret having made this a habit of life. Use the church's Bible reading plan or any other plan you find and stay with it day in and day out. You will be amazed at how your thought life will be shaped and set in the right direction. If you want to know What Would Jesus Do, then saturate your mind with what God has said.

Choose the right kind of friends. Be kind to everyone. Diversify your friendships. Don't limit your friendship circle to people who look and think just like you do. Choose very carefully those you want to know well and be with a lot. A true friend is someone who will tell you the truth, is loyal, accepts you as you are, and gives you good advice. Remember, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Prov. 27:6).

Pray a lot. Talk to God on a regular basis. Praise Him. Confess your sins to Him. Thank Him. Bring your needs to Him. He wants you to. Start your day with prayer. End it with prayer. Pray before you make decisions. Pray that you will meet and make the right kind of friends. Pray that you will marry someone who loves God. When you marry that person, pray with him or her until one of you dies. Make a prayer list and keep it with your Bible, the one you are reading through every year. One of the joys of the Christian life is to see how God answers prayer. This won't happen unless you pray.

Admit that you are a sinner and never feel good about it. Sin is ugly. It is everything that God isn't. Don't laugh at it, practice it, daydream about it, or plan to do it. Hate sin. It will ruin you. We are all sinners by nature (born with a fist in God's face) and it has affected every part of our being (body, soul, spirit, intellect, conscience, will, and heart). When you look at yourself in the mirror, never forget that you need God. Because of sin we don't think right (we need God's thoughts, the Bible). We don't "will right" (none of us seeks God without God's enablement). We don't "feel right" (we can't rely on our feelings). Without God we will love and hate the wrong things. Sin messes up lives. It leads to unhappiness, depression, broken marriages, DUIs, suicide, jail, and a host of other miseries.

Rehearse the gospel often. The best news in the world is that Jesus Christ has provided a way to deliver us from our slavery to sin and made it possible to serve Him forever. God is holy, just, and loving. His law demands perfect obedience. We have all broken it and deserve death. Jesus Christ lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. Put your trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life. You will never outgrow your need to think about the gospel and live according to it. Make it one of your goals in life to tell as many people as you can about this good news.

This is not all I would like to say to all my after-camp-week friends, but it's a start. Events like a week in the woods studying the Bible and having a good time are important. My "camp/retreat" weeks from 1956 to 1959 changed the way I looked at life. Where will you be fifty-two years later? I have told you some of the things that will matter most when you have finished your journey. What kind of disciple of Jesus do you want to be? Having lived for Christ is the life best lived.

A Gospel Place (August 7, 2011)

A gospel place can be found just inside the Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. Wherever the gospel is believed, proclaimed, and practiced that is a gospel place. Upon our arrival in Jerusalem on May 15, our first night's stay was at the Christ Church Guest House. We were pleased with the rates but much more so with the traveler's respite it offered.

Christ Church Guest House is best described in the brochure received at the check-in desk.

Inside the courtyard visitors discover a tranquil refuge set among lush shade trees, cascading flowers and intriguing historic buildings. Christian staff members and volunteers, called there by God from around the world, serve and minister to guests touring the Christ Church complex, or staying with us in the Guest House.

Facing the Guest House is the 19th Century Christ Church – the first Protestant Church in the Middle East – where visitors can pray and attend a number of weekly worship services. A few steps away is the site of the first British Consulate in Israel. Constructed in the 1820s, it is now home to CMJ's Alexander College and the Conrad Schick Library for historical research.

The Guest House was charming, quiet, comfortable, and an integral part of the Christ Church ministry center. We attended the services of the church on our first full Sunday there. Worship was in the Anglican tradition of hymns, a message on John 14, and open communion. A call to praise, preparation, Gloria, Scripture readings, sermon, offering, intercessions, prayers of penitence, Holy Communion, thanksgiving, blessing, and dismissal offered a truth rich liturgy.

The building was simple, dignified, and steeped in history. Eyes were drawn upward to the stained-glass windows picturing the olive tree of Romans 11. The words of the Scripture reading leaped from the page as 1 Peter 2:1-10 spoke of stones and the foundation stone. Stones were all around us, everywhere plentiful in the architecture - floors, walls, and streets.

The song service was rich with a multitude of energetic voices, two guitars, a piano, and two vocalists. The words about the cross of Christ sung only a few hundred yards from the very place where Christ was crucified became filled with special meaning. We were stunned by the time and space certainty of the redeeming work of the Savior.

One of the ministries of Christ Church is its deeds of mercy to Jews and Arabs. A child from Gaza (ruled by Hamas, Israel's enemy) with a congenital heart condition was brought to Israel for a necessary operation performed by Israeli doctors. Christ Church paid for the expense.

We were in a gospel place. The gospel was preached, sung, portrayed in the bread and cup, and demonstrated in kindness and compassion. What a witness to Jew and Gentile of the all-sufficient saving work of Jesus Christ where it was accomplished two-thousand years ago. "Lord, fill our world with gospel places."

THE GATES OF JERUSALEM

The Old City of Jerusalem, today's walled city, has eight gates. These walls and gates are not those of first century Jerusalem. It's a long story. The short version is that the Romans out of anger and frustration with Jewish rebellions leveled the first century city, remade it and called it Aelia Capitolina (135 A.D.). The wall encircling the Old City of Jerusalem today is a combination of the walls of Herod (37 B.C.), Agrippa (41 A.D.), and Saladin (1187 A.D.), but for the most part the walls and gates are the work of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1538-41 A.D.

Every gate tells its own story. The gate through which we passed upon our arrival was the Jaffa Gate. We went in and out of this gate more than any other because of its location near our hotel. It is known as "Bab el Khalil" ("Gate of the Friend"). An Arabic inscription over the entrance reads, "There is no god but Allah and Abraham is his friend." Most motorized traffic enters through this gate and during daylight hours it is alive with bread vendors, tourists, Hasidic Jews walking fast to wherever they are going, police, soldiers, money changers, and various shops.

The New Gate is the entrance into the Christian Quarter of the Old City. It was opened in 1889 but closed from 1948 to 1967 when under Jordanian control. The Damascus gate on the north

side of the city, along with Herod's Gate, and Lions Gate carry a lot of traffic from Muslim neighborhoods to the Muslim Quarter in the Old City. The Damascus gate is the most ornate of all the gates and is the pilgrims' start to the city of Damascus in Syria. In the Middle Ages Christians renamed Lions Gate, St. Stephen's gate, after Stephen who traditionally was martyred nearby.

The Dung gate sits strategically on the eastern side of the city providing immediate access to The Western Wall (aka the "Wailing Wall") and Mount Moriah, better known as the Temple Mount. This is the location of El Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. From the 2nd century the refuse of the city was carted out through this gate. Today the Dung Gate bustles with Bar Mitzvahs joyfully proceeding through it with lively songs and dance.

The Zion Gate offers entrance into the Armenian Quarter and Jewish Quarter of the city. It is located near the Jerusalem University College which we attended for our studies in Israel. One of the first impressions upon seeing Zion Gate is the scars of war. During the war of 1949 Jewish fighters blasted their way through this gate to reach the besieged Jewish Quarter. It has been aptly said that "Jerusalem's history is written in its stones."

One gate remains, but it is sealed, and no one passes in or out. It is called The Golden. Built in 640 A.D. by Arab conquerors, it is said to sit over the initial site of the Eastern Gate of the Temple compound. Pictures taken from the Mount of Olives usually reveal this unique gate. We were told that a Jerusalem University College student was walking by this gate situated above a Muslim cemetery. It had just rained, and the soft ground gave way dropping the startled student down into a hole with what was possibly the first century eastern gate staring him in the face. After a quick photo op he climbed out, returning the next day to find the spot filled in and no visitors allowed.

It is believed that the Eastern Gate was the one through which Jesus passed when He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. According to Jewish religious tradition the coming Messiah will enter Jerusalem through the Golden Gate. In 1810 A.D. Muslims sealed the gate during the rule of Suleiman to prevent this. What we do know is that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns "on that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east" (Zech. 14:4). The prophets of the Old Testament tell us that a magnificent Jerusalem will be the place to which the nations swarm to worship Israel's Messiah. They will be saying, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob" (Isa. 2:3). No gate will keep our Lord and Savior out of His city. "And the Lord will be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9).

THE WALL

Few places on this earth possess an intersection of history like the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. There are theologically more significant sites in Jerusalem (e.g. The Holy Sepulchre Church), but none are more charged with Israel's dashed dreams and longings for the future than "the Wailing Wall."

The Western Wall is probably one of the more recognizable scenes for those who have never visited Jerusalem. Pictures abound of shawl draped Orthodox Jews reading and praying while facing enormous stone blocks. The Western Wall is actually a wall within the walls of the Old

City of Jerusalem. It formed a part of the supporting walls bounding the outer court of Herod's first century Temple. Its contemporary significance dates from the Solomon's Temple which rested on the summit of Mount Moriah. A large rectangular plateau with retaining walls supported Israel's magnificent Temple. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple. In 517 B.C. a second temple was constructed by a returned remnant of Jews from Babylon under the direction of Nehemiah. It was this second Temple that Herod the Great restored to its first century splendor.

During the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), a brilliant architect and magnificent builder, Jerusalem was developed to astounding beauty. But his crowning achievement was the embellishment of Israel's Temple. Its enormous size and beautiful proportions made it one of the wonders of the ancient world. It is here that we encounter the Western Wall. What is seen today is about a tenth of the size of the original retaining wall constructed by Herod to hold the Temple Mount. The size of its stones is a testimony to the grandeur of the Temple in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus.

Illustrating this is one of these supporting stones measured at more than 36 feet long with a weight of about 100 tons. Another witness to the size of the first century temple and walls are the stones which Titus, the Roman commander, ordered to be cast into the Tyropoeon Valley. I stood beside some of these excavated stones. Imagine the ingenuity it took setting such stones in place.

One can understand why Jesus' disciples said, "Teacher, what wonderful stones and wonderful buildings" (Mk. 13:1). Even more astounding is what Jesus said in reply; "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." This prediction of the Temple's destruction (70 A.D.) left undisturbed huge foundation stones that were actually not part of the Temple itself. The Western Wall in Jerusalem today is part of Herod's original footings in the retaining wall under the entire Temple Mount.

It is this wall that Jews reverently approach (and any Gentiles who are properly attired). Praying, reading Scripture, singing, and dancing may all take place at this sacred shrine of modern Judaism. Through the last two centuries it has been called "The Wailing Wall" because Jews came here to lament their fallen nation. In recent decades there has been a shift from referring to it as "The Wailing Wall" to "The Western Wall" now that it is in Jewish hands. However, even though the nation of Jordan (which had control over the Old City from 1948 to 1967) no longer controls this sacred Jewish site, it remains stones of remembrance of what once was. Jews have been drawn to this site since the 4th century. The prayers of Jews and pilgrims written on pieces of paper can be seen in the crevices of the mammoth stones, expressing hopes that these prayers will come true.

The Western Wall stands as a vivid and sad reminder of the consequences of Israel's rejection of her Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Jesus told His disciples that the Temple would be torn down. And it was in a horrific cost of life in 70 A.D. The disciples were also told that a time of great tribulation would come (Mk. 13:19). After this awful time of God's wrath, the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory (13:26).

Standing among ardent Jewish worshipers at the Wall my heart was heavy for unbelieving Israel, the natural olive branches that have been broken off (Rom. 11:17). At the same time, I was reminded that one day "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). God will graft believing Israel

back into the root of Abrahamic blessing. There is coming a day when Israel's present state of unbelief will turn to belief. The wall of resistance will become a wail of repentance. "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10).

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER, GROUND ZERO

There are geographical places where our past, present, and future have been forever impacted. But all historical monuments and markers pale into insignificance compared to the area covered and bounded by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the city of Jerusalem.

The Holy Sepulcher has been called the most celebrated church in Christendom. It marks the place, tradition says, where Jesus was crucified and the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where Jesus was interred. The Basilica is not particularly impressive from the outside. An aerial view shows two mosques that flank the Holy Sepulcher's walls. Beneath the large and small domes of the church is the traditional location of the crucifixion marked by a silver disc under a small main altar. A booklet entitled, This is Jerusalem, describes the site. "It is possible to touch the actual Rock of Golgotha through the hole in the centre of the silver disc. When Jesus died, the Rock of Calvary was split and on the right of the altar a fissure (underneath a metal plate), which cuts through the rock to Adam's Chapel below, is held to date from the Crucifixion. Two black discs on either side of the altar mark the position where the crosses of the two thieves were planted."

In our visit to the Holy Sepulcher Church visitors were lined up to kneel and touch the silver disc. We made our way to Adam's Chapel which contains a glass panel showing a fissure (purported to be from the first century) in the Rock of Calvary which is a continuation of the split from the above place where Jesus died on the cross. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the location of the last five Stations of the Fourteen Stations on the Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross). It is the route, many believe, taken by Jesus from the Antonia Fortress, where He was condemned, to Golgotha where He was crucified and buried in a tomb nearby.

A short distance from Calvary is "the gloomy, cavern-like Chapel of the Syrian Jacobites" in the western end of the Rotunda. We entered what is believed to be an ancient rock-hewn Jewish burial chamber which is said to be Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. That can't be certain but it is true that Jesus was laid in one like it. There is enough room outside this burial chamber for a small gathering for worship services held every Lord's Day.

The area covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher also contains additional shrines such as the Mary Magdalene Chapel, the traditional spot where Mary saw the resurrected Jesus. There is also St. Helena's Chapel, where Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, was supposed to have directed her search for the "True Cross." It must be kept in mind that Helena visited this site several hundred years after Christ's crucifixion. It is highly unlikely that Christ's cross or any piece of it still existed.

There is an alternative site that some believe is Golgotha and the Garden Tomb. They are located outside the Damascus Gate just behind the Arab bus station. Though the site has its adherents

(known as Gordon's Calvary after the British General Gordon of Khartoum) because of a rocky knoll which resembles a skull, it is unlikely. Tradition, history, and archaeology all support the authenticity of the Holy Sepulcher site.

Stepping out of the light of the Jerusalem sun we entered the dim light of the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher. A long line of people waiting to touch the crucifixion altar caught our attention. There were lamps, candles, shuffling feet, hushed voices, and a sense of reverence. This was the place, though reshaped by buildings and crowded with tourists from many nations, where the Lord Jesus Christ "offered one sacrifice for sins, for all time" (Heb. 10:12). This was ground zero for the plan of redemption. There is no piece of real estate that carries such eternal importance.

Does one have to stand on what is considered to be hallowed ground to wonder at the magnitude of Calvary's meaning? No. The lighting of candles, splinters of wood from the "True Cross," incense, so-called bits of the rolling stone used to close Jesus' tomb, or being baptized in the Jordan River cannot remove the guilt of sin. The stuff of saving faith is not found in rituals, kneeling at a shrine, or touching a religious relic, no matter how well intentioned. God's grace for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life comes through Christ alone, the crucified and risen Son of God.

POOLS OF WATER

Jesus chose the pool of Bethesda to perform one of His sign-miracles. John tells us that this pool of water was located "by the sheep gate" (Jn. 5:2). There is no water in this pool site today, but nevertheless, it is a very important place to visit and reflect upon a wonder story. It opens up to the mind's eye a dramatic encounter between Jesus the miracle-worker and a helpless man.

One looks down into the lower level of what was part of the Jerusalem of Jesus' day. It is described as "rectangular in shape, surrounded on all four sides by porches and divided laterally by a 5th porch." Nearby is a pool believed to have been used for washing of the sheep before sacrificing them in the Temple. This is understandable given its location just outside the Temple Mount area. It was at the pool of Bethesda that Jesus met a man who had been afflicted with paralysis for thirty-eight years. By human standards it was a hopeless case.

At one time critics of the Gospel of John argued that its author (not John in their judgment) did not know what the Jerusalem of Christ's time was like. This argument was based on the absence of any discovery of a five-sided pool from first century times. However, the nay-sayers have been proven wrong. The pool was discovered by archaeologists with its twin pools surrounded by colonnades near St. Anne's church just inside the Old City wall.

The paralytic of thirty-eight years, longing for healing, was asked by Jesus, "Do you wish to get well?" If someone could just get him into the water when it stirred, he thought (superstitiously so) that he could get his healing. Interestingly, a multitude of people, "sick, blind, lame, and withered," wanted their healing as well (Jn. 5:3). With the greatest of ease Jesus told the paralytic to, "Arise, take up your pallet, and walk. And immediately the man became well. He walked. What a story! It ought to be enough to make one believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Jn. 20:31). Paralyzed. That is the way we all are without Christ. We can't do what God

demands. We are all in an impossible situation, unable to please God, keep His commandments, and utterly helpless (“For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly,” Rom. 5:6).

Another pool of significance, the pool of Siloam, is located at the end of Hezekiah’s tunnel at the lower end of the old city of David. This marks the site of Jesus’ miraculous curing of a blind man (Jn. 9:11). According to the historical record, “a church was built over the pool but destroyed by the Persians in 614 A.D. and never rebuilt. It is not a particularly beautiful place today, but it was a “sight for sore eyes” for a blind man in Jesus’ time. It was here that Jesus encountered a man blind from birth. The disciples were more interested in theologizing about why the man was born blind. The fact was his condition was an opportunity for God to work. Jesus spat on the ground, made two small mud pies, and placed them on the man’s eyes. He was then told to “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. He did what he was asked to do. He went to the pool, washed his eyes and came back seeing (Jn. 9:1-7).

We sat by the pool of Siloam for a reading of the account of the healing of the blind man in John 9. It was a delightful experience to go back in time in our minds to that wonderful time when Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, turned a man’s darkness into light. The places that Jesus went and the things He did were neither fantasy nor fiction.

What a wonderful picture of what Jesus does (the sixth sign-miracle in the Gospel of John) for sinners. “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” Sin has made us all blind. We do not see our need for God. We do not see our true spiritual condition. We do not see who Christ really is. We do not see where we are going without Christ’s forgiveness. Thanks to Christ’s healing power our darkness was turned to light. It is an awful thing to be both blind and lost. The pool of Siloam is a good place to reflect upon the truth that Jesus is “the light of the world” (Jn. 9:5). Some say faith is blind. No, it is not. The truth is that faith is for the blind. It is the only way to receive spiritual sight. These spiritual eyes of ours that once were blind will one day see Christ in all His glory. The pools of Bethesda and Siloam cast a reflection of the wonders of who Christ is and what he can do for the helpless and blind.

THE TEMPLE MOUNT

The Temple Mount is an open, level space of 37 acres located in the southeastern section of the Old City of Jerusalem. Sitting directly across from the Mount of Olives it showcases the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim Mosque with a golden dome.

There is perhaps no place on this planet that typifies the conflict between Islam and Judaism as does this site. On the western side of the Temple Compound, considered by Muslims as one of Islam’s most holy sites, is the Western Wall (The Wailing Wall) which is Israel’s sacred site. It represents her lament and hope for the future. All of this is within a hundred yards. Four thousand years of history are bound up in this place. It is also known as the Mount Moriah-Temple Compound because some believe that the sacred rock in the Dome of the Rock is the location of Abraham’s intended sacrifice of his son Isaac. It was on this rock where Araunah’s threshing floor was located which David purchased and built an altar to the Lord “and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings” (2 Sam. 24:25). Solomon’s magnificent Temple was later built there, but was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. When the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, the Second Temple was constructed under the

supervision of Nehemiah. It was under Herod the Great (74 B.C. – 4 B.C.) that the Temple and its grounds underwent enlargement and development (establishing the present area of 37 acres).

Islam's current possession of the Temple Mount and its various buildings goes back to AD 639 when Jerusalem fell to Muslim armies. The Dome of the Rock was completed in AD 691. It is covered in tiles from Persia and marble sits over what Islam considers to be a sacred rock. In my visit in 1981 we were allowed to reach through a prepared opening to feel "the footprint left by Mohammed as he leapt into heaven."

Conflict between Islam and Israel has brought the Temple Mount to the center of world attention. Being a holy site to millions of Muslims it is jealously guarded. It was the site of Palestinian-Israeli violence in September 2000 which ignited the Second Intifada ("uprising"). One way in which Muslims have attempted to stake their enduring claim to the Temple Mount is through historical revisionism. Dore Gold in "The Light for Jerusalem: Radical Islam, The West, and The Future of the Holy City" quotes Yasar Arafat as asserting that, "There is nothing there (i.e., no trace of a temple on the Temple Mount)," further insisting that "Solomon's Temple was not in Jerusalem, but Nablus." This only illustrates Islam's impassioned claim to not only the Mount's sacred value, but also Jerusalem and all of Israel.

In July 2010 a public opinion poll in Israel showed that 50 % of Israelis believe the Temple should be rebuilt. This, of course, would entail a violation of what is considered Islam's third holiest site. What is the future of the Temple Mount? Will Israel once again build her Temple on this site? How would a proposed Palestinian state impact Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem?

Long ago the glory of the Lord departed from the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 10:18; 11:23). As it did, hope was given to Israel for a future restoration of the land of Israel. The New Covenant with Israel guarantees permanent possession of the land, a cleansing of all idolatry and unbelief, and that "all Israel will be saved" (Ezek. 11:19; Zech. 12:10; Rom. 11:26). Israel's Messiah will return, and the glory of the Lord will fill the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 43:2; Zech. 14:4). The holy presence of the Lord in the Millennial Temple will be stunning. There will be a life-giving river flowing from the Temple which will flow eastward into the Kidron valley (Ezek. 47:1-12). The water of the Dead Sea will become fresh (It is anything but that now as our "swim" in its waters felt like a bath in kerosene (left)) and fishermen will crowd its shores.

The Millennial Temple will be a powerful visible symbol of God's presence among His people and a vivid reminder of Israel's relationship to God through the New Covenant. Today the Temple Mount is a testimony to what sin creates: false worship, wars, lost blessing, and the absence of the glory of God. Take hope! The Lord Jesus Christ is coming and "the name of the city from that day shall be, 'The Lord is there'" (Ezek. 48:35).

A Bright Light is Gone: A Tribute to Carol Pass (November 17, 2011)

On Saturday, October 29, Carol Pass finished her journey toward the heavenly presence of Jesus Christ. In April of this year Carol was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. She continued her joyful self through the following months, worshipping with us, until she became homebound by pain and weakness. Now she is rejoicing with that host of saints who have gone to their heavenly rest.

No one can calculate the meaning of Carol's death to Frank, her husband, and her children, Jaclyn, Rachel, Luke, and Frances. The Lord in His infinite love and wisdom called upon Carol to endure the hardship of death by cancer. Why? The answer is found in the purposes of God declared in the promise "that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). What does that "good" look like? Time, trust in God, wisdom gained through trials, and eternity collaborate to one day give us that fuller knowledge when we come face to face with Christ (1 Cor. 13:12).

The full light of the personal presence of Christ is preceded by His presence through the light of the gospel in the lives of believers. We are made to "appear as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). Carol Pass was one of those lights. She burned brightly; her cheerfulness lit up her greeting, her presence in the church kitchen, and behind the serving line making sure everything was in place. We found her to be interested in our comings and goings. There was that light in her eyes when she asked about that recent trip we had taken, a grandparent experience, or personal trial we were working through.

Carol was flexible, fun loving, and gave attention to details. She made sure the plates and napkins were at the beginning of the line, the serving pieces were on the tables, the bowls were beside the soups, and small plates by the desserts. All the while, she smiled, greeted people and helped the children. It is that kind of servant spirit that makes Bible study, prayer, good conversation, and the enjoyment of one another flow with greater ease. Teachers and those up front must never forget that. Ample time for prayer at our carry-in dinners was assured, in part, because of Carol's early arrival in the kitchen and quiet, sure preparation.

My visit with the Pass family in Novosibirsk, Siberia in May 2003 gave me the opportunity to experience a home lighted by Carol. The lights of kindness, encouragement, and a pleasant atmosphere were created by a thoughtful hostess. Bananas and oatmeal were provided for her guest. The small apartment was enlarged by Carol's delicious meals and the surprises of remembering what I liked to eat for breakfast. In the midst of all those Soviet era gray concrete apartment buildings was a warm, bright, and happy home. I experienced what Paul meant when he spoke of Philemon, that "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you" (Phile. 7). Carol's diet and appetite were not as she would have desired in her last months. However, this did not keep her from thinking of others. The staff ladies decided to join her and not bring birthday cake to their July celebration. Carol surprised them by baking a delicious blueberry pound cake for her own party. Though she could not eat it, she delighted in those who enjoyed every sweet bite of it.

God weaves each of us in our mother's womb. We can each thank God that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The woman, wife, mother, and servant of us all that Carol came to be were gifts of God's grace. Her laugh is stilled. Her smile is gone. Her Christ-like concern for others is absent. Thank God for the years that He gave us to share with her. But now we will miss her. However, our grief is not as those who have no hope. One day God will bring with Him, Carol, along with all who have fallen asleep in Jesus, and join all who are alive at the coming of the Lord.

We shouldn't be surprised if in that moment of glad reunion, we hear Carol laughing and holding up her finger with that lilt in her voice saying, "I told you."

A Pastor Looks Back (December 4, 2011)

I entered pastoral work in 1965. As a fulltime student in seminary and working parttime in a grocery store, the Lord presented me with the opportunity to pastor a church in a farming community in northern Indiana. It changed my life. I wanted to preach and serve God with the training He had given. It didn't take long, however, to become overwhelmed by what it takes to study, understand, apply, and live God's Word. Caring for a church congregation, encouraging the weary, mediating conflicts, preparing couples for marriage, comforting the grieving, helping parents with rebellious children, working with the teens, and taking the gospel into the world could not be done by energy and Bible knowledge alone. I can remember crying out to God for the help I needed.

Upon returning to the Atlanta area in 1968 the providence of God opened the door for starting a Bible study which would eventually become Berachah Bible Church.

With the thoughts of the early years vivid in my memory, I will offer a pastoral perspective on forty-five years of serving in Christ's church. This is not as easy as it looks. There is the temptation to read the present into the past. The Christian life is a walk of thousands of steps. Some of these steps are wise. Others are not. Unbelief is not easily dislodged. Preachers have to mature in the faith just like everyone else. Personality, the Christian culture, and family experience can create spiritual blind spots. As this pastor looks back, it is through the eyes of God's grace. The Apostle Paul offers a theological reflection on his past; "and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 1:14).

The gospel of Jesus Christ made me a thirsty person. I was not seeking God before my conversion to Christ in 1956. When the Spirit of the living God made me a new creature in Christ everything changed. God has made us for Himself that we might experience everlasting joy in fellowship with Him. I cannot take credit for the thirst God initiated in me. How did this happen? God is holy, just, loving and forgiving. I was made aware of this from my earliest years. I am a sinner unable to pull myself up from the hole of sin into which I was born. Only God can pull me up and out of the prison of mental darkness in which I lived. Then by grace-granted faith "I awoke – the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, immense and free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee." Thank you, Charles Wesley for saying it so wonderfully. The cross of Jesus Christ was my way out. God rescued me through the infinite value of the Savior's death for my sins. God saved me and gave me a thirst for Him. To my dying breath I will be amazed at His condescending love to this sinner who had resisted Him. I did so because I was afraid He would ask me to be someone I did not want to be. How sin does blind us to its own fatal folly. I love the gospel. What a pleasure it has been to unfold the flag of its truth and let it fly before the eyes of all to see. What a joy it has been to witness its life-changing power in those who bow their knee in allegiance to Jesus Christ.

The final authority of the Bible has been a truth for which I am willing to die. I have believed and taught that the Bible is God's authoritative, inerrant, and trustworthy revelation. The Scriptures have proven themselves to be sufficient for the wisdom and guidance I have needed. They have given me God's thoughts to replace my flawed thinking. They contain the precious promises of the coming again of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom on this earth (2 Pet. 1:11). They reveal God's way in contrast to man's way of thinking and living. The Bible is the only book God has written. It has no equal. His Word endures forever, and He hasn't changed His mind. In my lifetime of pastoral ministry there have been critics of the Bible. These voices have told me that the Bible is just another human book. They have said that its various authors are not who they said they were. Some have claimed that there is a Bible within the Bible. How convenient. We must sit at the feet of pretended "scholars" to find out what parts of the Scripture are trustworthy. It has been claimed that the Bible is authoritative and inerrant in only what it teaches, not in its exact words. Others have wanted me to believe that both the Bible and nature are God's message. Theologians interpret the Bible. Scientists interpret God's voice in nature, so the argument goes. But this is a trick to make the Bible submit to the mind of man, not to the mind of God. I have staked my life on the trustworthiness of the Scriptures. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." (2 Tim. 3:16).

Faithful Christians have been a letter from Christ to me. Where would I be if it were not for fellow believers in Jesus Christ, many of whom are now worshiping before the throne of God? They have prayed for me, taught me, proclaimed the gospel to me, loved me, corrected me, and encouraged me. Their numbers are too great to list by name. God knows who they are. My grandparents had a firm grip on God and His Word. Flawed, yes, but they pointed me in the right direction. I thank God for a pastor who opened up the Bible and set the table of truth every Sunday. There have been friends, kindred spirits, who have refreshed my soul. You know who you are. I thank all of you.

My dear wife, Beth, has been a jewel of God's grace to me. Early in my Christian experience I prayed for the wife that God wanted to give me. I did not know who she was or where she lived but God did. He brought Beth into my life. We were in our early twenties, both in Bible College. Now, for almost forty-eight years, my "crown" has served God with me. She has loved many, shown compassion to the hurting, taught God's Word, been an example of Christ's presence, supported me, encouraged me, cooked for me, and listened to thousands of my sermons. What loving loyalty. It has not been easy for her. When two people walk hand in hand through life, they share their imperfections, excesses, and struggles. This pastor would not have been able to study, preach, counsel, and bear the burdens of others if Beth had not been loyal, patient, kind, and wise. I have depended on her in decision-making. Her discernment has been incalculable in dealing with the ditches sin had dug in my thoughts and behavior. God knew how much help I would need to be a Christlike servant. Thank you, Beth, for your steady, strong, and gentle ways. You did much more than "keep me in the pulpit." You lived a life that kept Christ's presence before me and our children.

My children have been refreshing shade trees. What a difference a tree makes on a hot, summer's day. Miriam and Eric have taught me much. They have loved me, made me laugh, challenged my thinking, been kind to me, and have forgiven me. An elder must have children who help to keep him above reproach. Thank you, my dear children, for enabling me to see things about myself that needed changing, for feeling free to come and sit down in my study and talk, for not

becoming resentful when I disagreed with some your decisions, for loving me and being patient when I annoyed you, and for showing me what it is like to be a doer and not a hearer only of God's Word. You have given me refreshing shade in the labors of pastoral work.

The Spirit's transforming work in the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ is a treasure I will always cherish. Personal stories of Christ-exalting change walk across my mind. Forty-one years at Berachah have given me many truth-rich reflections. I cannot use your names. Your untold stories, disappointments, joys, tears, and growth in Christ are known to God. The flock at Berachah has shown me how God comforts the afflicted, what loving God and His Word is like, the sweetness of reconciled relationships, and the ways in which the gifts of the Spirit show up in congregational life.

Thank you my Berachah family for helping one another through hard times, for giving sacrificially so that the gospel can go far and wide, for not giving up when someone has disappointed you, for getting up early on Sunday mornings and driving in all kinds of weather to worship on Sunday, for loving and teaching the children of our church, for opening up your homes to fellow members, guests, and missionaries, for planning, preparing, studying, and making Sunday School, Awana, VBS, and a host of other Bible events possible, for bearing witness to Christ on the job, for leading and participating in song, prayer, and the ministry of the Word week after week, for working in the kitchen, for working with the teens in classes and camps, for taking meals to hurting and grief-stricken people, for administering hour upon hour in the church office, for setting aside the comforts of home and participating in missions trips, for leaving family and friends to live in the far-corners of the earth for the sake of Christ, for encouraging and sharing the life-giving gospel with a friend whose life has been overwhelmed by sin. You are my teachers.

“Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descent like dew, like showers on new grass –like abundant rain on tender plants.”

Deut. 32:2

Looking back is not enough. The Christian life is a race to be run. I do not know how long my last stretch of the race will last, but my plan is to keep running it at Berachah Bible Church. I am looking forward to helping in preaching, teaching, and in any other way I can. The Lord has provided an able servant to assume many of my previous duties. How thankful I am for Justin Culbertson. We work well together. I know his desire is to care for the flock and He has a heart for God. Berachah is in good hands.

The Fruit of Faithfulness, Part 1 (December 11, 2011)

I will never forget that day. My father came to my elementary school and checked me out. It was a cold rainy February day in Georgia. The family car was packed, and we drove south to Orlando, Florida, to our “new” home. The air became warmer. Sand replaced the red clay. Palm trees and skinny pines took the place of oak trees. Suddenly, appearing before my eyes were trees adorned with oranges. I had never seen this before. What a sight. Sweet oranges ready to be picked. Fruit trees—they are wonderful!

One fruit all Christians ought to bear is faithfulness (Gal. 5:22). It grows on the tree of a Holy Spirit-empowered life. This sweet, delicious fruit is a sign of a growing Christian. Faithfulness is the God-enabled use of God-given opportunities stretched out over time. It is a fruit of the Spirit which grows in the soil of daily dependence on the Spirit and obedience to the Word of God.

The amount of one's responsibilities does not determine whether one is faithful or not. Nor is faithfulness measured by the standard of merely showing up at church week after week. To be faithful means to do things God's way consistently. It is the way we go about serving others. The smallest task done for the glory of God will receive a great reward. In the parable of the ten minas the disciples of Jesus who are faithful will be rewarded with even greater opportunities to serve Him in His earthly kingdom (Lk. 19:11-22; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3; Rev. 2:26-28). Unfaithfulness results in the loss of rewards.

Some faithful servants of Christ are mentioned by name in the New Testament; Epaphras, Tychicus, Antipas, and Sylvanus all received commendation for their reliability. Every believer should aspire for that incomparable accolade from Jesus Christ, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23).

Another way to view the high value of faithfulness in the church of Jesus Christ is through the lens of perseverance or endurance. This is one of the marks of a good servant (1 Cor. 6:12; 2 Cor. 6:14). The Christian life is compared to a race which is to be run with endurance (Heb. 12:1). Difficulties, suffering, and pain are opportunities to develop more spiritual stamina in our race to the finish line of heavenly glory. Not all Christians run with the same degree of effectiveness. Encumbrances can slow us down (e.g., getting too bound up in the things of this world). Sin can entangle us. We can get knocked out of our grace-lane into the lane of legalism (Gal. 5:7). But the fact remains that the believer's eternal security depends on God the Father (Eph. 1:4-6), God the Son (Rom. 8:28-30), and God the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

Must a Christian persevere in continual obedience in order to obtain final salvation? Some think so. Erwin Lutzer opposes the view but expresses it clearly: ". . . true believers never fall away, and if they do, it is not for long. If a person fails to continue in the faith, he is giving proof that he was never saved." Such passages as Mark 13:13 ("the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved") and Colossians 1:23 ("if indeed you continue in the faith") are interpreted to mean that eternal life is conditioned upon a life of obedience. Theologian Charles Hodge, a proponent of the view, goes so far as to say, "There is a perpetual danger of falling...Neither members of the church nor the elect can be saved unless they persevere in holiness without continual watchfulness and effort."

This summons a host of questions. Can a true believer continue in sin? Is the genuine Christian not secure in Christ? How can assurance of one's salvation be possible? And, most importantly, does this not suggest that our salvation depends upon good works? The problems bound up in these questions have led some to say, "Perseverance to the end is inevitable because God will make the believer persevere." Further thought and a biblical analysis of the perseverance of the saints and its relation to faithfulness is obviously necessary.

I am personally convinced that the Scriptures teach that (1) the believer is eternally secure from the very moment of regeneration, (2) faithfulness to Christ can be interrupted by seasons of disobedience, (3) Christians can have assurance of their salvation based on God's Word from the

outset of their walk with Christ, (4) good works, while confirming the presence of spiritual life in Christ, in no way contribute to the free gift of God in salvation, and (5) unfaithfulness will result in loss of rewards and faithfulness will be rewarded.

Is faithfulness to Christ becoming an increasing characteristic of your life? Is it what comes to mind when fellow Christians think of you? If you are unfaithful to Christ in the days before you die, does that mean you have not been a Christian? If you are in a state of unfaithfulness and rebellion against God, what should you do?

The Fruit of Faithfulness, Part 2 (December 18, 2011)

Fundamental to the questions regarding eternal security, assurance, and the perseverance of the saints is, “Must a Christian keep on believing in order to gain their salvation?” The way some understand the doctrine of perseverance is that our arrival in heaven is dependent on our faithfulness. But is not the believer secure in Christ from the moment he is born again? The Scriptures are very clear that nothing can separate the Christian from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). What about one’s assurance of salvation? Jesus said that assurance (the realization that one possesses eternal life) is inherent in the very offer of salvation itself (“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but passes out of death into life.” Jn. 5:24). Assurance of salvation is based on the promises of God’s Word. Jesus did not say that works were the basis of assurance. Nor does one have to wait until death to find out if they are saved. According to Jesus there is no judgment for the believer.

Are our works important? Absolutely. There will be fruit in every believer in some measure, somewhere, sometime. Fruit in the Christian life, however, is not the primary ground for assurance. It is the promises of God upon which believer’s assurance rests. This is extremely important. If the believer has to ground his assurance on the subjective test of fruit-bearing, then he is left to wrestle with doubt and confusion. Of course, there will be self-appointed fruit inspectors who will presume to know whether one is saved or not. For example, W. Chantry writes, “Only when God is loved supremely and the spirit of the law kept has a man any reason to believe that he has been truly born of God.” One is left stunned at the presumption of such a claim. Assurance of salvation, according to such logic, becomes elusive and subject to the flawed perceptions of the individual.

If perseverance to the end is the condition for entering heaven, then what would it be like? It is difficult to pin down those who make such an assertion. One says, one has to keep on believing using the present tense in John 3:16 (“whoever continues believing in him”). This is a misuse of the Greek present tense and leaves the Christian wondering, “Am I believing today?” Another one offers the standard that says, “They (believers) can never finally remain in sin.” What does this mean? If a professing Christian suffers and grows angry with Christ, does not repent, and dies in that condition, is he or she finally lost? Can a genuine Christian commit suicide? I am not suggesting that believers are free to sin with impunity and rejoice in their one-way ticket to heaven. But Christians do fall into sin. They can live like unbelievers (1 Cor. 3:3). Some can even become guilty of sin unto death (1 Cor. 11:30). The Christian life is not a tidy thing. No two Christians grow at the same rate. The degree of fruitfulness varies greatly among believers (Matt.

13:23). These and other factors defy neat formulas designed to give the professing Christian assurance (or a denial of it).

Perseverance in the faith is not the condition for justification before God. It is rather the condition for sanctification. This is exactly what Paul said to Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” (1 Tim. 4:16) The salvation of Timothy was deliverance from the power of evil in his own life and in its contaminating effects through false teachers. Paul was not in any doubt about Timothy’s faith in Christ (1 Tim. 1:2).

Endurance in the faith is an essential ingredient in the spiritual growth of a Christian. This is a pronounced theme throughout the epistles. Peter, writing to Christians, tells them that perseverance protects the believer from the waste of time in living inconsistently (2 Pet. 1:5-7). Perseverance in holiness is a mandate for all God’s children (1 Pet. 1:15). The goal of perseverance is not the attainment of heaven, but is arriving there holy, blameless, and beyond reproach (Col. 1:22, 23). Many passages in the New Testament speak of the conditions that determine how we arrive in heaven (1 Cor. 9:27; 15:1, 2; Gal. 5:14; Heb. 6:4-6).

Running the race of the Christian life with endurance is the stamina-producing work of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 12:1; Gal. 5:16). Sin must be fought and killed (Rom. 8:13). Those things that hinder our progress in the faith must be put aside. Hardship is to be endured for the glory of Christ (2 Tim. 4:5). And at the end the fruit of faithfulness will be abundant and everlastingly sweet.

A Recommissioning Revisited (January 8, 2012)

Sunday, December 4, 2011, will be forever carried in our memory. It was a busy season for everyone, but so many helped us look back upon forty-one years of ministry at Berachah. The program was filled with grace-rich reflections. Pastor Jim Nixon and his wife Bonnie drove all the way from Toledo, Ohio. He reminded us of what it means to have a lasting friendship for over fifty-five years. My fellow servant Dr. Howard Eyrich, Pastor of Counseling at Briarwood Presbyterian in Birmingham, reminisced about the ways our lives have been bound together. Steve Martin, Pastor of Heritage Church in Fayetteville, reminded us of the high value God places on faithfulness and what it means to finish well. Jim and Toni Dykes blended their wonderful voices to lead us in some of our favorite hymns of the faith. John and Rachel Sherwood took us back to our days in East Point when, as two single young people, they began their life together at our dining room table. We treasure their God-seeking partnership in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nelson and Jody Wallace, having raised their family at Berachah, walked us back to our early years at the schoolhouse in Red Oak. They have given us so much of themselves for such a long time. How we thank God for those who have encouraged us with fruitful lives of service. Jay and Patti Clay touched our hearts with their story of God’s grace to them and their children. Rick and Debbie Lute represented those who have joined with us in recent years. Their words of appreciation were sweet to hear. What a delight it has been to have the younger generation worship and serve with us. Our daughter-in-law, Cheryl, honored us with the gift of her beautiful voice carrying the words, “O Lord, Most Holy,” into our hearts.

To mention the names of those who participated in the “Re-commissioning service” is not meant to overlook all those who have labored faithfully alongside us. Your cards, verbal thanks, and presence on December 4 will always be cherished.

Thank all of you for the planning and participation that went into that Sunday of memories of God’s faithfulness. Thanks to all who helped to make the nice reception a welcome to all. Our special events are a Berachah legend.

The special surprise of a trip to Hawaii caught us completely off guard. Every sunset keeps Beth and me reminded of a flight westward to that island paradise that is waiting for us. Thank you!

Berachah family, you have brought us much joy, and we will carry you in our hearts forever.

Romania: A Few Reflections - Howard & Beth Dial (February 26, 2012)

We met Eric in the airport in Bucharest. The weather had affected all flights. Having arrived in the early afternoon we had to wait on flight 707 from Bucharest to Iasi (pronounced Yash). Also waiting was a young man from Illinois on his way to visit some old high school friends and his girlfriend. He worked for Motorola and spent most of his time texting on his Verizon phone to a host of people. He was internationally connected and knew computers inside and out. It’s always good to meet someone who knows his way around the digital communication system. He told us about “google talk,” helped us with our luggage, was very friendly, and an interesting companion during those long hours of waiting. I gave him a Gospel of John to read. Pray for Eric.

Liviu was there to meet us at the Iasi airport. We had corresponded with him by email. The plan had been to stay with Liviu and his family, but sickness had prevented his eight-month pregnant wife, Oana, from hosting us. Having graduated from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Liviu is now the director of the Bethlehem Bible Training Center in Iasi. This tall, soft-spoken Romanian is committed to bringing his fellow countrymen to Christ and building them up in the faith. Karl Kosobucki, the previous director of the BBTC, has selected a capable man to continue the work he and his wife Jo Ann poured their lives into for over eighteen years. Pray for Liviu and Oana.

We and our luggage squeezed into Liviu’s automobile and drove between mounds of snow to the apartment of Marcela, our hostess and translator. Marcela has translated for me on my last three trips to Romania. Her English is impeccable and she amazes me with her unfaltering ability to think in English and Romania as fast as I can talk. Marcela is an indefatigable worker for the Lord. She teaches Bible, has a wide range of friends, translates for every teacher who comes to the Bible Institute, and is a joyful servant of Christ. Every morning and evening was a snow-filled challenge. Parking spots had to be dug out of snow drifts. Marcela, a relatively new driver, was our chauffeur. She carried snow shovels in the back of her car. We would get stuck, spin the wheels, get out, shovel some snow, and be on our way. She is probably still doing this as we enjoy the snowless traces of an early spring. Pray for Marcela. She lives simply, is always on the go and helps many to hear and know God’s Word.

I met Costel on my first trip to Romania over sixteen years ago. He is an energetic, joyful, gospel-loving Gypsy with a heart for his people. During a break in class one day, to my surprise,

Costel made a special effort to come by and say hello. The Gypsies are among the poorest of the land. Costel is giving himself to plant churches among his people. Pray for him.

Valentin has started a thriving church in the Gypsy community. His son, Raoul, a gifted musician had wandered from his Christian roots for a time. He now leads worship in the church, along with his sister, and all three were in the classes. Many musicians are coming to know Christ through his witness. One whole family was baptized just the Sunday before we came. Pray for Valentin and Raoul

Eduard and Daniel were two students in the three-day class on Daniel and Revelation. Daniel asked questions on behalf of a friend and translated my answers back to his fellow student. Eduard spoke English well enough to approach me with questions regarding sinning Christians and eternal security. I was touched by the students who expressed their appreciation for the teaching. A number of university students were in the class. What an encouragement they were. Pray for them.

Marius and Mihaela, were both students in the classes. They are expecting their first child, Justin, any day. They are both afraid. Their physician does not use the public clinic where she will deliver, so they will be assigned a doctor when she arrives. Some require bribes. Some are kind, some are not. She does not know what kind of anesthesia she will receive, if any. She does not know if Marius can be with her. She did not want the baby to come the last night of classes because she wanted to take the exam. Hungry-for-truth young people who asked us to pray for Justin's safe delivery and their fears.

A distraught Mom called our translator having heard of her reputation as a strong believer. Could she recommend a Christian counselor for her university aged daughter who has been diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder? They rode the train in on a Sunday afternoon to meet with Beth, and the story unfolded. She is herself, but at four ages during her life. The oldest one threatens, directs, demands. They come to her at night when she's asleep, but people around her hear their voices. She loses memory of her past, introduces herself to her boyfriend, draws pictures in her sleep, and writes her name backward. She has been in therapy, took medication, and sees that it does not help. She was given the beauty of truth that afternoon in a condensed version but agrees to email. Please pray for her.

Two of our dear friends in Iasi are the Alexandrescus. Constantin attended Dallas Theological Seminary, returned to Romania, and with his wife, Elena, has reached many for Christ. Once a week Constantin drives to Moldova (about a thirty drive from Iasi) to minister to a group of converted Jewish people. At the age of 72 Constantin has vivid memories of his experiences in Romania during World War II and the days of communist rule. He told us that when he was a youth he laughed in class when the teacher began to sing the praises of Joseph Stalin. His teacher cursed Constantin for his contrary view of Stalin. Pray for Constantin and Elena. They are faithful servants of Christ with an abiding desire to spread the gospel in their remaining days.

Before we left one headline read, "Romania's Government Collapses". We experienced no implications of that. Another read, "Romania in Record-Breaking Snow, 74 Dead". We saw plenty of that. But we were invigorated, amazed, concerned, and for the most part, warm. Those circumstances were part of the big picture in which God worked in hungry, confused, growing hearts. Thank you, Berachah, for allowing us the privilege of being there.

Our hearts overflow with gratitude for the faith of the saints at Berachah. It has been the desire of this congregation to study the book of Daniel with its emphasis upon the sovereignty of God over all the nations. For two years we studied the book of Revelation with its call to live as Jesus' Second Coming people. By God's grace I was able to take those messages to your brothers and sisters in Christ in Romania.

The Republican Presidential Primary - What's a Christian to do? (March 4, 2012)

I am not a Democrat, a Republican, or a Libertarian. I am a Christian. Simplistic? No. Allow me to explain. Part of a Christian's life of obedience to Christ is good citizenship (Rom. 13:1-7). Among other things this means vote. Thank God that we live in a country which gives us the freedom to participate in elections that mean something. There are political parties which compete for the loyalty of the voting public. Popular thinking sees Democrats as for the "little guy" and Republican as for the "wealthy." This is political fiction, but that argument is not my pursuit at this time. When Christians go to the polls to enter into the electoral process what kind of guidance is needed? At this juncture there are candidates from only one political party (the Republican Presidential primary). While this cannot be a "you-should-vote-for" appeal, it is an opportunity to rehearse the kind of biblical truths that should shape our decisions.

In the first place, what is the role of human government? It has been instituted by God and is accountable to Him. Civil government exists to promote the good of society by restraining evil. Government is responsible for the protection of life and property (1 Tim. 1:9; Rom. 13:4) and for the preservation of peace and order (1 Tim. 2:2). Civil government is given the right to fine, imprison, banish, and execute the death penalty to repress evil. We can rightly look to government to guarantee a free church in a free state. But government is to be kept on a short leash. The inclination of sinful human beings is toward corruption and tyranny.

God warned Israel of the dangers bound up in the desire for a government "like all the nations" (2 Sam. 8:7-20). The potential for political disaster bound up in human government is identified by Alva J. McClain in his book, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. * In this inductive study of the Kingdom of God in the Scripture, we are given a sobering reminder of the danger of those who see government as the solution to human problems. McClain says, "It is easy to forget that 'we the people' in the long run must always pay for whatever the government does for us. . . (it) not only makes the people pay for everything done for them, but always makes them pay more than it should cost" (McClain wrote these words in the 1950s). Further, we are reminded that no government has ever succeeded without addressing "the two problems of order and power" (order within the state and protection against external enemies). However, as McClain insightfully observes, "the real difference between the various kinds of government is found in the price people have had to pay for these benefits of internal order and external safety." Israel's desires for a new form of government predisposed her to "tendencies . . . which are inherent in all government under sinful men."

Nine of these tendencies are summarized by McClain in pondering First Samuel 8:7-20.

- (1) Government service (the beginning of government bureaucracy).
- (2) Job-making (government jobs once launched become impossible to control).

- (3) Labor scarcity (the growth of government begins to create “serious economic maladjustment”).
- (4) Government for its own sake (the state is interested first and last in its own support and perpetuation).
- (5) Burdensome taxation (taxation erodes the incentives to produce and earn).
- (6) Property confiscation (“the decrees of confiscation today are various and often disguised by high-sounding terms – controlled currency, social legislation, income taxation, the public good – but underneath them all, the relentless search goes on to find more sources of income for the state.”).
- (7) Political corruption (“politicians will talk grandly about devoting the ‘public wealth’ to the ‘common good’ . . . often it is taken away from those who produced it and given to the undeserving,” i.e., redistribution of income in the name of “fairness and compassion.”).
- (8) Totalitarian control. (“Today . . . for every failure of highly centralized government, its supporters have no remedy except a larger dose of the same thing.”)
- (9) Intolerable oppression. (“Human government is necessary, but people who are wise never let it get too big or powerful. Unless strictly limited, the end is the loss of liberty, economic distress, and political despair.”)

Government on a leash? Is it too late? It may very well be. But the Christian mind is engaged with other important issues as well. We are to look for a presidential candidate who has demonstrated high moral and ethical standards, who refuses to endorse the shedding of innocent blood in abortion, who is committed to the defense of the God-given institution of marriage and the family, who will appoint federal judges who are not hostile to Christianity, who is committed to the upholding of the Constitution of the United States, who will not place international sovereignty over national sovereignty, who is committed to peace through strong national defense, and who is wary of a tyrannical government in the name of economic planning and environmentalism.

We are not voting for a messiah, someone who is going to deliver us from all our societal ills. A candidate’s character, worldview, and religious orientation all play vital roles in our qualification assessment. He does not need to be a Christian. There have been Presidents who professed to be Christian yet demonstrated a seriously flawed view of the Bible and its teaching. What is the Christian to do before voting? Be informed, ask God for wisdom, and know that no presidential candidate or political party is able to create a utopia. Our hope is not in Democrats, Republicans, or Libertarians, but in the power of the gospel to save sinners and in the exhilarating anticipation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

*Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959) pp. 108-113.

Wearing a Dunce Cap (April 1, 2012)

The wearing of a dunce cap would definitely be out of step with contemporary culture. At one time it was acceptable to have slow learning students to sit in a corner wearing a tall, cone-shaped cap. This was a frightening form of punishment for school children. I am extremely thankful it had fallen out of fashion by the time I took geometry in high school.

There is another kind of learning which has its own version of a dunce cap as punishment. It is called the school of life. The Bible calls the person a fool who rejects God's wisdom. This is not a badge of honor. The fool is not someone who is mentally deficient but is morally deficient. It is stupid to disregard what God teaches about what is really important.

April Fools' Day is observed on the first day of April. It has the tradition as a day on which harmless jokes are played on the unsuspecting. However, in God's book being a fool is no joke. The dunce cap is reserved for those who think wisdom is unimportant (Prov. 1:7 "fools despise wisdom and instruction"). Associated with this arrogant attitude is the unwillingness to concentrate on the truth and thinking that wisdom can be bought. Limiting one's mental diet to one's own thoughts and feeding the mind on human opinion is not an exercise in wisdom. One outcome is trying to teach others but actually having nothing to offer and not know it (Prov. 17:24, 16; 15:14; 26:7; 17:10). Imagine someone who struts about making fun of the Bible, invests thousands of dollars in getting an education, feeds his mind on mountains of information with no thought of God whatsoever, and is proud of it. Prepare the dunce cap.

God says that the fool is a danger to people (Prov. 17:12 "the companion of fools will suffer harm"). Fools are like deep and dangerous potholes on the road of life. They quarrel and stir up strife (Prov. 20:3). They will waste your time, are unreliable, cannot control their anger, and cannot handle prosperity (Prov. 14:7; 26:6; 29:11; 19:10). How often is personal wealth wasted on those who have no biblical sense? People who ought to be taking care of themselves and being generous to others end up being unable to even meet their own needs (Prov. 10:21). Choices! We all make choices. Watch out for those who squander their abilities and opportunities then come looking for a handout. Prepare the dunce cap.

This is really going to hurt. The fool does not know how to control his tongue (Prov. 18:7 "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul." Eugene Peterson's paraphrase captures the thought, "Fools are undone by their big mouths; their souls are crushed by their words."). Spreading slander is like spraying your azaleas with sewerage. The tragedy is that fools don't even blush at doing so. Slander is gossip's first cousin. But it is more sinister, open, and malevolent. It is a verbal assault on someone's character. Have you ever been the victim of an untruth told about you? Fools work the craft of an uncontrolled tongue, and it is not pretty. When a fool opens her mouth, everyone will know it (Prov. 24:7 - "Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the gate he does not open his mouth"). What is in the heart comes out of the mouth. Seeking the counsel of someone who does not take God's Word seriously is like trying to get a drink from a waterless spring.

Those wearing God's dunce caps are arrogant in their outlook on moral wrong (Prov. 28:26 - "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool"). The population is filled with those who mock at sin, are self-deceived, and have no fear of God (Prov. 14:8, 9; 1:29). A Phi Beta Kappa can laugh at God's moral law, but there will be a price. God does not look kindly upon those who think they know better than He. Sexual immorality is not a recreational sport without consequences. Among other things there is the underworld of STDs. More importantly, to give into one's sexual lusts hardens the heart, putting myself above God's desires for me and not caring for the other person. Prepare the dunce cap.

The really sad thing about April Fools' Day is that there really is one. It is every day for those who do not submit themselves to God's wisdom and seek to live life His way. The greatest fool

of all is the one who lives and dies without having experienced the salvation that is in the Lord Jesus Christ (Lk. 12:20). One day life will be over and the saddest of words will be, “April Fools is past and you’re the biggest fool at last.”

The Reason in Our Hope (April 8, 2012)

Living without hope is not a natural human instinct. We start out very early in life expecting certain things to come to pass. I guess one of the first of those is our next meal. In a land of grocery stores whose shelves are loaded with food we have learned to live with the confidence that there will be meals in our future. We also grow up thinking that no matter how miserable things may become, there is the hope that misery won’t last indefinitely. Things will get better. My sickness won’t last forever. Below zero weather will pass. We think this way.

What if there were no hope? Most people think that there is some kind of personal existence after death. Few would agree with Carl Sagan’s presumptuous conclusion that, “The cosmos is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be.”

But how do we know that we will live in some form after we die? We must examine that assumption. What if, when we die there really is a place called hell, and it lasts forever? What if there is a heaven, the place where God is, and only certain people go there? Thinking that when we die we will go to a better place may prove to be absolutely wrong.

There is one event in human history that can help us with our concerns and questions about life after death. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is the key to the door of the hope of life with God after we die. There are very good reasons to believe that Jesus Christ actually arose from the grave after His crucifixion. In the first place, Christ really died. He did not fake it. Read the Gospel account of Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus’ was placed in a tomb. That is where they place dead people. Secondly, Christ’s tomb was found to be empty. An angel told the women who visited His tomb early on Sunday morning that “He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said” (Matt. 28:6). Thirdly, hundreds of people saw Jesus after he had been raised (1 Cor. 15:6). Those who knew Jesus best were absolutely convinced that He was alive and that He ascended to heaven. It has been said countless times, but is worth repeating, the willingness of Jesus’ followers to suffer persecution and even give their lives for Him says volumes about the truthfulness of His resurrection. It was not a lie. Fourthly, consider the astounding results of the resurrection. Within months of Christ’s resurrection, thousands had put their trust in Him for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. The whole world was turned upside down by the first century Christians. Why? They believed that what Jesus said about Himself had come to pass; He was killed and raised from the dead (Matthew 16:21).

What does all this have to do with hope? Everything. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ death has been conquered. This opens up a treasure chest of realities. (1) Through faith in Jesus Christ our guilt before God can be pardoned and we can live with Him forever. (2) We can know Jesus and enjoy fellowship with Him. (3) Jesus can change our lives and make it possible to overcome evil with good. (4) The resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees every believer’s own resurrection body on the last day (1 Cor. 15:35-38, 42-43, 49).

What then should you do?

God exists. He is holy, just, and absolutely without any sin. He has left His fingerprints all over His creation. There is enough of Him to be seen and known of Him to hold everyone accountable (Rom. 1:18, 19). The Maker of the cosmos has told that He is there, and He is not silent.

We are sinners. We were born under God's judgment. We don't seek Him. We break His moral law. We fall woefully short of His absolute perfection. And for this we are doomed to an eternal separation from Him in the lake of fire (Rom. 3:21).

Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins. There is a way out of our predicament. Rescue is possible. But there is only one person who is qualified for this, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God who came to us and perfect man who lived among us. Jesus became our substitute. He took our punishment in His place, suffered the Father's wrath, and offers to us a righteousness which we don't have. The Bible calls this justification, the declaration by God that He has forgiven our sins and that we are righteous in His sight (Rom. 3:24; 8:1).

Put your trust in Jesus Christ to receive the forgiveness of sin and eternal life (Rom. 3:25, 28). It is absolutely free. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Yes, it is as simple as that. Good works and your best efforts cannot save. We are unable to save ourselves. What if my trust is not strong enough? The famous preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, wrote, "The weakness of your faith will not destroy you. A trembling hand may receive a golden gift." Our conviction rests upon the rock-solid facts of Christ's death for us and the empty tomb which He left behind. There is reason in our hope because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Take up your Cross (April 22, 2012)

The sky was a brilliant blue. A steady light wind came in from the west with low humidity. It was a perfect day for a track meet. I sat with Conner, my grandson, talking about his race strategy and waiting for his 1600 meter and 3200 meter races. Scores of young athletes in their school colors were busy warming up, stretching, and dealing with pent-up adrenalin as they anticipated their events. Then it came; "First call for the 1600meters." The runners assembled in their holding area at the end of the track. Then they were called to move up the track to the starting line. Final instructions were given. Eager bodies leaned forward. The gun sounded. The race began.

The disciples of Jesus were in a comparable situation when they received instruction from their Master; "And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?'" (Mark 8:34-37).

The twelve disciples were at a starting line. Jesus was entering a new phase of His ministry. Jerusalem, His death and His resurrection were only eight months away (Mark 8:31). The crowds crushing around Him would soon be melting away. The commitment of the disciples would face new challenges. Were they with Him? Did they understand what was at stake?

Every Christian, like the disciples, becomes qualified for the "race" of following Jesus. All race entrants have seen themselves as sinners under God's judgment and have received the offer of eternal life; "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life" (John 5:24). The entry fee has been paid. Jesus Christ did that on the cross with the price of His life offered up for sinners. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This offer is absolutely free. There is no cost. To become a "runner" after Jesus, we trust Him and He gives us eternal life.

Runners after Jesus have a race in front of them. As Jesus called His disciples to come after Him, they were to have the same mind toward death and life as their Master. Eternal life is free. Discipleship is costly. There is a price to be paid in following after Jesus. No pain. No gain. Running the race of discipleship requires a racing strategy. The first requirement is denying oneself ("let him deny himself"). Self must not take precedence over submitting to the desire of God for us. Jesus has led the way, "yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). The authority of self was not the way of the Savior. It is not to be the way of His followers. Obedience to Jesus Christ is necessary for those who wish to run their race with endurance and finish well.

The second strategy for the disciple/runner is "to take up one's cross." A sober intoxication of delight in doing the will of God must rule the mind. Serious followers of Jesus are to be determined to obey God no matter what the cost. Running after Jesus is a daily death experience. This is more than dealing with aches and pains, difficult people, annoying relatives, or a boring job. The cross of which Jesus speaks is that suffering which comes as a result of obeying Him. The future of the disciple/runner is the one God has planned. Cross-bearing involves being rejected by others for your belief in Christ. It is being ridiculed because you believe there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ. It is being mocked at school because you believe that Jesus created the universe, not chance through time.

The third phase of the disciple/runner's strategy is "Follow me." This is not an emotional, subjective WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) in decision making. Following Jesus is a call to gain through loss. The paradox of the cross is embraced. Self-centered living is loss ("losers are keepers"). "To save your life, lose it; to keep your life, throw it away" sounds like a riddle. It is the way to run effectively for Jesus Christ. Living for oneself demonstrates itself by pursuing personal peace and prosperity as one's goal in life. The world pulls in that direction; "pamper yourself," "you owe it to yourself," "build your self-esteem." The disciple/runner knows that to invest one's life in self is to live a superficial life.

The disciple/runner who wants to please his Savior is driven by the truth that God-centered living is gain ("losers are keepers"). To invest one's life for God is to gain the joy of glorifying God. Gaining the world is shallow, short-sighted living. The wasted life is to forfeit true life now and reward in eternity. The disciple/runner sets his pace by living for the things that matter, a generous giver to God's work, investing one's life in the spread of the gospel, serving others for Christ's sake, doing those things that please God.

The gun sounded and Connor went out quickly with the front pack of runners. With a good racing strategy and a steady pace, he got a PR (personal record) in the 1600 meters. The disciple/runner has been given the example of Jesus to motivate him to run with endurance the race that is set before him (Hebrews 12:1-2). Jesus set the record no one will ever break. He

trusted in the Father all the way. He accomplished our redemption; "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

If you are a disciple/runner how is your race progressing? When you will have finished your course and all of life's decisions have been made, what will it all add up to? Will there be more gain than loss? Will you hear the Savior say, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" There will be rewards for those who have competed well. It was Vance Havner who said, "Most of us would live by faith if we knew the rewards would be forthcoming within two weeks." The disciple/runner is in a marathon, not a sprint. Are you settling for teaspoons of transformation of life when there could be oceans of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Jim Elliot, who gave his life for Christ in the jungles of South America decades ago, summed up what it means to take up one's cross; "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

None of us knows when our finish line will come. It may be a long run or a short run. We do know, however, that our goal is not a perishable reward, but an imperishable one. Our Savior awaits us there.

Love Your Enemies? You Must be Kidding! (May 6, 2012)

No, I am not. Jesus was very serious when He told His followers to love their enemies not hate them (Matthew 5:43-47). It's easy to love those who love us. Non-Christians can love one another without the grace of God. That despised social group in Jesus' day, the tax collectors, loved their fellow tax collectors. Private clubs, friends, and sports teams can have a real affection for one another. That's not bad. It just isn't Christianity. Morality is not Christianity. Loving one's friends may be just self-love (like those who like you).

The Pharisees had developed a moral code which said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." They were partly right, but totally wrong. The command to love one's neighbor was found in Leviticus 19:18. However, through some creative Bible interpretation "hate your enemy" was made a rider in the law of love. It had been reasoned that since a neighbor was someone near, a fellow Israelite for example, then hatred for one's enemy was a possibility. A bureaucratically created loophole became a convenient way to have one's theological cake and eat it too. You could love those who were lovable and hate those who didn't like you. How convenient. There was nothing supernatural about that. And to further support such an ethic God's command to destroy the Canaanites in the Old Testament, as well as imprecatory prayers (calling down God's curses on evildoers) in the psalms, may have been invoked.

The superficiality and wrongness of this kind of thinking should be transparent. But we must never underestimate what the sinful heart of man can do to justify evil. Cults are notorious for their distortions of Scripture in order to by-pass the plain teaching of the Bible. Think of the thousands of professing Christians who twisted Scripture to support slavery and segregation.

Jesus was not one to dodge the theological bullies of His day. He commanded kingdom citizens to love their enemies. Seek their good, not their harm. His example said it all. He gave Himself for His enemies (Colossians 1:19-22). By doing what was best for them, He overcame evil with

good. With ultimate moral authority Jesus said to pray for those who persecute the children of God. D. A. Carson tells us that “Praying for an enemy and loving him will prove mutually reinforcing. The more love, the more prayer; the more prayer, the more love.” When loving their enemies, disciples of Jesus will love like God, not men.

Many hatreds corrupt society. Labels can be useful ways of indexing worldviews (Left, Right, conservative, liberal, socialists, feminists, fundamentalists, pro-choice, pro-life, homophobia, etc.), but they can easily fuel suspicion and hatred. Impersonalizing people is a step in the wrong direction. Our treatment of others must not depend on who they are or what they have done to us. What should control our view of others? Think of God’s nature and the enormity of His grace, mercy, and love demonstrated to us. Do you have enemies? Are there people who have said terrible things about you, have slandered you, and show no remorse in having done so? There is love-work that must be done. Anger, hatred, and revenge are poison and everlastingly destructive. Follow Jesus and love your enemy.

The more excellent way of love provides the ways in which we are to love our enemies (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

- Love is patient. I will choose to persist creatively when I suffer at the hands of my enemy.
- Love is kind. I will choose to reach out to my enemy to make his life better.
- Love is not jealous. I will choose to refuse to be resentful when my enemy has something that I don’t.
- Love does not brag. I will choose to avoid self-promotion by trying to look better than my enemy.
- Love is not arrogant. I will choose not to indulge in any power grab in order to “win” over my enemy.
- Love does not act unbecomingly. I will choose to treat my enemy with respect.
- Love does not seek its own. I will choose to sacrifice my rights for the benefit of my enemy.
- Love is not provoked. I will choose to absorb the irritations and offenses of my enemy out of concern for him.
- Love does not take into account a wrong suffered. I will choose to let God keep the moral scorecard of life and not keep a list of grievances against my enemy. I will attend God’s school of forgiveness.
- Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness. I will choose not to delight in the sins and misery of my enemy.

- Love rejoices with the truth. I will choose to delight in the things that please God and not excuse the sins of my enemy.
- Love bears all things. I will choose to put up with all kinds of hardships for the sake of my enemy.
- Love believes all things. I will choose to act wisely in the effort to help my enemy. I will refuse to be naïve and gullible or cynical.
- Love hopes all things. I will choose to be confident about the future and not become pessimistic. I will trust in the fulfillment of God's righteous purposes through my enemy.
- Love endures all things. I will choose to not stop loving. I won't give up on my enemies. I will pray for him consistently.

Jesus was not kidding when He said to love our enemies. He has told us how to do it and gives the supernatural enablement to love as He has loved us. Open your mouth wide for tablespoons full of God's grace.

The Gospel on Four Feet (June 10, 2012)

Modernity's attack on the institution of marriage is an ugly sight. It has been assaulted in many ways. Most conspicuous at the present is the audacity of a social movement to redefine marriage. No longer is matrimony to be understood as a special kind of relationship between a man and woman. Any two people who "love" one another should not be barred from being considered "married." So the thinking goes. Let's qualify that, not a brother or sister (incest is not accepted as of this writing). Two men or two women should have the opportunity to enter into wedlock. Heterosexuals also have their ways of maligning the God-ordained union of a husband and a wife. How about adultery and divorce? Christians are also doing their part. Marriages that should be portraying the relationship between Christ and His church are sending a heretical message instead. Vows made for better or for worse melt like a snowball on a July day.

Christians ought to be deeply concerned about the way marriage is being shredded by the same-sex marriage advocates. But there ought to be equal outrage and broken-heartedness over what we, the body of Christ, are not doing to dazzle the world with Christ-like love between husbands and wives. Let's not give non-Christians grounds for mocking what we say we believe about marriage as God designed it. The world needs the gospel on the lips of love-bound husbands and wives giving witness to its power in transformed lives. Are you with me on this? Could we not make some resolutions?

Resolve to devote our lives to the pursuit of the knowledge of God so all can see what a wonderful God we serve. This kind of knowing is an intimate relationship. We must get this right. It is possible to know a great deal about God, but not know Him. J.I. Packer in his extraordinary book, *Knowing God*, tells us that those who know God have great energy for God, have great thoughts of God, show great boldness for God, and have great contentment in God. Are we there? Test yourself. Is God's honor something you are prepared to die for? Does God's holy majesty and infinite perfection humble you? We who are God's people through faith in the

Lord Jesus Christ, of all people on this planet, should hunger and thirst for the God-pleasing life. A husband and a wife who have this kind of mutual appetite will taste and see that the Lord is good.

Resolve that the promises and assurances of God's Word will stand guard over our thoughts and that joy and peace will dwell in the living room of our hearts. Sweet are the commitments God has made to us through His Son. Husbands and wives who follow Jesus can know that His "yoke is easy" and His "load is light." Are you a weary married couple? Have you more disappointments than you can shake a stick at? The yoke of discipleship is restful and satisfying. Bring your sins and failures to Jesus. He alone can give you hope. Replace your arguments with one another with the tender love of your Savior. Relax and enjoy Christ.

Resolve that growing strong in the Lord will dominate our thinking, that we will be known as lovers of God's Word, filled with good deeds, and patient with all people. Married couples, are you taking God's Word seriously? Is it found in your conversations? Are you taking time each week to read God's Word, pray, and talk together? Here's a suggestion. Determine a project together, helpful deeds that you can do together for others. It could be running some errands for them, cleaning their house, taking them a meal (what a bonding experience that could be, preparing a meal together).

Resolve that we will pray, and that with God as our Helper, time with Him will be the most delightful part of our day. Think of the delight it would be to see God answer prayer, prayer that a husband and wife have prayed together. "You do not have," says James 4:2, "because you do not ask." Prayer is more than asking, but that is part of it. Make a list together of requests to present to God. God always answers our prayers when we come in the name of Jesus. The answer may be disguised in some way. But God will give "good things" to all who ask Him.

Resolve that the pain and suffering we endure will not be wasted. Married couples suffer together. Can we not experience God's comfort together? Are you going through a very difficult situation at the present time? Is one of your children breaking your heart? Let it draw you closer together as husband and wife, not drive you apart. Take one another's hand and ask God for wisdom and the grace of joyful endurance.

Resolve that we will serve Christ with all our abilities, gifts, time, energy, and that we will redeem the time in our remaining years. The Christian life is depicted in Scripture as a race. We are admonished to run it with Spirit-given endurance, laying aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us (Heb. 12:1). Husbands and wives, are you running together? How much time do you have left? Of course, you don't know. As fellow heirs of the grace of life, savor the precious nature of so little time remaining and use it well. What are your spiritual gifts? Are they being put to use in the church? Talk about this together.

Resolve that we will be supportive, wise, expressive, warm, gentle, and a good communicator in our relationship as husband and wife. How are the conversations going in your home? You say; what conversations? Hopefully, it's not that bad. But if it is, start somewhere. "I loved that meatloaf you made for supper." Then take it up a level, "Honey, you have been a great encouragement to me by . . ." Talk over plans and decisions mutually. Discuss problems, disagreements, and controversial issues. This is a tall order. It will take great amounts of God's grace, but the rewards will be worth it.

“Lord, enable us to live together as husbands and wives in such a way that our marriages will be the gospel on four feet.”

Mending Offenses (July 8, 2012)

My brother Tim and I are only 18 months apart. We had our share of disagreements in our growing up years. I am thankful for our present friendship. Tim received his M.A. in history from Georgia State University and learned many rich life examples from over thirty years of teaching high school history. The following is one of these.

Thomas Jefferson was from Virginia. John Adams was from Massachusetts. Jefferson was tall, thin, and had red hair. Adams was short and stout. Jefferson liked aristocratic society. Adams had New England simplicity. Both men had keen intellects. Both men were avid writers and readers. Jefferson played the violin. Adams seemed to disapprove of play of any kind.

These two men at one time, with such different backgrounds, were close friends. The flaw of Adams was his thin skin. He was insecure in politics and took any opposition very personally. Thomas Jefferson hated personal confrontation. He disliked making speeches. He always wanted to avoid conflict in public.

Both men wrote lots of letters. The letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams are famous. But nothing survives between Jefferson and his wife. She died young and he destroyed all the correspondence.

Jefferson was conciliatory when speaking to those with whom he disagreed. He always wanted to get along. But when he wrote, it was a different matter. It was often “slash and burn” and brutal attacks against his political foes. But from Jefferson’s point of view, he did not see what he wrote as personal attacks. It was just the legitimate testing of ideas. He could offend others without meaning to. John Adams was the same, in his own way. He was a kind man but had great vanity and was easily offended.

This inevitably led to the destruction of friendship between Adams and Jefferson. In the later years, it was John Adams who swallowed his pride, in 1812, wrote to Jefferson, and Jefferson responded. And, thus, we have many letters between these two men in their later years.

Sometimes, just swallow your pride and try to mend a relationship. It does not matter who is “at fault.” Jefferson was a deist and Adams was a Unitarian. How much more should we, as Christians, follow this example and be truly “Christ-like” when we feel hurt, wronged, or wounded.”

Think through your relationships, especially those that are in a state of disrepair. Did you say something that may have best been left unsaid? Have you been offended by what you consider to be an insult? Has a difference of opinion driven you off in different directions from one you love? Paul and Barnabas, we are told by Luke, had a “sharp disagreement” over the reliability of John Mark (Acts 15:9). They ended up going in different directions in mission work. However,

we know that later Paul was reconciled to both Barnabas and John Mark (1 Cor. 9:6; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11). As a matter of fact, we find Mark with Paul in his Roman imprisonment.

Why not be a peacemaker and do all you can to mend that fence standing between you and that other person? You will never know what good will come of it until you have humbled yourself and sought peace. Fences keep people out and they can also limit your freedom for Christ's sake.

Tim and I grew up in a home where the preferred response to relational problems was to ignore them. This was not a good way to start out on life's journey. Thank God for his grace and patience, so that we might learn His way of loving, living, and relating. And He is not through with us yet.

The Way Things Ought to Be (July 15, 2012)

In his book, Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. recounts a scene from the movie, *Grand Canyon*. "In the film *Grand Canyon*, an immigration attorney breaks out of a traffic jam and attempts to bypass it. His route takes him along streets that seem progressively darker and more deserted. Then the predictable *Bonfire of the Vanities* nightmare: his expensive car stalls on one of those alarming streets whose teenage guardians favor expensive guns and sneakers. The attorney does manage to phone for a tow truck, but before it arrives, five young street toughs surround his disabled car and threaten him with considerable bodily harm. Then, just in time, the tow truck shows up and its driver, an earnest genial man, begins to hook up the disabled car. The toughs protest: the truck driver is interrupting their meal. So, the driver takes the leader of the group aside and attempts a five-sentence introduction to metaphysics: 'Man,' he says, 'the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here.'"

From here Plantinga goes on to explain the Hebrew concept of *shalom* (peace) by saying that *shalom* is the way things ought to be. Peace disappeared from the human experience when Adam and Eve thought they were smarter than God and as a result were shown the exit from paradise. Ever since then our shared human dilemma has been alienation from God, alienation from one another, and alienation from ourselves. The Bible is the story of how all this has been fixed. Peace is possible.

Before there can be any informed conversation about peace, the first truth must be declared. Our alienation from God has been secured through the death of Jesus Christ for sin. The search for authentic peace must begin here. The incomparable Christ, God in human flesh and blood, came to the rescue of God's enemies (2 Corinthians 5:10). Nothing is more frightening than being at war with God. Every human being is under the wrath of an infinitely holy and just God. The good news is that a peace treaty with God has been written in the blood of Christ. God made Christ to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now let me ask you. Have you been reconciled to God? Have you received the reconciliation that God has provided in Jesus Christ? If you want to know God's peace, it all begins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

On that memorable day of June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan, standing at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, after having viewed the symbol of communist tyranny, the Berlin wall, said for the entire world to hear; “We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” That wall did eventually come down. But there is an even greater wall that fell in human history and that is the alienation that exists between human beings. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross opened the way for us to enjoy peace with one another. The peace of God is experienced as the believer in Jesus Christ lives in harmony with others (Ephesians 2:11-18). In Christ all racial and ethnic barriers are down. Of all people on this planet, Christians should exemplify how different kinds of people ought to get along. Peace is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Dear Christian, you know peace with God. Are you experiencing the peace of God in your relationships?

There is also that internal peace that God gives to those who belong to Christ. Sin has made us a package of disordered love. We look for personal peace in all the wrong places. Neither chemicals, romance, financial security, family, friends, yoga, altered states of mind, meditation, nor anything else in this world can provide what comes only from knowing God and doing the things that please Him. The psalmist has it right; “Those who love Thy law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble” (Psalm 119:165). Do you know the peace of being satisfied in God? Restlessness, irritability, worry, fearfulness, anger, and bitterness are symptoms of a lack of peace. The peace that God gives finds joy and contentment in Him.

How should we then live in peace?

- I am experiencing God’s peace when my sin of rebellion against God has been forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when my relationships become loving, kind, honest, helpful, forgiving, and generous.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when I can forgive those who have sinned against me and wounded me deeply.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when my irritability, unhappiness, and restlessness are replaced by a servant’s desire to love others as God as loved me.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when my sorrows, disappointments, afflictions, pain, and suffering move me closer to God rather than embitter me against God.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when the foolish decisions of my children or grandchildren are met with calmness, patience, and wise counsel.
- I am experiencing God’s peace when my rages in traffic are replaced by rest in God’s invisible hand working all things together for good for those who love Him.

- I am experiencing God's peace when I realize that I don't have to be in control of everyone and everything to get what I want.
- I am experiencing God's peace when I quit trying to control my spouse and children and serve them instead.
- I am experiencing God's peace when I can continue to work with those with whom I have disagreements.
- I am experiencing God's peace when thoughts of worry and fear about the future are submitted to the infinite wisdom, justice, and love of God.

This is the way things ought to be.

Shalom

A Prayerful Church (August 5, 2012)

Bernetta's Ziegler's life and death have provoked a needed discussion about prayer in the life of our church. Mrs. Ziegler prayed. She is in heaven now. One of the reasons God leaves us here on this earth is to pray. Prayer is the cry of God's people in confession, intercession, praise, thanksgiving, or supplication. It is the instinctive desire of the believer to commune with the living God of the universe. Prayer is the expression of dependence on Him. Do we want to see God's fame spread throughout the world? Is it our longing to see those who are blinded to the preciousness of the gospel to receive their spiritual sight? Do we really believe that it is not by might, nor by power, but by God's Spirit that lives and circumstances are changed for the glory of God? Consider this a renewed call to our church family to take the privilege of prayer seriously.

A prayerful church advances the gospel through prayer. "Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak" (Colossians 4:3). We should pray that God will open the doors of evangelistic opportunity. Start out your day with praise to God for His gospel and ask Him to bring people into your daily routines that are without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And don't forget to pray for your neighbors, county, and the nations of the world.

The prayerful church prays for a wide range of people and needs. "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions . . ." (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Pray for politicians, celebrities, clerks at the grocery store, soldiers, policemen, Olympic athletes, truck drivers, schoolteachers, postal carriers. A drought is ravaging major sections of our nation. Millions of people are jobless (get a name or names and pray for job opportunities for them). Pray in response to the major news stories of the day. Pray for the coming elections. Much is at stake. Pray that "we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Timothy 2:2).

The prayerful church has leaders who pray and a congregation that prays for its leaders. "But we

will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). Pray for the elders and deacons. They need wisdom for effective flock-care.

The prayerful church responds to trials with prayer. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The Christian life is not an all-expenses paid life in a resort. It is a battle with evil. Satan is a formidable foe. The world hates believers in Jesus Christ. Pray for boldness in a hostile world. Hardships bring temptations (e.g., complaint, anger, discouragement). We must never give up. Do you know someone going through a difficult time? Are they on your prayer list?

The prayerful church carries out its “one-anothering” through prayer. “I (Paul). . .do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1:16). Christians who love one another pray for one another. The Church Directory makes an excellent prayer list. Let’s pray that we will grasp the meaning of biblical teaching and experience the truth we know. Pray that we will be protected from the devices of Satan (Ephesians 6:8). Our high school and college students need special prayer as they handle a curriculum that is often rigged against Christianity.

Mrs. Ziegler asked many of us to give her seven things that she could pray about. You may want to choose to do the same thing. The method is not the important thing. Prayer is praying. We need specific items when entering into intercessory prayer. Gather prayer requests. Organize them. Spread them out over a day, a week, a month. Do whatever it takes. Pray for your dentist while you brush your teeth. Pray for your neighbor when he drives by your house. Pray with your spouse. Pray for your spouse. Thank God when it rains. Thank God when it doesn’t rain. Pray for friends who are traveling. Offer up intercession for your immediate family every day. There is no end to this list.

I am unable to get Mrs. Ziegler’s box of prayer requests out of my mind. I use a journal with blank pages to create my list. It needs additions. Find what works best for you. But above all, pray.

Do Not Be Angry (September 5, 2012)

It’s a bright sunny day. You are riding down the road minding your own business. A sports car comes zooming up beside you. The car in front of him is going to slow. He looks for some room to get in front of you. There is none. So, he makes it happen. You hit your brakes and blow your horn as the frustrated speedster cuts in on you and flies on down the road to who knows where. You are angry. You say something you should not have. You wanted to give chase, but the risks were too many. The adrenalin is coursing through your body. Have you been there? Anger can happen in a split second. It is involuntary. It can be violent and then suddenly over. Or it can be internalized and eat on you for hours, even days.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had a clever way of avoiding the implications of their behavior. They thought if they had not murdered anyone that they could check off that moral duty on their list of “don’ts.” We could think, “I didn’t chase that reckless driver down and shoot him. I’m

good.” The Pharisees can be our spiritual blood brothers. They had reduced the command to not murder to the mere act itself (Matt. 5:21). We can do the same thing by failing to see that the root of murder is anger. The kind of right living that Jesus requires of His disciples is not only refraining from the act of murder, it is dealing with one’s anger which is the motive of murder (Matt. 5:22).

The words we use when we are angry with others betray the depth of our sin. Insulting words like “you fool,” “you idiot,” or “go to hell,” reveal our contempt for another human being. We are accountable to God for our anger and the verbal stuff that goes with it. The Pharisees put the emphasis on external repercussions. Jesus put the emphasis on eternal repercussions.

Thankfully, there is a way of overcoming the anger that rules us and ruins others. Think along these biblical lines. Repentance must happen. Acknowledgement of sinful anger (there is a non-sinful kind of anger, but that’s for another time) is the first stop on the road to change. Take responsibility for anger by examining your heart. What do you crave, lust for, and wish for? What desires do you serve and obey? When you are pressured where do you turn? When do you get angry? What are the things that really tick you off? Reconciliation must be on the table. It has been said that “we stop being angry when we start engaging in personal reconciliation.” What relationship is in disrepair because of anger?

Resolve to live by the demands of Jesus. The commands of Jesus are not burdensome. His “yoke is easy,” and His “burden is light” (Matt. 11:28). Living in obedience to Him creates changes in the nature of our anger. Our anger is to be controlled by loving our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Pray for them. Do good things to them. When others seek to do us harm, verbally, emotionally, or physically, show love to them. Live by the truth of the fallen sparrow (Matt. 10:28-31). Let the truth of God’s love and sovereign control over all things flow through our thoughts. Rudeness, lost car keys, a forgotten birthday, tripping over a root, a bad call by a referee, all of these and hundreds of other perceived evils need to be met a mind and motives that have been overhauled by God’s Word.

I as a Christ-like kind of person am to show up at the scene of an anger inciting moment. That person is to be one who is living by the grace of forgiveness, becoming my own eye doctor (judging myself before I judge others), denying myself, taking up my cross, and slaying the dragon of pride. We are preparing today for the next volatile encounter. The next time that stray driver from the Atlanta 500 cuts you off in traffic, who will be behind the wheel of your car?

No Other Gospel (November 4, 2012)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest news in the world. There is nothing like it. It is the good news that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. There is no other way to be accepted by God and live with Him forever than to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me” (John 14:6),

But there is trouble. There are advocates of other gospels. These are not true gospels, but they make their claims. It is possible to be deceived by them. This is not a new thing. The apostle Paul warned in the first New Testament letter that he wrote that, “If any man is preaching to you a

gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:9). Christian, be on the alert. Know what the gospel is and know what it isn't.

One of those false gospels that makes its reappearance in every generation is the Social Gospel. It has a certain surface appeal because it uses biblical terms, appeals to certain verses in the Bible, and claims to be the answer to some real problems in our world. The recipe for the social gospel includes the following ingredients. (1) Belief that man is perfectible, capable of change by his own efforts. (2) Belief that society is also perfectible. Social problems can be solved given the effort and time. (3) The existence of social problems such as poverty, homelessness, racism, joblessness, the poor getting poorer, the rich getting richer, industrial exploitation, governmental indifference to discrimination, sex trafficking, the breakup of the home, and a host of other injustices. This is not to say that social injustices do not exist. But the Social Gospel has its own special answer to them. (4) Pragmatism. Whatever works is right. By necessity truth is shaped by what will get things changed. (5) Rejection of biblical truth. This is usually one of the first things to be thrown overboard in the quest to save society. One of the early proponents of the Social Gospel in America denied the Bible's teaching on human sinfulness and the atonement of Christ. The message of the historic Christian gospel is dismissed as a pie-in-the-sky myth.

One of the features of the contemporary Social Gospel is the swapping of biblical priorities for human priorities. Same-sex marriage is proclaimed to be a noble and a good thing. Those who oppose it are said to be intolerant and filled with hate. Being “born-again” is not as important as giving to the poor and social justice. Biblical statements like “to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:45), are taken out of context in order to prove either personal salvation by humanitarian efforts or more government social programs. To this must be added what is known as liberation theology. According to this system of thought Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation. Consciousness raising and bringing down corrupt and oppressive institutions is the way of “salvation.” To participate in God's salvation is to cooperate with the revolutionary Christ as he liberates oppressed peoples from bondage.

The Social Gospel has different kinds of presentations and dogmas but is fundamentally a belief system that preaches a this-world-gospel. Social action is the instrument of social progress and social progress is the attainment of social justice. The shift is away from the guilt of the sinner and his need for redemption in Christ to the redemption of society, the eradication of injustices, and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

Does the true gospel of Jesus Christ ignore injustice and the broken human condition? Absolutely not. The church of Jesus Christ has been the vanguard of a compassionate response to the ills that beset mankind. Hospitals, educational institutions, orphanages, shelters for the homeless, and countless charitable ministries have arisen where the gospel has been preached, believed, and lived. And most importantly, the dreadful plight of sinners under the wrath of an infinitely holy God is addressed in the love of God in Christ on the Cross. The human misery on this planet can never compare to the misery of an eternal hell. Only the gospel as revealed in Scripture offers hope for all eternity.

America's Best Hope (November 9, 2012)

You may all relax. This is my last political article for a while (maybe). The national election is over. Many will probably heave a sigh of relief at the end of four years of Presidential campaigning. Cable networks with their 24-7 news coverage and the internet help to keep the political pot boiling. One of my concerns with continual campaigning, bias media coverage, and the leftward drift among American voters is that Christians can be in danger of investing too much emotional capital in politics. No, we should not head for the hills and retire from biblically informed political activism. But we must, in the words of the apostle Peter, "Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4:7). If the election did not turn out the way you wanted it to, don't panic. Having lived through over seventeen Presidential campaigns, I can attest to the disappointments and celebrations they bring. Presidents come and they go. But one constant is God's sovereign rule over all the affairs of man and His everlasting gospel.

As the parade of politics marches on we would do well to remember several truths. First, the outcome of the Presidential election is sovereignly determined and there will not be a failure in God's purposes for us as a nation and the church of Jesus Christ. God raises up leaders and nations and brings them down. This is not necessarily related to the character or intentions of the leader. The nation of Israel in the Old Testament is a witness to this fact. Secondly, the outcome of the Presidential election does not guarantee a solution to our nation's ills. While many seem to think that the most important issue is the economy, there is much more involved. Our moral and social problems clamor for attention. However, these can't be solved by more government regulations, higher taxes, and legislation. Thirdly, the outcome of the Presidential election cannot stop the church of Jesus Christ from being what it ought to be and do. Gospel work, teaching, preaching, Great Commission fulfillment, stronger marriages, helping the hurting, and rearing our children in the wisdom of God must go on.

Our nation, with its staggering debt of sixteen trillion dollars and the growing secularization of society, is in trouble. Our only hope is revival in the church, thousands of churches teaching God's inerrant, infallible Word, declaring the gospel far and wide, living counter-culturally, and thinking with minds transformed by divine revelation.

Any anger directed at politicians, government programs, higher taxes, and threats to our freedom must be righteous anger. It must be anger directed at sin that dwells within each of us, anger at the sin that is eating away at the soul of our civilization, and anger at the god of this age who has blinded the minds of unbelievers. But righteous anger is to be handled with care. It can easily turn into sinful anger which serves neither God nor man. We will need to ask questions of ourselves lest anger become a means of self-deception. Am I angry because my freedom is lost or because God's name is hated? Am I angry because my comforts and financial security are at greater risk, or because our nation rushes blindly after the god of materialism? Am I angry because people disagree with me or because God's Word is being trampled upon and disdained? Am I angry because my convictions are ridiculed and misrepresented or because God's salvation in Jesus Christ is treated as narrow-minded bigotry?

There are some serious concerns we should all share about the direction our nation and government is taking. (1) Our national ills cannot be healed by the secular medicine of unlimited government. (2) If there is no higher authority than the state, we stand naked in the public square. Who gives us our "rights," government, the voting majority, or God? (3) If economic self-

interest is our only interest, we are left chained to the god of materialism. (4) Any political party or government that is indifferent to human life issues is a nail in the coffin of freedom. (5) A cradle-to-the-grave nanny state will suffocate the better selves of our citizens. (6) When the state legitimizes moral vices by law, we are all put in danger. (7) The Balkanization (to divide into small and hostile groups) of society will blow its icy winds upon the church. Dividing the population into special interest groups by race, class, and gender and pitting them against one another contributes to the death of a nation. (8) If evangelical Christians are a threat to politicians, then someone is moving in the wrong direction.

Where then will we place our hope for the future? Our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ who is coming again to rule and reign. It is He alone who guarantees a righteous government. The change to which we must give ourselves is the supernatural, transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us grieve for America but let not our sorrow carry us over the falls of despair. The story of the human race is the pursuit of one idol after another. America is no exception to mankind's longing for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That fruit, eaten by the father and mother of us all, is a poison that condemns us to eternal separation from a holy God.

The bitter fruit of rebellion against God's righteous law is a world ripening for destruction. Let us not think that we live in a more enlightened and better world than our ancestors. The fool's paradise is one of fleeting happiness and the failed dreams of self-worship. The psalmist speaks to a world intoxicated with its God-hating pride and attempts to create utopia.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast their cords from us. He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'" Psalm 2:1-6

What is our hope? It is God's mighty decree that the King has come and is coming again. This is not escapism. It is motivation for living a life that counts for God and knowing to whom we are ultimately accountable. Christian, do not fail in a time of disappointment or celebration. No matter how you voted or what your perspective on current events, we are pilgrims in this world. Keep your eye on Him who sees all things and to whom we must all give account. Be wary, lest your love be more set upon this world than the one to come. Live undaunted by the haughty boasts of unbelief. Conduct your lives with truth-seeking, Spirit-energized love for God and joyful, compassionate love for all people. America is not the world's best hope. That honor belongs to the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bethlehem, the City of David (December 9, 2012)

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Bethlehem is the birthplace of a king. As a matter of fact, the King of kings and Lord of lords was born there. In A.D. 325 Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, built a church over a series of caves in Bethlehem at the site tradition had said was the exact birthplace of Jesus Christ. The city of Bethlehem is located about six miles SW of Jerusalem on a ridge route that runs north and south. In my first visit to Bethlehem in 1981, I encountered a town of tourist shops, hotels, and the revered Church of the Nativity (below). Olive wood carvings of crosses and other Christian symbols were in ample supply. Its West Bank location in the Palestinian Authority today has a population of about 25,000 people with a Muslim majority and shrinking Arab Christian minority.

My second visit in 2011 revealed a city showing the effects of 17 years of Palestinian administrative and military control. Upon leaving Bethlehem and heading back to Jerusalem, the Wall separating the State of Israel and the West Bank territory was a sad reminder to the lack of peace in a land where the Prince of Peace once walked, healed, taught, and preached.

Christian pilgrims have been historically drawn to Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity (right). It is a cold, curious looking, stone edifice built over the traditional site of Jesus' birth. Justinian I (A.D. 527 – 565) built a new and larger church on the same site replacing Helena's chapel. According to the Gospels of the New Testament Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem from Nazareth, a trip of about seventy-five miles, in order to register for a census decreed by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-4). Little did the Roman Emperor realize he was the instrument of God in fulfilling biblical prophecy. It was the prophet Micah seven hundred years before Jesus' birth who had said; "But as for you Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2).

In what was an insignificant little town in the hill country of Judah, the place of King David's birth, was born David's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ, Israel's long-awaited Messiah. Micah also tells us that Jesus had made pre-incarnate appearances as the Angel of the Lord. And with a further prophetic flourish revealed that the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the guarantee of the fulfillment of God's covenant with David. One day the baby born in a manger in an out-of-the-way village will rend the heavens and establish His kingdom on this earth.

The area around Bethlehem is very fertile with grain fields that provided Ruth, the ancestor of David, the occasion to meet her kinsman redeemer and future husband, Boaz. It was a beautiful romance set in a time of rank apostasy in Israel (read the book of Judges). In the providence of God Ruth picked up grain in the field owned by her relative, Boaz. The story glimmers with anticipation of the Bread from heaven coming to be born in the "house of bread" (meaning the word Bethlehem) in which David shepherded his father's sheep (1 Samuel 17:15) and was there anointed king over Israel (1 Samuel 16:13).

In John 7:42 we find Bethlehem on the lips of clueless critics of Jesus. They did not grasp His true identity. With pieces of prophetic truth some believed that Jesus was the Prophet spoken of by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). Others said that Jesus was the Messiah. It didn't cross their minds that the Prophet and the Messiah were one in the same person. In their confused unbelief they were of the opinion that Jesus was born in Galilee, so He was disqualified because the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem. Hello! They had not gone to the trouble of investigating Jesus' claims. He was born in Bethlehem. This is so much like those who reject Christ by

avoiding the real issue. They want to pursue questions like, “Where did Cain get his wife?” rather than worship the Son. It is possible to know the Bible, but completely miss the Christ of the Bible. In Him the hopes and fears of all the years are met.

Bethlehem and Sandy Hook (December 21, 2012)

Horrifying! Six and seven-year-old students hearing gun shots, then looking into the face of the man who was about to kill them and their teachers. The fear, the screams, and the evil of it all is more than anyone wants to imagine. But it did happen on Friday morning, December 14, at 9:30 a.m., in the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. Dear little children dying in the arms of adults attempting to protect them. Funerals with little caskets and a grief-stricken community which will never fully recover must find ways to cope, to live on, to try to sleep, to experience some degree of normalcy again.

Can we, who have watched the dark night of death and grief descend upon so many, do anything meaningful in response? We can pray that God’s comfort will be realized by those who lost so much. Oh, that the gospel would be heard. We can pray that the children and their parents will find some measure of mental strength to go on and bring their community from the edge of the abyss of despair to shared love, support, and innumerable kindnesses. We can pray that the fear that haunts the children who saw their classmates killed will not paralyze them and take them away to a land where anger, depression, and hopelessness would shrivel their souls.

There has been no shortage of assessments that have been offered. Why did the killer do this? What was his motive? It strains the ability of the human mind to explain the thoughts of a twenty-year-old man who could stand before innocent and helpless little children, look into their eyes, and pull the trigger. Sadly, the attempts to unravel the mystery of the mind of a cold-blooded killer have revealed the hollowness of the moral bankruptcy of our culture. The conversation has been dominated by a crescendo of gun control advocacy. Is the murderer not responsible for this heinous crime? This whole gun control debate deflects attention away from the real problem. A sinful human being was the problem. Many in our society have been morally disarmed by their refusal to acknowledge the existence of evil and its companion, sin. In all the articles I have read and discussions heard on television and radio, I have yet to hear (with perhaps one exception) a cogent, moral explanation of the murder and murderer. So much talk revolves around assault weapons, with high-capacity magazines, and the need for more gun control laws. Yet none of the existing laws would have prevented the wholesale slaughter in Newtown.

We are told that “mental health” screening must play a greater role in gun purchases and society in general. The whole concept of mental or emotional illness is based upon a medical model of illness. Behavior that is difficult to explain is submitted to flawed presuppositions about the mind. Is the mind merely a mass of tissue and chemicals? A “sick” mind we are told is the cause of murder and other aberrant human behavior. A distinction must be drawn between organic diseases of the brain (brain tumors, cancer, strokes, etc.) and non-organic based processes of thought and behavior for which an individual is responsible. The truth is that there is a “sickness” in the human heart. The final authority on human nature, the Lord Jesus Christ, said that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19). Our culture has created a host of psychological categories which, in

effect, are an attempt to change the subject from personal responsibility and sin to that of “disorders” and lack of “mental health.”

Psychological, sociological, economic, and political explanations are woefully inadequate for coming to grips with what is wrong with human beings and why some have no conscience about taking a weapon and without flinching, deny others the right to live.

It is noteworthy that one editorial columnist in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution offers a “model that already exists to address (the) societal problem” of mass killing and gun violence (Wednesday, December 19, 2012). Essentially this proposal is that we follow the same legal and social path that has contributed to the decline of traffic-related alcohol deaths. Such measures as increased liability, required licensing for gun ownership, and other legal restraints should be incrementally pursued to “reduce the number of deaths caused by firearm use.” Did it not cross his mind that laws could be put in place to begin stopping the slaughter of millions of babies in the womb, children who cannot defend themselves? Why are those who are clamoring for more gun control laws not willing to apply their zeal to an abortion industry engaged in mass murder on a daily basis?

There has been a discernible decline in the moral stability of civil society. University professors mock the idea that there is any objective truth. Hollywood movies have no time for God-consciousness other than profaning His name. One listens in vain to hear the word evil in the context of mass murder. Could the reason be that one has to believe in the existence of God in order to think in terms of good and evil? To believe in God is to acknowledge accountability. This is not acceptable in a society where many believe that people can do what is right in their own eyes (“no judgmentalism please”). Also missing in the national media is the connection between the Sandy Hook massacre and the breakdown of the family. Broken homes, fathers who are absent, and children struggling with the problems of life cannot be ignored.

In the little town of Bethlehem in the first century a child was born to Joseph and Mary. This child was a king. When King Herod learned that a king had been born in his region, he felt threatened and outraged. In order to secure his throne against any challenger Herod out-sourced the murder of scores of boys, age two and under. Parents grieved in Bethlehem as their sons were ripped from their arms and slaughtered before their eyes. Did Herod have a “mental health” issue? He certainly did. His jealous and angry heart bore no conscience in having innocent children massacred. We are told in the Book of Revelation that Satan was ultimately behind the attack on the children of Bethlehem (Revelation 12:4). We also read there that the king born to Joseph and Mary would one day rule all the nations with a rod of iron. The old dragon wanted to kill the King of kings and Lord of lords in order to keep his own kingdom of sin and death in power. But it was not to be. Divinely delivered from the clutches of the devil the Christ-child lived to die another day. It would be a death by crucifixion with the triumph of the resurrection so that the death of Death would be accomplished by the death of Jesus Christ.

There is our hope. It is in Christ alone. There is no final safe place in this world. Safety and security can be found in the One who said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25).

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day - A Guideline for Remembrance (January 20, 2013)

Observing a national holiday for most people simply means a day off from work. We have all been guilty of this, but there is a better way. As Christians we should aspire to be contributing citizens in our nation. Part of that means giving “honor to whom honor is due” (Romans 13:7). On November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill creating a federal holiday to honor Martin Luther King, Jr. This day was first observed on January 20, 1986.

The establishment of this federal holiday has not been without controversy. There was initial resistance due to a mix of politics, resentments, and racial prejudice. This is not the time or place to explore these issues. One thing remains. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was at the vanguard of those who were challenging entrenched racial discrimination as it existed in the mid-twentieth century in America. While all may not agree with Dr. King’s theological and political views, the fact remains that he had the courage to stand against the evils of racial segregation. He paid the ultimate price for taking on a grievous moral and social cancer.

There are ways Christians can express their desire for racial reconciliation and exemplify the love of Christ. I am proposing ways in which the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can be honored on January 21. These need not all be done, but taking one simple action is a step forward in living out the truth of Romans 13:18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

1. Pray that all racial groups in your neighborhood will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in the coming year. Create a list of names of specific people for whom you can pray.
2. Pray for the elected officials in your county and identify particular issues that carry racial tensions. Pray that community harmony will be achieved.
3. Develop a friendship with someone outside of your own racial group. Have them over to your house for a meal. Invite them to church. If they are in your church get to know one another in a more meaningful way.
4. Read a biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (See Amazon.com for a listing).
5. Attend the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day parade in downtown Fayetteville (if you live in the area).
6. Identify ways in which racial prejudice (no color of skin is exempt from this problem) infects the way you relate to those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Confess to God your need for a change of attitude. Anger, resentment, suspicion, and pride prevent Christlike thinking and relationships. It was Jesus who said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).
7. As a family, set aside ten minutes during the day (Monday, January 21) to pray that our church will shine like a city of a hill for all to see what it means for all racial and ethnic groups to experience racial reconciliation.

We can't change a nation, but we can do our part. May God send a revival in His church in America so that Christ's presence will be seen by all.

Aloha! (March 3, 2013)

Your kindness provided every memory and lots of pictures. It was a trip of a lifetime. All the planning and anticipation carried us to the Honolulu airport where a young lady met us and placed leis of purple orchids around our necks. We then marched to baggage claim looking like some sure enough tourists. The Outrigger Hotel on Waikiki beach awaited us. The tropical breezes – sometimes wind – felt so good.

The day after our arrival we went to the Pearl Harbor Memorial, a fulfillment of a lifetime dream. Those moments of looking down on the submerged USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor cannot be contained in this writing. On December 7, 1941, I was sitting in a highchair with my mother feeding me strained carrots when the announcement came over the radio about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor (My mother, not my memory, receives the credit for that information). My father went into the Marine Corp, fought on the South Pacific islands, and came home in 1945. His life and ours were never the same again.

Our last day on the island of Oahu was spent with a long walk from The Outrigger to the top of Diamond Head. We didn't know that all our running and walking was also training Beth and me for the hike of a lifetime. The view of Honolulu from the peak of Diamond Head was breathtaking. We have pictures.

Hawaiian airlines took us to Maui, our next island. It was a short flight with a great view of Oahu out of the window of the plane. The highly recommended drive on the road to Hana was spectacular. We let a driver handle the 600 plus hairpin turns while we took in the waterfalls, tropical flowers, and scenic overviews. Some of the mountains on Maui receive over 400 inches of rain annually. Need I say, the forests are lush with vegetation and all kinds of exotic plants.

The last island we visited was Kauai, the garden island. On one of our days there we drove our Ford compact to the north end of the island and went for a short hike along the Napali Coast. It was a narrow, steep, and rocky climb but rewarded us with a stunning view of the waves crashing on the shoreline. The ride to Waimea Canyon on the west side of the island made us feel like we were viewing the Grand Canyon.

These are only a few of the magnificent sensory delights of our time in Hawaii. I offer the words of the American author, Mark Twain, who in 1866 visited the Hawaiian Islands, as a fitting description of this tropical paradise.

No alien land in all the world has any deep strong charm for me but that one, no other land could so longingly and so beseechingly haunt me, sleeping and walking, through half a lifetime, as that one has done. Other things leave me, but it abides, other things change, but it remains the same. For me its balmy airs are always blowing, its summer seas flashing in the sun, the pulsing of the surfbeat is in my ear. I can see its garland crags, its leaping cascades, its plummy palms drowsing by the shore, its remote summits floating like islands above the cloud wrack; I can feel the spirit

of its woodland solitudes, I can hear the splash of its brooks, in my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago.

Beth and I thank you again our Berachah family for the generous gift of ten days in our fiftieth State. The memories and the sweet fragrance of your gift to us will be ours forever.

With love and gratitude,
Howard and Beth

Soul Food (March 24, 2013)

Around our house chicken and dumplings are considered comfort food. If you are feeling a little low and out of sorts, then chicken and dumplings are needed. You probably have your own comfort food. Hopefully, it is not too high in calories and not too often on the menu.

God has a recipe for comfort food. We know that our heavenly Father takes delight in comforting His children in their affliction (2 Cor. 1:4). Actually, there is no other source of genuine and lasting comfort than in God Himself. This is not to say that there aren't knock-off brands of proposed comfort. There are seemingly endless chemicals that offer themselves as sedatives or stimulants to ease one's soul-pain. Alcohol, marijuana, anti-depressants, Red Bull, Monster Energy Drink, promise what they can't provide, namely, real comfort or encouragement. The marketplace, legal and illegal, is well stocked with chemical cocktails of comfort, satisfaction, and cheer. The price, however, is far too expensive.

Counterfeit comfort comes in everything that is a substitute for God: money, relationships, romance, games, entertainment, novels, hobbies, television, movies, shopping, and travel. You name it. But let's get to the real thing. When it comes to soul-satisfying, reality-based, God-sanctioned comfort, God alone is our infinite resource. All God-given comfort is carried on the wings of the Spirit and truth (Acts 9:31; Rom. 15:4). The Holy Spirit is the hand in the glove of biblical truth. Genuine comfort always flows within the banks of the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), whether it arises from within through truth-rich self-talk or from without through the kindnesses of others. This is why the preaching of God's Word can work wonders in encouraging life-weary Christians (1 Cor. 14:3). Do you have troubles? Sunday television is clouds without rain. Meet with God's people and let the rain of God's Word fall upon the parched ground of the heart.

A visit from a dear friend, hearing their voice, picking-up on their reminders of God's wisdom and mercy, knowing they care can be like a warm fire on a cold, wet, and wintry day. Such a visit may come in the form of an email, a phone call, a card, a conversation in the fellowship hall, a chance meeting in the grocery store, or a side-by-side conversation while at your child's soccer game.

The road to comfort is sometimes found in self-examination, repentance, and confession of sin. The counsel of Jesus is, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). The great escape from a tortured conscience is not experienced through Saturday Night Live. Sin, like a cancerous tumor, has to be surgically removed by acknowledging it to God; "Lord, I have sinned against you. I should not have uttered those unkind words. Forgive me." Comfort

comes when we confess our anger and enjoy the Father's embrace. The 17th-century minister, Thomas Watson, said "Our tears must drown our sins."

Do you need comfort? Don't waste your time with placebos. Run to God immediately. "As (a) father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Psa. 103:13). He is the God of all comfort. Mimic your Father. Commit yourself to being a comforter of others. Resting in God's sovereign, wise, and loving rule is the place where comforters are trained and sent forth as carriers of comfort to those who are in any affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4). You can be someone's comfort food, like manna from heaven.

It was recently that I learned that my life-long friend, Jim Nixon, had been diagnosed with melanoma in his stomach and lung. This very aggressive form of cancer can be treated in the short term with interferon and chemotherapy. Jim knows what the long-term prognosis is. We talked about it. I was fumbling around seeking to be of comfort to him in his time of affliction. In the conversation Jim spoke with full assurance of his hope in Christ. But until he sees the Savior face to face there is a battle to be waged. He was not alarmed and would take the misery of his treatments as it comes, wanting as much time with his family as the Lord will grant him. His confidence in God and his calm manner comforted me. Comfort is a two-way street. In the school of comforters, comforters receive comfort. That is soul food.

A Letter from the Cross (March 31, 2013)

I am Scipio, a centurion in the Roman army, a veteran of many wars. After all my experience, sacrifices for Rome, and rank in the army, I found myself stationed in Judea, a backward post. I had much preferred something closer to home in the countryside near Rome. The Jewish population here hates me, or maybe I should say they hate Roman occupation. We are on constant alert to the possibility of riots and threats from Jewish insurrectionists. It was only two weeks ago that I missed being knifed by an angry zealot named Barabbas. He was later charged in another incident with murder. It was stunning to learn that he had been released by Pilate in response to an angry Jewish mob clamoring for the death of a man named Jesus. Some said that this Jesus was Israel's Messiah.

How ironic. I was standing guard when we were called upon to crucify Jesus instead of Barabbas. Crucifixions are always messy, but I had a job to do, and I did it. This, however, became no ordinary crucifixion. As Jesus was hanging on the cross, He uttered words that at first puzzled me. I began to understand some of the extraordinary claims He had made for Himself, that He was the Son of God, Israel's Messiah who had come to take away the sins of the world. I must confess I had lived for many years believing in Mithra, as did many of my fellow soldiers. Mithra is the sun-god. We believed that Mithra had slain a sacred bull proving his strength. He then ascended to heaven where he continued to battle with evil. I vividly remember having my hands bound and passing through life-threatening flames of fire to prove my strength. It was exhilarating and gave opportunity to achieve a higher rank among the followers of Mithra. I had passed through death itself to emerge stronger in my faith and courage.

But this was all before that afternoon outside the walls of Jerusalem on a hill of execution called Golgotha. Please let me hurry to recount what changed my life. While this Jesus was dying on the cross suddenly the sun was covered by a heavy darkness. Where was Mithra? The ground

shook beneath our feet as an earthquake reverberated through Jerusalem. In all our vicious battles, we had never experienced anything like this. Above the clamor of the crowd, I heard the one called “the King of the Jews” cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What was this? My life flashed before my eyes. I was terrified. The God of heaven was pouring out wrath. What had we done? In an instant the little knowledge that I had about this alleged criminal came together in my mind. I had been worshiping a god who did not exist. The man hanging on that cross was the “Son of God.” I understood. His humility, His self-control, and the words He uttered on the cross resonated authenticity. He had prayed that His enemies would be forgiven. With my own ears I heard Him promise one of the criminals being executed next to Him that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day. Why, He even had given up His own spirit. It was as if He were offering up Himself as a sacrifice. I had seen many men die, but never anyone like this. It mattered little who heard me. “This man is innocent.” He was not dying for any wrong He had committed. He was not only Israel’s Messiah. He was dying for my sins. I can tell you right now. I believed in Him at that moment, even as the thief beside Him had earlier done so. I had more to learn about this Jesus, but that was the turning point. I began telling my fellow soldiers about this Savior. I realized how I had been deceived by all the ritual and beliefs about “Mythras” and the sacred bull. We were told that the bull’s blood was life-giving. It was a lie. I had found the one true life-giving sacrifice for my sins. It was this Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who died in my place who alone could give me the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Three days later it was all confirmed to me. The guard detail at the tomb of Jesus had been given filthy blood-money to spread the rumor that Jesus’ disciples had come during the night and stolen His body. I knew better. It was a flimsy cover-up, an attempt to hide the reality. The “Son of God” was risen from the dead.

I, Scipio, a centurion in the Roman army, appeal to you. “Truly this was the Son of God.” Turn from your false gods and come to the only one who can be your Savior from God’s eternal wrath.

The First Mother (May 12, 2013)

I am woman, hear me roar
 In numbers too big to ignore
 And I know too much to go back an' pretend
 'cause I've heard it all before
 And I've been down there on the floor
 No one's ever gonna keep me down again

CHORUS

Oh yes I am wise
 But it's wisdom born of pain
 Yes, I've paid the price
 But look how much I gained
 If I have to, I can do anything
 I am strong (strong)

I am invincible (invincible)
I am woman

Let's go back to the Garden of Eden. Eve has just been created out of Adam's rib. She's standing there before God and Adam in all her feminine glory, without sin, and ready for life. And then, God's gift to Adam breaking out in a triumphant voice begins singing, "I am Woman."

Something is wrong with that picture. Setting aside the obvious anachronism, we have a major theological discrepancy. Everything we know about Eve and the Creator's plan for the planet's first couple is made to stand on its head. Eve was not full of herself. For now, let's consider what God has revealed about Adam's wife and the mother-to-be of his children.

Eve was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). She was a picture of God, if you will. Theologians call this the *imago Dei*. There were striking similarities between Eve and her Creator. The whole of Scripture fills in the details as to what this means which, by the way, opens up the wonder of the thought that the more we know about God the better we will know ourselves. No human being is identical to God, but, women, if you want to know yourself you must know God. If Eve had broken out into the lyrics, they would have needed to include some of the following truths.

Woman was created for the glory of God (Isa. 43:7; Ps. 8:4, 6). Ladies, God made you to reflect his character. Because you are in God's image you have worth and dignity. You don't get that from primate ancestry (Ancestry.com will not help you here). Your life has extraordinary significance. God created you to radiate a beauty from within. God's love, His truthfulness, His holiness, His wisdom, His mercy and joy are to radiate out for others to see. I will be careful here, but it must be said. Your physical features, your hair, eyes, feet, height, and figure were given as God designed you in your mother's womb. Have you accepted who you are? Are endless comparisons to other women eating your lunch? Are you a good steward of your body? Take care of yourself. But please don't forget that you exist to display the hidden person of the heart in Christlikeness.

Woman is a moral being. This imprint of God upon you means that you have been made morally accountable to God for every thought, word, and deed. Eve was created with right tendencies, an inner sense of right and wrong. Ladies, how are you doing in properly representing your moral likeness to God? Do you have a healthy sense of shame? Is your conscience sensitive about the right things? Does not telling the truth cause you any discomfort? What is informing and directing your moral standards?

Woman was made for relationships. Eve was created to relate to Adam, to her children, and all other people. She was given a body, mind, soul, and spirit with which to connect with people. Ladies, you have been designed by God to reflect the perfect unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The eternal harmony of the Godhead is part of the glory of God. You have the privilege of living out your complementary role in your marriage. The Christian husband and wife have the exciting possibility of creating a symphony of unity out of the varying instruments of their gifts, differences, and roles. Masculinity and femininity are a pleasure to see when sanctified by the Holy Spirit, complementing one another in love.

Woman was made to be a helper to her husband (Gen. 2:18). To many people that smacks of servility. Not so. Eve was created to be an equal counterpart to Adam or as has been said, “Eve was God’s finishing touch for Adam.” Woman reflects God as Helper in her helping role. Wives are to play a significant role in helping their husbands with their work, relationships, thinking through problems, and by giving encouragement.

Now comes some bad news. The image of God in Eve became horribly distorted by sin (Gen. 3:7). It gets worse. All of Eve’s children are afflicted with congenital spiritual blindness and a nature which is at war with God. Try to imagine what it’s like for humans to be alienated from God and one another. On second thought, imagination is not that necessary when it comes to sin’s damage. Unbelief and selfishness lie at the root of every woman’s troubles. Unless God intervenes, a woman cannot glorify God. Her moral character is cemented in self-centeredness. Her relationships are fractured by jealousy, suspicion, gossip, anger, quarrels, to name just a few of the serpents slithering in the darkness of the sinful heart.

Is the restoration of the image of God possible? Is there a remedy? Actually, there is. We don’t know how much Eve understood when she was told she would have a descendent who would be the remedy for her spiritual plight. The first mother was given a revelatory glimpse of the ultimate victory of the Messiah over Satan. If Eve could sing for us now, the lyrics might be something like this.

I am woman. Hear me shout praise to God.
 In numbers too big to ignore there is hope.
 I’ve been down and now by God’s grace
 I’ve been lifted up in forgiveness for my sins.
 Satan can’t have me again.
 I now belong to Christ.
 The eternally wise God gave Himself in the pain of death
 for my sin.
 He paid the price.
 And look how much I have gained.
 My Savior is strong.
 He is invincible.
 He has transformed me into the image of Himself
 from one marvelous degree of glory to another.
 I am woman made new by Christ.

Gay Marriage – A Call for Moral Clarity, Part 1 (June 2, 2013)

Rhode Island, Delaware, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Washington, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire. What do these states have in common? They are states allowing so-called same-sex marriage. And, most recently, the Minnesota Senate voted to legalize same-sex marriage.

Even though one may oppose this trend, there appears to be a growing acceptance of the homosexual agenda. A book by this very title written in 2003 issued a warning that “Radical homosexual activists readily acknowledge that the redefinition of marriage is just a tool in their

greater agenda to reorder society. If many homosexual activists have their way, Christ's message of redemptive love will be silenced and those who share it through the preaching of the uncensored words of Scripture will be punished.”ⁱ

The shift in public thinking regarding same-sex marriage has been rapid. Even ten years ago who could have predicted that the traditional understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman would be made to stand on its head? It is astounding how quickly moral, social, and political resistance has melted. Decades of indoctrination through television, movies, and universities supported by the media and legal strategies have placed our nation on the precipice of redefining marriage. “Will and Grace,” “Brokeback Mountain,” activist judges, and morally malleable politicians have placed those committed to traditional marriage on the defensive. “Today, love wins” said Sen. Tony Lourey of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota. That vacuous platitude seems to be all it takes to persuade the undecided.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago and author of The Truth about Same-Sex Marriage traces the roots of the success of the same-sex marriage agenda to the 1960s. The sexual revolution with its call for sexual self-expression, the pornography industry, and the Playboy philosophy “shifted the center of gravity from marital unfaithfulness to personal enjoyment.”ⁱⁱ Add the emergence of the national value of “tolerance” and the resulting belief that people “could do whatever they wished, and it was improper to judge their conduct . . . with these streams flowing into our national culture, much of America was ready for same-sex marriage.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are questions that Christians must answer as the tsunami of same-sex marriage advocacy sweeps over our land. The following answers proposed are unapologetically based on a biblical worldview. At the same time those who wish to redefine marriage have their own belief system. One set of values is based on what God has revealed and the other is based upon man-made beliefs.

How did things get to this point regarding same-sex marriage? Though the answer to this question has been pursued already, a further word needs to be added. Homosexual activists have been successful in advancing the same-sex marriage agenda. This has occurred through the cooperation of the media in getting “gayness” presented in multiple venues such as movies, sitcoms, documentaries, the portraying of gays as victims, threatening boycotts against businesses, and charging opponents as bigots, mean-spirited, and intolerant. It has worked. Who could have guessed that a pillar of civilization, marriage as between a man and a woman, would be redefined to include men marrying men and women marrying women?

Why did God create the institution of marriage? God is the designer and the Creator of the universe. He gave marriage to the human race for the purpose of procreation and the pleasure of intimacy between a husband and a wife. Marriage demonstrates the unity and plurality of God in the Trinity. It provides the protective and nurturing environment for child-rearing. “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24-25).

Isn't so-called same-sex marriage really a matter of equal rights? One argument used to defend gay marriage is the assertion that it is a matter of civil rights. This is deceptively misleading. The truth is that we have equal rights for all Americans whether they are homosexual or heterosexual

in their orientation. Those who have same-sex attraction are not denied equal rights. As a man I had the right to marry my wife. A woman can marry the man of her choice. Men are not prohibited from marrying women. Women are not denied the right to marry men. The issue is not about equal rights. It is about the definition of marriage. Attempts are made to equate so-called denial of civil rights of homosexuals with the civil rights movement on behalf of African Americans. This is nothing but sheer emotional demagoguery, a not-so-subtle tactic of equating the color of one's skin (not a matter of choice) with sexual behavior which is a matter of choice (the matter of choice in homosexuality will be considered further on). Discrimination based on race is morally and constitutionally wrong. It is not, however, necessarily wrong for men and women to be treated differently under the law. Discrimination based on gender differences in bathroom facilities, for example, is an acceptable social and legal arrangement.

ⁱ Alan E. Sears and Craig J. Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principle Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 99.

ⁱⁱ Erwin Lutzer, *The Truth About Same-Sex Marriage* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 18

Gay Marriage – A Call for Moral Clarity, Part 2 (June 9, 2013)

Should not two people who love one another have the right to get married, even if they are of the same sex? The slogan, “Today, love wins,” captioned a recent legislative win to legalize same-sex marriage. But this bumper sticker theology does not win. There is no law that prohibits any two people from loving one another. There are laws, however, that limit love. Close relatives cannot marry one another. An adult cannot marry a young child. Definitions are important as well. Love is not merely a romantic feeling. At its very core is truth. True love does not celebrate that which is wrong. Love “does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). It does not enjoy sin. Love cannot condone evil. The love that is the foe of sex before marriage and infidelity in marriage is the same love that prohibits same-sex behavior.

Are not arguments against same-sex marriage based on religious view disallowed because of the separation of church and state? This kind of argument is a not-so-subtle attempt to eliminate all moral opposition to same-sex marriage. But it seems to be having some success in legal battles in the courts. “Bracketing morality” out of the same-sex marriage debate is, in the words of Dr. Albert Mohler, a “profound moral revolution.” The Judeo-Christian objection to same-sex marriage or to any other support of traditional law is not permitted. What has developed is the disallowance of religious worldviews in any legislative or judicial discussion. We are left with the allowance of only secular reasons for moral or legal proposals. Mohler is correct that “on this ground the vast majority of Americans would be excluded from all public decision making.” Christians must not allow themselves to be muted on the moral issues of our day. We are faced with a dangerous era in the life of our nation. To disqualify moral arguments based on religious persuasion is to subvert the thousands of laws that rest on a moral foundation. This is civilizational suicide and, above all, rebellion against the God of creation.

What would be some of the consequences if same-sex marriage becomes the law of the land? To redefine marriage as including men marrying men and women marrying women will have the effect of legally declaring that gender no longer matters. “It would mean that those who, for religious or other reasons, wish to retain the man-woman definition of marriage will be legally

and morally as isolated as racists are today.” Those who glibly dismiss the redefinition of marriage as having no personal effect on their own marriage are breathing the fumes of moral folly. The meaning of marriage will be changed for everyone. Definitions and laws change values (e.g., civil rights legislation). Among the harms perpetrated will be the minimizing of gender differences, the marginalizing and ridicule of advocates of traditional/conjugal marriage and viewed by the state as guilty of discrimination. For social-service institution government contracting and licensing will be conditioned on compliance with same-sex marriage standards. Christian adoption agencies will experience legal reprisals. Public schools will have to teach students about same-sex marriage. Proponents of traditional/conjugal marriage will be labeled bigots (as they are at the present time).

The probabilities and possibilities of a cultural and governmental squeeze against those who believe and teach God’s view of marriage are not imaginary. We are told to not worry, “a form of gay marriage has been legal in Denmark since 1989, and most of the rest of Scandinavia from not long after.” Such reassurances are not in touch with the realities of the bait and switch policies already at work in our society (e.g., civil unions, “Proposition 8,” DOMA, and activist judges). The legalization of same-sex marriage will create an entirely different moral atmosphere in our society. This is no benign issue. Are we at the mercy of so-called “societal evolution” regarding marriage? Intended and unintended consequences of same-sex marriage will be clods of dirt on the coffin of a society that redefines what God has clearly defined, the institution of marriage.

ⁱ Albert Mohler, “Bracketing Morality – The Marginalization of Moral Argument in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate,” 1 April 2013, <http://www.albertmohler.com>.

ⁱⁱ Albert Mohler, “Mere Moral Opprobrium? Far More than Marriage Is on Trial,” 29 Jan. 2010, <http://www.albertmohler.com>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dennis Prager, “Why a Good Person Can Vote Against Same-Sex Marriage,” 29 March 2013, <http://www.dennisprager.com>.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, Robert P. George, “What is Marriage?” (New York: Encounter Books, 2012). 53-72

^{vi} Scott Bidstrup, “Gay Marriage: The Arguments and the Motives,” 5 April 2013, <http://www.bidstrup.com>.

Eight Days in October (October 13, 2013)

It was the church on the corner. I passed it often. It was only two blocks from where I lived. Little did I know that what took place in that church every October would change my life. As I write this, I am looking at some of the Missions Conference programs from the 1950s. Seven months after I was converted, I attended my first World Missions Conference. Things were never the same afterward. World class speakers, missionary reports, films (grainy black and white, but they communicated) about people who needed to know about Jesus Christ, lively singing, and the annual faith promise. It was all new to me and God used it to give me a new outlook on my future.

Fifty-seven years later. It’s October and time for Berachah’s annual World Missions Conference. On Saturday, November 5, 1983, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, President of Columbia International

University, conducted a Great Commission Workshop at Berachah. He preached twice on Sunday morning; “Prayer for Missions” at 9:45 a.m. and “Compassion- The Heart of God and World Missions” at 10:50 a.m. Our first Missions Conference was launched.

How will God use our visiting missionaries and special speakers in your life the next two weekends? We can know this, the Lord told Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem, that it was “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The city walls and the temple in Jerusalem were a wreck. The rebuilding task was daunting. Human skill and energy were not enough. It would take God’s Spirit to make it all happen. So it is with us. Our best efforts cannot create good attendance, empower the speakers, stir us to greater world missions’ commitment, send our own people, and increase giving to fund our missionaries. God the Spirit must work if obstacles are to be overcome and we are to be motivated to new levels of involvement in the Great Commission.

We have some praying to do. Will you commit yourself to pray for our eight days of World Missions Conference? As I remember back to 1956, the church I attended had people sign up to pray for every hour days before the conference began. We all can do our part in prayerful intercession. Pray at mealtimes. Take fifteen minutes and break away from your routine and pray. Husbands and wives can pray together. Have the children join with you at supper time to pray. For those of us who don’t sleep too well, some of those waking moments can be used to pray. Create your own times and ways, but let’s pray that God’s Spirit will move and work among us in a powerful way.

The Tears of a Nation - November 22, 1963 (November 24, 2013)

The president of Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Herman Hoyt, called me to his office. Any nervousness about the occasion soon dissipated when I learned his reason for talking with me. Dr. Hoyt would be driving to Atlanta to speak in a Bible Conference Thanksgiving week. He wanted me to accompany him and help with the driving. What a gift. It gave me the opportunity for a free ride home for Thanksgiving and I could visit my sweetheart in Columbia, South Carolina.

It became a ride I would never forget. We left Winona Lake, Indiana shortly after noon on Friday, November 22, 1963. When we reached Indianapolis, we stopped for gas. The service station (what they use to be called) attendant told us that the president had been shot. Our drive through the night was filled with continuing radio coverage of the events that had transpired that day in Dallas, Texas. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated at 12:30 p.m. (cst) while riding in an open convertible in a motorcade. He was only five minutes away from the planned destination. A gunman had fired the fatal shots which killed the President instantly. They came from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas.

The grief of the nation was palpable. Not since the bombing of Pearl Harbor had America undergone such immediate, collective shock. People everywhere were in tears, stunned by the loss of the leader of the free world. Had World War III begun? Who was next? Television in its nascent news gathering capability did its best to inform a grieving nation of unfolding events. Many things changed that day. A vibrant, popular president was gone. With him his optimism, wit, dreams for America, and courageous stand against communism were interred with his bones.

National grief. The tears of a nation ran freely. No matter what one's political persuasion it was a time for mourning. Introspection set in. Who had pulled the trigger? Why had he done it? Was it society's fault? The elite political and media establishment were sure it was a right-wing fanatic. The fact that the assassin was a lone gunman, a communist, quickly got lost in a flood of biased talking heads, reporters, and authors. How did the president's death alter America's future? We will never know. But to those of us who lived through the tragic events of that day in Dallas, we will always remember the sadness, insecurity, and loss of national innocence that swept over our land. We were not the same again.

Imagine. What if we had another kind of national mourning? A time of grief over our sins against a holy and righteous God is long overdue. There is a precedent for a nation being warned that unless it repented it would be overthrown. This happened in ancient Nineveh. The prophet Jonah engaged in street preaching, declaring "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." A miracle occurred. "The people of Nineveh believed God." Assyria was a proud and godless nation. In the god Nebo they had trusted, not in the true God. Their sin, the shortness of time and God's impending judgment got their attention. In response to Jonah's message they grieved deeply over their sin and demonstrated this by putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes. Scratchy clothing and dirt baths were an appropriate way to express their sorrow over sin.

God did not judge Nineveh. That great city didn't get what it deserved. This is grace. God withdrew His burning anger. America, where are we? The prophets of a secular society want to erase anything that smacks of God in public life. Lying has become a national past time. We are being told that the presence of a father or a mother is not important in a home. Fraud, embezzlement, and Ponzi schemes have become a flourishing industry. Carbon footprints are viewed as more horrendous than babies killed in the womb. Our material prosperity and comforts are more important than God's wisdom. But the greatest sin of all is to have disregarded God's gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Treating Christ as if He were merely a great teacher, a good man, and denying that He is the only way to the Father is to hate Jesus. The sinner's only hope is to fall down before the cross of Jesus and cry out for God's forgiveness. Sinner, mourn over the tragedy of having disbelieved.

America would do well to take a lesson from repentant and believing Israel at the Second Coming of Christ, "when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10). That is a national time of mourning that must come before the door of opportunity closes and the Day of Judgment arrives. Let the tears fall that He suffered and died for our sins, and we did not care.

"Gotcha" (December 8, 2013)

It happened one morning. It's my daily routine to begin my day with Bible reading and prayer. This is my daily routine. However, I soon discovered I was one day behind in my one-year Bible reading plan which meant on that particular morning I needed to read 1 Corinthians 9 to 16. How could I find time to do this with a daunting "to-do" list for the day waiting on me? Oh, the burdens of a retired pastor. I found myself chafing at having to read a longer portion of Scripture than usual. Then it dawned upon me that I was grouching about a sense of personal inconvenience

over reading God's Word. It was a "gotcha" moment. I needed a reality check. It just so happened that I had recently been studying Zechariah 7.

Some explanation is necessary. In Zechariah 7 a delegation from the remnant of Jews in Babylon had come to Jerusalem by way of Bethel. They came to inquire of the priests and the prophets if it was necessary to continue observing certain fasts. They had a fasting-more-but-enjoying-it-less problem. For seventy years the Jews in Babylon had fasted four times each year to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem. They wanted to know if these national fasts were still necessary. These fast days had become a burden. Why should they go on grieving, especially when a return to Jerusalem was now a reality? Frankly, the routine was not enjoyable.

That became a "gotcha" moment. The delegation was rebuked. A religious routine voluntarily assumed had become an empty ritual. Complaint and self-pity had replaced genuine sorrow and repentance. They received a necessary dose of biblical medicine. God wants truth in the heart. Hearing and doing God's Word is more important than meaningless formality.

How easily we fall into this trap. We take on responsibilities and then let them become burdensome and joyless. Grumpiness, grievances, and dissatisfaction take over. Here we are getting deeper into the Christmas holiday and New Year season. Places to go and things to do. Much of it for other people. That's good. God wants us to love other people, to be merciful, and serve Him with joy.

The Jews in Zechariah's day had to be reminded that love for God is demonstrated in our personal relationships. Living out the gospel can be eclipsed by grimly going about our spiritual disciplines and our duties for others. Our Bible reading can become a tolerated inconvenience. Church attendance, giving to Grace Promise, nursery duty, teaching a Sunday School class, home schooling, dropping off and picking up our children, school functions, (the list is endless) can be riddled with shortness of temper and resentment. Before you know it, we can find ourselves ticked at God for giving us so much to do. At that moment we need to call a time out. Think about it. Maybe we have taken on more than we should have. Or we have allowed our motives to come off the rails. We need to pray. "Lord, fill my heart with your joy and let Christ be seen in my actions. Help me, lest I misbehave in traffic. Grant me patience when a host of obligations show up at the same time."

One day all our busyness will be over. There will be no more Christmases, errands to run, people to encourage, and unsaved people who need to see and hear about Jesus Christ. This life will be done. Church services will be a thing of the past. The last meal will have been prepared and served. The children will be grown and on their own. Heaven's gate will be a step away. Will I have been lovingly obedient to the Lord? Will joy have marked my way? Will I discover that much of what I had done was driven by the wrong motives? Now is the time to pause, think, reflect, and repent where it is necessary.

My "gotcha" moment was a whistle I needed to blow on myself. There will probably be other times like it. Better that way than not at all.

Who is the Real Jesus? (December 22, 2013)

Jesus Christ was a genuine man who enjoyed good meals, drank cool water to slake his thirst, slept hard and dreamed, walked until his feet hurt, talked, planned trips, listened, learned how to read and write, felt pain, grew weary, enjoyed being with friends, played with the kids in his neighborhood, loved his mother and father, got up early in the morning to pray, memorized Genesis to Malachi, loved the smell of fresh bread, loved blue skies and sun sets, felt the rain on his face, enjoyed a warm fire on cold days, cried, laughed, rejoiced in being obedient to his heavenly Father, grieved, and died.

Jesus Christ never sinned once in his life. He endured all kinds of temptation but never yielded to any of them. He never lied, never sinned in his anger, never got drunk, never slandered anyone, never cheated in a game as a child, never lusted after a woman, never stole anything, always obeyed his parents when growing up, never hated anyone, always forgave those who sinned against him, didn't hold grudges, never coveted anything, was never envious or jealous, was always perfectly content, never complained, paid his taxes, knew what it was to be betrayed by a friend, felt the sting of slander and mockery, loved everyone and his heavenly father with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Because Jesus Christ was the perfect man you and I have a Savior who could make the perfect sacrifice for sin. He alone could die in my place and pay the penalty that was due me. I have a perfect example of how God wants me to live. I have the promise of a new body one day that will be like his. I have a High Priest who can sympathize with my experiences. And I will spend eternity with him.

Jesus Christ was and is the God of the universe, not some super angel, or superman. He knew he was God. He possessed every attribute of God in his incarnational life. He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He created every molecule in the universe, the stars, the moon, planet earth, animals, and man and woman. There never was a time when he did not exist.

Because Jesus Christ was God, he could bear the full penalty for all my sins. If Jesus is not fully God, then there is no Christianity. We are left with a theological castle of sand. Jesus Christ was both perfect man and fully God and no less of either. He was full deity and full humanity in one person. The baby in the manger was the God who upholds the universe. The man asleep in the boat was the God who created the wind and water. The Jesus who hung on the cross did not fake his death. He gave up his life voluntarily. His heart stopped beating. His brain waves ceased their activity. In three days he came back to life, ascended back to heaven and will one day return to this earth to establish his kingdom.

Jesus Christ is the One who deserves to be supreme in our lives. The pursuit of God is the pursuit of likeness to Jesus Christ, to love him, to revere him, think about him, to teach about him, to obey him, and to tell others the good news of the forgiveness of sins he offers. He is to have the preeminence in all things.

This is the real Jesus. How real is he to you? Do you have the eternal life that he offers? Do you love him? Are you living with his purposes in mind, to reflect him, to honor him, to bring him pleasure? Are you ashamed of him? Do your thoughts run to him when you awaken in the morning? Are you looking forward to his Second Coming? I hope to see you there.

Copperheads, Wallets, and God's Love (June 8, 2014)

Two close calls in one week. Beth and I were taking a walk on our street. I was on the inside next to the edge. As we neared our house it happened in a split second. I wasn't looking down, but I did catch out of the corner of my eye something striking out at my ankle. I jumped and saw an eighteen-inch copperhead pulling back for another go at it. He had been startled and was defending himself. I was startled and determined that his attack mode would no longer be used. About six inches was all that kept me from being bitten and having to take a trip to the hospital. Did I thank God? You bet I did. Just check the pictures on the internet of copperhead snake bites. It's not pretty.

I was running some errands and was pleased that my shopping missions were going so efficiently. On my last stop I got out of my truck and by habit felt for my wallet on the way into the store. It wasn't there. What?! Being so compulsive about the location of my wallet, I panicked. How could this have happened? Where was it? I began to break into a cold sweat. My heart was racing. I jumped into my truck and headed for the last place I used my wallet. A full-time job of damage control was flashing through my mind, and I was at that moment driving without a license. My prior parking space showed no signs of a wallet. I rushed into the grocery store and headed for the lady who had checked me out. She saw me and immediately said, "You dropped your wallet. It can be picked up at the customer service counter." I could have hugged her. Relief washed over me. Did I thank God? Absolutely, though it did take a while to collect myself as I contemplated what had nearly happened. I praised God for sparing me from someone else enjoying a shopping spree at my expense and my having to spend a day at the DMV, among other things.

Christians ought to thank God for His deliverances. He gives them in a variety of ways every day. Sometimes they are really big things but most of the time they are mercies that go right by us. We would do well to be more alert to the invisible hand of God's providence in our lives.

But wait a minute. What if that copperhead had bitten me and I had to endure the pain and incapacitation it would have brought? Would God have been in that set of circumstances? And the wallet? Think of the losses and inconveniences that would have been created. Here is where the wheels of our theology meet the road. I am immediately reminded of a list of bad stuff that is guaranteed not to be a denial of Christ's love. As the Son of God was not alienated from the Father's love as He bore our sins on the cross, so the child of God is not severed from God's love when terrible things happen to him (Rom. 8:35-39). Trouble, distress, persecution, lack of food, abject poverty, dangers, and even being murdered for Christ's sake do not mean that God is not working in His loving way to accomplish His purposes in our lives.

Last Sunday Pastor Culbertson told us of their family's gratitude to God for sparing their daughter, Katie, the complications of a malignant brain tumor. It was benign and her recovery has been good. Yet, at the same time in his expression of thanksgiving, Justin clearly affirmed to us that God would have been no less loving if Katie's brain tumor had been cancerous or there had been life-long consequences. Justin, we are grateful for walking us through the truth that though our circumstances change, God does not.

Thank God for keeping us from being bitten by poisonous snakes and seeing to it that our wallets fall into the right hands. But God is good and full of lovingkindness when in His infinite wisdom He unleashes a pack of miseries on us. May we praise Him and trust Him even then.

The Church and Hospitals (August 3, 2014)

We walked into the emergency room at Piedmont Fayette hospital on Thursday, June 19 at 3:20 p.m. This began a total of two weeks in two different hospitals, IV therapy, antibiotics, multiple medications, EKGs, an Ultra-sound, a CAT Scan, four different doctors, scores of nurses, technicians, vital signs checked, germ warfare, and hospital beds that were paradoxically helpful and uncomfortable, and finally the joyful time of being released to convalesce at home.

We had never experienced so much time within the confines of the medical community. Pastoral ministry has given me numerous opportunities to visit the sick in hospitals. But this was different. My wife was now a patient. Two infections, Atrial Fibrillation, a fever, and an ovarian tumor received the attention of people we had never met before.

In the emergency room we were treated with courtesy and immediate medical assistance. Thankfully, the physician on duty in the ER was the sepsis doctor. Sepsis, as we learned, is a fatal whole-body inflammation caused by severe infection. Powerful antibiotics are necessary to kill this infection. We could not have asked for better care. Once Beth was admitted to a room there were visits from the internal medicine doctor. He was kind, thorough in his explanations as to what was going on, and not in a hurry. The nurses were untiring in their care. They were patient and treated Beth with compassion. Upon leaving the hospital a PICC was inserted in Beth's arm. This was followed by visits to the Infusion Center where a pump was provided for continued antibiotics while at home. It was there we met a nurse who was so gentle and helpful. We will never forget her. Standing on her feet all day long we never felt hurried as she patiently answered our questions and taught us how to use the portable pump.

On Monday, July 21 surgery was performed at Piedmont Hospital on Peachtree Street. Within one hour and twenty minutes the surgeon had removed an ovarian tumor the size of a small orange. Within minutes we were met by the doctor to tell us that there was no cancer involved. He was kind, answered our questions, and left us hopeful and thankful to God. From that Monday to Friday Beth was in the care of shifts of nurses and technicians in and out of room 207. Without exception we were treated professionally, but not in a cool and aloof way. When needed they came to the room cheerfully, helpfully, and made us feel at home. We got to know them and appreciate the lives they live for others.

Yes, we know they received a paycheck for their work. But still they were fellow human beings with families and demands upon them we didn't know about. In not one instance did we encounter grumpiness, complaining, rudeness, or impatience. This was true all through both hospital experiences. Every doctor and nurse and technician had time for us and treated us with respect and charity. We were strangers in their work environment with a room not far from the nurses' station. We overheard their conversations which evidenced mutual respect and cooperation. We can honestly say that we spent almost two weeks in a culture of professionalism and genuine concern for our well-being.

Is not the local church a hospital that serves with eternity in view? It offers emergency room treatment for those whose lives are broken. The church is to be place of convalesce. Spiritual infections are treated. Heart issues are addressed. Nourishment from the Word of God is offered. Spiritually gifted people bring their services to one another and administer healing to those wounded by sin. Do guests and newcomers see us as respecting and loving one another? The last thing hurting people need is an aloof and unloving experience. The pursuit of personal comforts and routines, while ignoring the hurting, is a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God calls every one of us to a church culture that greets people with cheerfulness and availability, desiring not only to help but to comfort in the name of Jesus Christ.

Wise Up (August 24, 2014)

“A watched pot never boils.” “A penny wise and a pound foolish.” “Don't cry over spilt milk.” “Don't put all your eggs in one basket.” “Don't throw out the baby with the bath water.” “If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” “Never miss a good chance to shut up.” “The wish is the father of the deed.” We all know what a proverb is. There are hundreds of them, and we grow up using them more than we realize. A proverb is a general principle to help in life's experiences. Or we could say regarding biblical proverbs, that proverbs are divine wisdom in short sentences.

The book of Proverbs fell into my mental lap when I was just months old, spiritually that is. As a new Christian I was challenged with the value of immersing my mind in the bite size truths of Proverbs. But before we take one of these truth-bites, let's read the “Nutrition Facts” on the outside of the package.

Proverbs was written in order to apply the bigger moral truths of the Ten Commandments to specific situations in life. In so doing the youth of Israel would be prepared for life. There is a way God wants us to live in this world and wisdom is the word to describe that way. To put it another way, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). What does the fear of the Lord look like in everyday life? Let's consider one more “Nutrition Fact.” Wisdom must be defined. Wisdom is skillful living. Take a cabinet maker for example. A good carpenter knows what tools he needs, how to use them, and most of all, how to craft a beautiful set of cabinets. I have seen it work. We have kitchen cabinets that display the skilled hands that made them. They look good and they make work in the kitchen much easier.

Proverbs 10 will serve us in delivering some of these bites of truth. Proverbs 10:2 says, “Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death.” The truth is, wisdom tells us that right living is the best insurance policy. The pursuit of financial gain without God promises what it cannot provide. What are “ill-gotten gains” (“wickedness”)? It is achieving material success by violating divine standards. Other proverbs corroborate this truth; “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice” (Prov. 16:8). “A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days” (Prov. 28:16). Financial gain without moral judgment melts like ice on hot pavement. We read this truth again in Proverbs 13:11, “Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it.” One good example of this is Ahab's land grabbing scheme prompted by

his wife Jezebel. He wanted Naboth's vineyard really bad. He got two scoundrels to say that Naboth had cursed God and the king. Their lie worked and Naboth was executed by stoning. Ahab got his vineyard. There is more to the story, but it is enough to say that things did not go well for Ahab and his partner in crime.

Bound up in this proverb is the reality that only God can satisfy us. Money is like drinking honey to quench one's thirst. Learning contentment, not comparing ourselves, not being ashamed of what one has, learning the habit of gratitude, recognizing I may love turning a deal more than pursuing God. All these have depths of consequences that can't be measured by money. Parents would do well to teach their children the place of money in life and its God-pleasing use. (1) Instruct them in how to express their love for God in developing a budget. (2) Give them the opportunity to earn money to give to God's work. Sweat equity is a great investment. (3) Have some conversations with them about the evil nature of envy, what it is and where it leads. (4) Assist them in opening up a bank account in which they can place their earnings and gifts. (5) Explain and exemplify what is the best way to use a credit card, learning the wisdom of waiting. (6) Keep before them the fact that the family that tries to enrich itself by sinful means will cross swords with God.

There is a second line in Proverbs 10:2. "But righteousness delivers from death." It's amazing how much Proverbs has to say about death. One characteristic of death is that it can be a way of living. One can be cut off from life in the way it was meant to be lived. It is possible to be a spiritual zombie. So then, how does righteousness deliver one from such a death? It can keep us from a chaotic, disordered, and confused life, and an early grave. The blessing of a right relation to God is the best life, one that lays up treasures in heaven.

This big little bite of truth is a gift from God to enable His children to navigate through the treacherous waters of loving money more than loving the Master.

The Road Best Traveled (September 7, 2014)

"The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked."
Proverbs 10:3

Wisdom tells us that if we are allowed to do without, God has something better.

Loving God with all one's heart means that life will be filled with continual prosperity. Right? Wrong! A comparable statement to Proverbs 10:3 is found in Psalm 37:25 where the psalmist says he "has not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread." We must keep in mind two interpretive keys. First, this claim is made within the historical context of Israel's theocracy within the Promised Land. There were special provisions from God for Israel contingent on Israel's obedience to Him (Deut. 28; Lev. 26). Secondly, when the totality of the believer's life is considered, though there may be set backs and temporary deprivation, he is never forsaken by the Lord.

Jesus stated the truth this way, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Solomon's counsel and Jesus' word to His followers is that God will satisfy His children whether they have little or much. The apostle Paul gives his

perspective, “To this very hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless” (1 Cor. 4:11). He further adds, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor. 11:27). As I seek God, He adds all “these things” that are good for me and that will bring Him glory. Christ said, “I thirst.” The Father did not say to Him “claim the promise.” He said, “I know your thirst and I will give whatever you need to sustain you.”

We must not overlook the second statement in Proverbs 10:3, “but he [God] thwarts the craving of the wicked.” This is an example of antithetical parallelism. The second line says the opposite of the first line. One of the better commentators on Proverbs expresses it well, “The Author of all life in the end gives food to his saints, though they may hunger for a season – and finally withholds it from his enemies” (Bruce K. Waltke). Living to get what you want is the road to disappointment. Self-destruction and disaster become the wages of the desires of the wicked. Who are these wicked ones? They are those who do not seek God. They hotly pursue their idols who inevitably lead them to dissatisfaction (Hos. 2:7).

What kind of appetite do you have? Are you hungry for God or are you hungry for whatever pleases you without regard to God? Do you want more money? Why? What do you plan to do with it? Is giving to God part of the plan? Teenager, what kind of friends do you seek out? Why? What we love and what we hate tells volumes about us. What desires do you serve and obey? Try this assignment. Fill in the blank, “I want _____ more than anything else.” Then ask yourself “why?” Don’t let the word “wicked” (rasha in the Hebrew) at the end of verse 3 put you off. As Waltke has said, “When man breaks free from God and does not get his wisdom from him . . . he then becomes a rasha, a wicked person.” Following one’s impulses and cravings divorced from God’s wisdom is the road to eternal loss.

But there is an off-ramp on this road to self-destruction. It is called repentance. The prodigal son in Luke 15 is an example. After years of wasted time “he came to his senses” and confessed, “I have sinned against heaven” (Lk. 15:17, 18). His Father was more than willing to receive him. That is the way best traveled.

The Key to the Future (September 14, 2014)

A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame. Proverbs 10:4, 5

Wisdom tells us that the key to the future is today.

The harvester ant is an amazing creature. It has an economy which depends largely on seed gathering. They usually live where food is scarce, and competition is keen. How do they feed themselves? They collect seeds in the growing season for use during the dry season when this food is not available. God made these creatures in such a way that they know how to get ready for the future. Solomon, an astute observer of nature, singles the harvest ant out as an example of industrious foresight (Prov. 6:6-11).

Every generation needs proper training early in life about the ABCs of wise living. Not all poverty is the fault of the individual, but everyone needs to understand the value of work and the

danger of laziness. If Israel was going to prosper in the land God had given them, personal responsibility was a must. The issue is lazy hands versus diligent hands. This one is not hard to figure out. A good work ethic can protect one from depending on others. Laziness is the refusal to do what one ought to do. A lazy person may be very busy, but busy doing the wrong things.

Proverbs gives us various causes of poverty. *Too much talk and not work is unwise* (“In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” 14:23). *A lack of generosity has its consequences* (“There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, but it results only in want.” 11:24). *A case of the “hurry-ups” can create waste of effort and money* (“The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.” 21:5). Haste makes waste. Poor planning, shortcuts, and shoddy work are a recipe for financial loss. *Pleasure seeking as a way of life is not the way to prepare for the future* (“He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.” 21:17). Spend your money unwisely and one day you may wonder why you are in debt. *Oppression of the poor carries with it its own penalty* (“He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself, or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty” 22:16). God does not smile upon a selfish attitude. It has a way of coming back to bite us.

Make hay while the sun shines is the point of Proverb 10:5. Flushing the radiator, antifreeze, and a good battery can help to avoid frustration and unforeseen expenses on that below-freezing day in January. How about that furnace? Does it need servicing? Interestingly, it is said that “a son” acts wisely who gathers in the summer. A family functions better when each one is pulling his own weight. The teenager who fritters away his time expecting his parents to maintain his car and keep his room organized is an embarrassment.

The son or daughter who wishes to graduate summa cum laude from the school of God’s wisdom will need to be taught the importance of God-centered ambition. Parents, if you want to create a lazy child then encourage the fulfillment of desires without personal efforts. Let your children look for the easy way out of responsibilities. Look the other way when they use others with more money in an attempt to get ahead. Don’t be concerned when they refuse to do temporary, less than enjoyable jobs while waiting for that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It’s not a good sign when a son or a daughter places status on “prestige” positions and scoff at jobs beneath them.

The key to the future is in the heart. If we love God, we will take Him seriously. At any stage of life some well thought out goals infused with biblical priorities can prevent outcomes that dishonor God. Meeting deadlines and winning the war against procrastination are assets that yield good dividends (e.g., paying off debts and saving for a rainy day). There are doors of opportunity that God in His providence has put before us. God’s wisdom is the key that unlocks those doors.

Sowing and Reaping (September 28, 2014)

“Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot” (Proverbs 10:6, 7).

Wisdom tells us that we reap what we sow.

City and urban dwellers don't have the same day to day experience in sowing and reaping as do farmers. However, the law of nature is all around us. Take a look at our yards. I am impressed, to some degree, with lawns that are made up of one kind of grass. Then there is my lawn. Weeds and grass are equally green. I am reaping what I have sown or haven't sown as the case may be.

Solomon doesn't mince words. Real prosperity can't be measured in material terms. Under the Mosaic Covenant material blessing was promised to Israel for obedience. A curse was pronounced upon disobedience. The truth of the matter is that our deeds have consequences. *The Message* (a paraphrase) puts it this way, "Blessings accrue on a good and honest life, but the mouth of the wicked is a cave of abuse." Notice the contrast. The righteous (those who obey God's law) prosper the entire community. Their deeds yield a wonderful crop of good things - honesty, generosity, and peace. The wicked (those who turn their backs on God's law) produce a crop of violence, brutality, and dishonesty. Their evil is written on all over their faces ("mouth"). It is plain to see. How often do we tolerate the vices that we personally practice?

Communities reap what they sow. People get the kind of government they deserve. Continuing to elect people who lie, cheat, and steal creates an oppressive, harsh, and dangerous environment. Those who despise God's moral law cannot be trusted. We seemed to be plagued by a lack of honest leaders. The daily news is filled with the latest commissioner, treasurer, bank official, CEO who have taken and given bribes. The love of money eclipses the fear of God. A judge commits sexual infidelity with a defense attorney. Principals and teachers devise ways to doctor student test results to create the illusion of good scores. Athletes use performance enhancing drugs and lie about it. Parents have no time for God and children follow hard in their footsteps. It's all a poisonous harvest of moral evil.

The words of Proverbs 10:7 are often used by Jews at the funerals of genuinely good people. "A good and honest life is a blessed memorial" (*The Message*). The opposite point of view is expressed in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* where Mark Anthony says, "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones." The sage of Proverbs wants us to know that a reputation follows you wherever you go, even to the grave. We reap what we sow. What kind of "fame" are you and I creating? This is not to be confused with the accolades lavished upon famous people, great athletes, movie stars, philanthropists, business tycoons, and such. What is your character resume? What do people think when your name is mentioned?

Consider your life as one of planting seeds. This truth has been expressed in the following way: Sow a thought, reap an action, sow an action reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character, sow a character reap a destiny. Of course, this sequence needs some biblical legs to make it walk, but it helps. The apostle Paul in writing to the Galatian believers admonished them to "not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7). The Christian life is likened to two possible kinds of soil: the flesh and the Spirit. The seed of the will in the soil of a sinful desire produces the seedling of sin. Plant enough seeds of disobedience and eventually a crop of corruption will result. On the other hand, plant the seeds of obedience to God and a crop of rewards will be harvested in heaven (Gal. 6:8).

The seeds of generosity can grow into lives changed forever for God's glory (Lk. 16:9). This is the point Paul is driving home in the above quote from Galatians. There are other kinds of seeds also. The seeds of deeds of love and compassion sown throughout one's life can change the entire landscape of relationships. The seeds of moral courage and uncompromised love for God give children the opportunity to grow up in a home nourished by the tree of life ("The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise" (Prov. 11:30). A life of obedience to God gives those around us the benefit of living in the shade of truth.

Driving on Empty (October 5, 2014)

"The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin."
Proverbs 10:8

Wisdom tells us that we are not to be all mouth and no mind.

Driving on empty. It's a foolish pleasure and has happened to many of us. We ignore the gas gauge when the needle is on empty, but we think we can go just a little further. We may even pass a gas station in a hurry to get where we are going. And then, in the middle of nowhere, not even gas fumes will help us.

The wise in heart are those who are captivated by the Word of God. They refuse to drive on empty. The proverb before us tells us, to put it bluntly, "shut-up and listen." The smart person listens to sound advice, keeping in mind that "smart" means wise. One can be intelligent yet morally stupid. You are smart to sit and listen to God's Word with the intent of having your life conformed to what Scripture teaches. James, the brother of Jesus, sounds the same note when he says, "be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (Jas. 1:19). The same "word of truth" (the gospel) that saves us is what sustains us through trials and temptations. "Lack of listening, combined with lack of restraint in speech, leads to ill-tempered action" (ESV Study Bible).

Spiritual attention deficit disorder is that condition which afflicts those who can't concentrate on what the Bible teaches. Are you teachable? Sermons are not the opportunity for the mind to go free range grazing, chasing every thought that flies by. Put a harness on your mind when truth is being taught. Take notes. Grasp the implications of what is being said and think of ways to create action. Parents, we should want our children to learn respect for God's Word. Do they see a love for the Bible in the lives of their parents? If you play fast and loose with the Scriptures what message are you sending to the next generation in your family?

Who is it that wears the dunce cap in this proverb? He is the "babbling fool." Bruce Waltke expresses the jest of the thought; "The fool is so full of himself that instead of having the capacity to accept wisdom he dangerously prattles out his own 'clever opinions,' which are devoid of true wisdom." A fool's mouth keeps on running when his mind is empty. He doesn't just run out of verbal gas. He wrecks his car ("will come to ruin"). It is folly to talk more than you listen. Self-absorbed people are this way. They are more interested in being heard than they are in being instructed. At its very beginning the Book of Proverbs sounds this trumpet; "fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7). To despise means "to hold in contempt, to belittle, to ridicule." It is dangerous to follow those who mock the Bible and try to live life their way. It's not a matter of just being morally accident prone. They victimize others and themselves.

Take a moment. Are there any symptoms indicating you may be less than willing to show your allegiance to God? Consider what it means to be mentally and spiritually driving on empty. The human mind is never actually totally morally empty. We begin to formulate values very early in life. Also, to be considered is the law of God written on the heart. Our consciences, imperfect as they are, do in many situations accuse us when we have done wrong (Rom. 2:15). The emptiness of thinking without divinely revealed wisdom can be identified in countless ways.

Let's consider who is a fool within the truth preserve of Proverbs. The fool fears man more than he fears God. Getting wisdom is more important than getting wealthy ("for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her" Prov. 8:11). Fools fly along the highway of life chasing their own happiness without regard to what it means to serve God. Chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage govern the thoughts, plans, and actions of the wise. Fools mock God's standards (Prov. 5:15-20; 6:24-35). This is only a sampling. The empty thought processes of the fool span any number of areas in life: Politics (e.g., utopian promises), religion ("All religions lead to God."), and self-concepts ("It is important to develop good self-esteem."). Read *Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind* by Anthony Selvaggio for a fly-over of follyville.

Fueling and refueling in God's revealed truth is always necessary. There is nothing sillier and more absurd than when the mouth is running, and the truth gage reads empty.

Boots on the Ground (October 19, 2014)

Boots on the Ground. How many times have we heard these four words used among the talking heads? Should we send American troops to the Middle East to fight ISIS? Can ISIS be defeated solely by an air war? The debate rages on with no resolution. To have boots on the ground means a combat ready infantry who can maneuver, engage the enemy, coordinate air attacks, and defeat the enemy. Wars are not won without foot soldiers.

This is a subject worthy of further discussion, but not now. I am thinking about missionaries at home and abroad who are the equivalents to boots on the ground in combat for the kingdom of God. Our church presently financially supports sixteen missionary couples. This in no way means that all of God's children in everyday responsibilities are not infantry for the gospel. However, our missionaries are in unique situations in places that are not immediately accessible for most of us. It's a time-honored and biblical arrangement which makes it possible for our church to be more effective in carrying out the Great Commission. Let's review what those "boots on the ground" are doing.

Paul and Emily Bell live and serve in Gorazde, Bosnia. They are working with a church planting team along with Steve and Kim Reitz. Both couples are learning the Bosnian culture and language. Paul is now preaching in Bosnian. We hear a lot about Islam. The Reitzs and Bells work in the Hope Community Center which offers a variety of ways for declaring the good news about Jesus Christ in the midst of a Muslim population.

Jody and Barbara Crain are seasoned missionaries whose faithfulness in church planting in the Philippines gives them a new set of opportunities. They assist churches and missionaries around the world in developing fresh and innovative ways of taking the gospel into limited access areas.

Emmanuel and Sucheta Endigeri have served Christ in Trinidad for over thirty-three years. Because they are there, thousands of Hindus and Muslims have heard the gospel, lives have been transformed, and churches have been planted.

Eric and Amanda Flintoff are our gospel people in Senegal, West Africa. Heat, dust, learning two new languages, and experiencing the adventures of third world living have not deterred Eric and Amanda from being Christ's boots on the ground.

Walter and Sanja Heaton are part of a team in Croatia planting a church in the city of Samobor. Croatia is not an easy place to live. Though it invites tourists to visit exotic places and stay in luxurious hotels, its darker side is one of political corruption and persistent economic problems. It is probably not where an American would want to seek the amenities of a better life. Walter and Sanja and their six children don't live in Croatia for their health and high paying jobs. They represent us in preaching, teaching, Bible translation, and gospel literature publication.

Karl and Jo Ann Kosobucki and John and Rachel Sherwood share a vision for reaching international students with gospel witness at North Carolina State University and Georgia State University respectively. Special events, hikes in the mountains, trips to the Creation Museum, hospitality, and general readiness to share the gospel define their lives in university settings.

Wes and Lori Tabor have a life-long burden for gospel work among Jewish people. They travel widely and strategically to encourage, assist, and equip believers to talk effectively about Yeshua. Paul and Kathy Schmidt serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Bible translation projects have consumed much of Paul's life, and he loves it. Together Paul and Kathy have made a difference for the gospel by making it possible for thousands of people to read the Scriptures in their own tongue. What a privilege.

Ray and Marti Williams have chosen to live "down-under" in Australia. They work alongside churches in mentoring and discipling men and women in the life-transforming power of the gospel. Part of their vision is to train carriers of the gospel to go from Australia to the ends of the earth. Gene and Martha Purvis, having served Christ in Costa Rica, are now investing their time and energy in evangelizing the millions of Hispanics living in America. Theirs has been a life rich in making friends for all eternity in the name of Christ.

Vance and Patty Woodyard left the comforts of the USA and spent thirteen years planting a church in the challenging environment and culture of Papua, New Guinea. They are now able to stand on the shoulders of that sacrificial and rewarding work by serving 260 missionaries in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. We have participated with them in a lifetime of gospel ministry because of the faithful giving of many in our church family. This can also be said of Joe and Terri Potter who gave themselves in gospel ministry in Guyana, South America. Their gifts uniquely qualified them for leading many Guyanese to Christ and bringing them along in the faith. When you have given to our Grace Promise plan of missionary support you have shared in their labors.

Frank Pass, one of our elders, delights in training pastors in connection with TMAI (The Master's Academy International). He did this for five years in Novosibirsk, Siberia and continues carrying the banner for the Great Commission by leading the World Missions Team at Berachah. Having boots on the ground in the body-life of Berachah is a special privilege by having Herman and Tami Teachout in our midst. Herman loves to fly. He and Tami live in Concord, GA where they carry out a multitude of duties in making aviation the valuable asset it is for thousands of missionaries in hard-to-reach places. Herman plays a strategic role in the air war of gospel work.

I hope you appreciate in a better way what is meant by having boots on the ground for Christ's sake. I have made our troops to pass in review so that we will not forget who they are and what they do. It is our financial gifts that help to pay for the expenses involved in keeping our infantry fully supplied. Are you with us? It is a privilege to demonstrate our allegiance to the King of kings and Lord of lords by investing in the war bonds of sacrificial giving.

Security Blankets (October 26, 2014)

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out. Proverbs 10:9

Wisdom tells us that genuine security is found in a life that is pleasing to God.

A security blanket. I suppose most, if not all of us, have had the experience of holding on to a special blanket or a stuffed animal in the early years of life. I can remember mine. Actually, there were two such objects of affection. I enjoyed a small sized blanket with silk borders. I eventually rubbed those silk borders away. There was also the stuffed panda bear. My brother and I both had one. They are long gone but not the desire for security. We all share that as part of our humanity. We were born dependent creatures. We were made for fellowship with God, but because of sin separation anxiety afflicts us all. But denial of that reality also comes early in life and is reinforced by our fellow security seekers in this world.

The book of Proverbs distinguishes itself in presenting the distilled wisdom of God. Wisdom belongs to God. Human beings possess it only to the extent that God's grace gives it. The Christian who is hungry for God's direction in how life is to be lived can be served generous portions by asking for it and seeking it. "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance" (Prov. 1:5). The craving for personal security can only be understood in its ultimate sense by what our Creator has revealed. One valuable piece of truth about us is that a true sense of security knows how to handle fear. If we have nothing to hide, then there is nothing to fear. We were made for God and only in Him do we find the sense of safety we all desire. Truth is the key. God, personified in wisdom, says, "But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster" (Prov. 1:33). This is the idea in the words, "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely." Honesty is the best policy. "Then (i.e., by conducting one's daily life in God's wisdom) you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble" (Prov. 3:23). One of the supreme benefits of being truthful inside and out is its protective value.

Guilt is the spawning ground for many fears, which is the thrust of the words, “but he who makes his way crooked will be found out.” If you want to become your own worst enemy give a cold shoulder to God’s eternal, infallible Word, and do as you please without regard to truth. I once knew a man who was unfaithful to his wife. He covered it up and refused to confess his guilt. After some time, his fear of being found out became so powerful, that even the sight of a police car sent him into a panic. The least sign of authority outside of himself produced a man as insecure as a house of sand at the beach.

The quest for security independent of God is a cruel task master. Money can be one those security blankets. It offers itself as an emotional sedative. If we can just have enough of it then all will be well. We think we can protect ourselves from the worries of life. But the seeming safe harbor of financial security fails us. It disappears in a collapsing economy. Our health breaks down. We lose our jobs. The daily news is filled with accounts of fraud, bribery, theft, and Ponzi schemes. God’s Word pierces the darkness of false security, “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5). Those who draw their security from God’s promises are content and generous people.

There are certain politicians who would have you believe that their political party and its policies will give you the security you long for. Free stuff is offered with no strings attached. Job security is promised. Cradle to the grave, government will take care of you. But it’s a ruse. Kiss freedoms good-bye. Be wary of those who attempt to stir up fears which, conveniently, only they can banish.

Fears are the fuel of insecurity. As a child my bedtime prayer was, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” It was designed to sooth me I guess, but instead it played on my thoughts. I did not want to die. I knew that there was some kind of judgment after death, but my theology was unable to unravel the fear I felt. By the grace of God, I know now what I did not know then. Everyone fears death. There are thousands of ways this craven fear attempts to create a sense of security. Man-made religions are a witness to this effort. But God has made a way to kill fear. He nailed it to a bloody cross that He “might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Heb. 2:15). The guilt that ravages us all because of sin has been slain. We can be pardoned and freed from the fear of death because of the death of Christ. That is security that is worth the price.

A Time to Vote (November 1, 2014)

One of the traps the enemies of Jesus attempted to use to discredit Him was in the form of a political question. The Pharisees and the Herodians thought they could put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. After a weak try at flattery, Jesus was asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” (Mk. 12:14). Jesus didn’t flinch. Without hesitation He drew attention to the picture of Tiberius Caesar and an inscription on a coin. The assumption was that if Jesus acknowledged loyalty to Rome, then He was disclaiming Himself as Messiah. If He said loyalty to Rome was not necessary, then He would be open to the charge of treason. Jesus in all His brilliance answered with absolute moral clarity, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk. 12:17).

Three essential truths are bound up in the reply of Jesus. (1) Loyalty to God supersedes loyalty to human government. When the state demands that Christians disobey God's moral law, they must obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19; 5:29). (2) Loyalty to God is expressed in the Christian's loyalty to human government (i.e., "All is God's. Therefore, what is Caesar's is God's."). God has delegated authority to the state and the Christian is to fulfill his responsibilities to the state (Rom. 13:1). Loyalty to the state (human government) encompasses a variety of citizenship responsibilities. (3) The supreme loyalty to which everyone is called is God-glorification. God is glorified when the Christian possesses knowledge of His revealed will and obeys it.

Those Christians who live in a democracy have "at the very least a minimal obligation to be well-informed and to vote for candidates and policies that are most consistent with biblical principles." Among other things, this means that believers in submission to the Lord should have a coherent Christian world and life view, know the moral and political issues of the day, and vote with biblical wisdom. It is currently being reported that most evangelicals do not vote. If this is true, it is an awful thing. It is actually a form of pacifism to refrain from voting. When there are issues of good and evil at stake, a failure to vote gives a green light to political candidates and policies detrimental to our national well-being. This is not a matter of trying to establish a Christian theocracy. Such a claim is the charge of those who wish to silence a Christian voice in government. We must not let this happen. No less a figure the founding of our nation, John Adams, said, "Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other." John Adams was the second president of the United States (1797-1801) and who also served as the first vice-president.

Laying out principles to guide an informed Christian at the voting booth by necessity requires brevity. It is helpful to think in terms of certain "index" issues. Their fundamental values and vision for America's future are normally revealed in the positions they take on these issues.

- I will vote for someone whose vision for America cherishes human liberty, justice, and is committed to the Constitution and does not see it as a document to be manipulated to create rights which only God can give.
- I will vote for someone who does not believe government is the vehicle to utopia. Human government is incapable of creating a perfect society. Be wary of tax and spend politicians. Social problems cannot be solved by increasing taxation.
- I will vote for someone who believes in the traditional definition of marriage. The politician who approves of same-sex marriage is a declared enemy of God's moral law and is not a friend of Judeo-Christian values.
- I will vote for someone who cherishes the value of human life and supports laws that are designed to protect it.

There are other issues vital to an office seeker's qualifications. In many cases (there are exceptions) one's party affiliation is a give-away to their political and world view beliefs.

The challenge included in a voting flyer we received in the mail recently is useful; "Don't be that person who complains about the direction of our country but doesn't even bother to vote!" My friend, I urge you to exercise your constitutional right and Christian responsibility to vote. The future of our nation is at stake.

Winking the Eye (January 18, 2015)

“Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but a babbling fool comes to ruin.” Proverbs 10:10

Wisdom tells us to watch out for people who hide and hurl.

Football is a game of fakes. The offense disguises its plays. The quarterback fakes a handoff to the running back. This momentarily freezes the linebackers. Meanwhile the wide receiver runs toward the middle of the field. The corner back goes with him. Then suddenly the pass receiver cuts to the corner of the end zone. Touchdown! Playbooks are filled with fakery, anything to fool the defense. And of course, the defense has its planned deceptions.

That’s just the way the game of football works. Deception is a ploy to win games. However, hiding and hurling is lethal in real life. We find it first in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, immediately hid and became blame throwers. They had been deceived and became deceivers. Self-deception turns out to be the worst of all lies. If you want to be a fool, be a deceiver. Be warned. There are those who use body language to deceive and camouflage ulterior motives.

Solomon tells us that if we wish to stay enrolled in the school of wisdom beware of the trickster who uses body language to conceal evil intentions. The Message says it this way, “An evasive eye is a sign of trouble ahead.” In another proverb we are told, “A worthless person, a wicked man, is the one who walks with a false mouth, who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, who points with his fingers; who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually, who spreads strife” (Prov. 6:12).

Sadly, many of us have done this. We have used body language in order to cover up a deception. Silence can be a deceptive ploy. This does not mean that we are to say everything we think. However, a well-constructed shell around us can conceal anger, lust, and revenge. A bitter husband or wife can hide behind a curtain of feigned happiness. But there will be pain. A blow-up is in the making. I am reminded of the wife who hid her anger toward her husband for years and then one day he came home and found a note on his pillow saying, “I’m gone. I’m through and I don’t want to hear from you.” Or at least words to that effect. Lies can be wrapped in deceptive body language. Deliberately telling an untruth can be done with a smile and a handshake. Creating a false impression garnished with a tone of conviction in the voice. Misrepresenting what another person has said with a holier-than-thou facial expression. Making a promise you don’t intend to keep by doubling down on your verbal pledge. If we would only say what we mean and mean what we say. That is the way of the wise.

But we are not through. There is the babbling fool. The fool runs his mouth, but his brain is biblically empty. This is scary. I can think of times when I have said something without adequate forethought. As I write this I am thinking of a particular moment when what I said was insensitive. My filter was not working very well. I’m hoping the group to whom I was speaking has bad memories. To make matters worse there is a crash and burn clause (“comes to ruin”). Ouch! I now pray often, “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth and keep watch over the door of my lips.”

Communicating hypocritically and rashly get an “F” in God’s school of wisdom. Am I sending a deceptive message by my life and words? We should aspire for transparency. Our family trip to Silver Springs, Florida is memorable. Riding in a glass bottom boat on top of crystal-clear water revealed a water world not often seen. We were looking at depths greater than we realized. A mind that is saturated with biblical truth, a tongue that tells the truth, and feet that walk in truth; that is body language that reveals the depths of God’s wisdom.

Who Killed Jesus? (April 5, 2015)

Murder mysteries capture the imagination. The plots vary but the common thread is the challenge of trying to identify the murderer. Clues come little by little, suspects emerge, and surprise turns in the plot to keep the reader or viewer off balance. Finally, the murderer is revealed. It captures our imagination and holds us in suspense.

Then there is real life with its own form of mystery and intrigue. Murders are committed and are turned into ongoing news dramas. The alleged killer is caught. We see him on the news in handcuffs looking disheveled and beleaguered. From the initial evidence it seems like an open and shut case. But court room drama changes things. The charged murderer reappears dressed nicely and flanked by high priced lawyers. The trial begins and what seemed like a sure conviction gets turned around and a verdict of not guilty is pronounced. What happened? Did someone else commit the murder? Was it a case of temporary insanity? Was it a hung jury?

The account of the arrest, trial, conviction, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the Gospels of the New Testament is a murder mystery of a different kind. How so? Isn’t it obvious that Jesus was arrested on trumped up charges, convicted by a judicial system rigged against Him, and executed by the Roman officials? But it gets more complicated. In the first place, movies about Jesus, while taking the plot of the Bible, tell us different reasons for the death of Jesus. Who did Jesus claim to be? Why was He hated so intensely by the religious establishment of His day? Why was He crucified? Was it because He was a revolutionary, a seditionist? A recent movie about Jesus tells us that He came to show us love. And for that He was killed? Jesus movies are notorious for cherry picking some of the statements made by Jesus and leaving out critical identity markers. The Jesus of the Bible becomes the victim of reductionism. He is devalued and the truth about Him is remade to suit the script writer. Inevitably the real Jesus and His true purpose for dying are left on the cutting room floor (the digital version of that).

Is there any way to get to the truth of the matter? Some vital pieces of evidence from the Gospel writers give us clues. Who was Jesus? The Scriptures rescue Jesus of Nazareth from a false identity. The apostle Peter was right when he said of Jesus, “Thou art the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Jesus gave His heavenly Father credit for making this known to Peter. The composite picture of Jesus is clear. He was full deity. He claimed that He and the Father were One (Jn. 10:30). He was perfect humanity who lived in a genuine human body (Lk. 2:52). What was Jesus’ mission on earth? As Israel’s promised Messiah He came to provide the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the sons and daughters of Adam (Jn. 1:29). He was the Passover lamb who made atonement for sinners. God the Father’s wrath fell hard upon Jesus. This was not because God the Father enjoyed such a death, but because He loves sinners (Jn. 3:16). Listen to the witness of Jesus Christ’s right-hand man, Peter, “and He Himself bore our

sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

So, who killed Jesus? Here are the suspects; The Jewish religious leaders, Judas Iscariot, the Roman officials and soldiers, and last but not least, we did. It was our sin that put Jesus on the cross. We deserved the punishment that the Son of God took for us. The sentence has been pronounced. We are guilty. But here is a huge turn in the plot. The One who was killed in our place offers forgiveness for us who are guilty. Think about it. There is no murder mystery like it. And to add an even greater twist to the story, God was the one who killed Jesus. Peter declared it on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, “this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23).

Jesus Christ was killed. However, at the same time Jesus laid down His life voluntarily. He was no helpless victim of His enemies’ violence (Jn. 10:18). What must we then do? We are under God’s judgment. We are convicted by our own sin of unbelief. Yet there is a way off death row. It is by faith alone. Saving faith is the trust in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay the penalty for our sin and who gives eternal life to all who will put their faith in Him alone for it. That is the gospel, my friend. What have you done about it? Put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That would be a beautiful, personal ending to the greatest of all murder mysteries.

Buyer Beware - The Unintended and not so Unintended Consequences of Gay Marriage (May 3, 2015)

There are products which, if we purchase them, may be a waste of money, prove to be much less than we expected, or even be dangerous to our health and well-being. In a consumer-driven society operating by a free-market economy there are reasons to be cautious about what we buy. A new or used automobile may turn out to be a “lemon.” A steady stream of mechanical problems such as a bad transmission, broken timing chain, and electrical issues can be a financial drain. Even one’s favorite ice cream can be contaminated with listeria, a bacterium which may kill you.

Hazards for consumers are not limited to automobiles and food. Certain ideas can be deadly, actually, even more unsafe than contaminated food. Ideas or beliefs are everywhere and come wrapped in very attractive packaging. A concept or value can be embraced with great expectations and yet may prove to be harmful. An untruth has the potential for destroying the best things in life.

In their book, What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense, Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George “offer a devastating critique of the idea that equality requires redefining marriage.” This is not a Christian book though its reasoning is consistent with Scriptural truth.

Most compelling is the chapter entitled “What’s the Harm?” The authors, after having compared and contrasted what is described as the conjugal view of marriage (the traditional view) and the revisionist view (same-sex marriage) ask the question, “How would gay civil marriage affect

your lives, liberties, or opportunities, or your own marriages.” The answers are breathtaking in their implications for civilization as we know it.

With explosions of reality, we are warned “that an unsound law of marriage will breed mistaken views – not just of marriage, but of parenting, common moral and religious beliefs, even friendship that will harm the human interests affected by each of these.” The legalization of same sex marriage will weaken marriage by making it harder to realize. “We all take cues from cultural norms, shaped by the law. For the law affects our ideas of what is reasonable and appropriate. It does so by what it prohibits - you might think less of drinking if it were banned, or more of marijuana use if it were allowed but also by what it approves.” Start calling marriage something other than it is and that will affect how Americans will come to think of marriage. When you change the definition of civil marriage a new meaning emerges. “Legally wedded opposite sex unions would increasingly be defined by what they had in common with same sex relationships.” A redefinition of marriage by its very nature changes the meaning of marriage. It shifts from the focus on the shared good of the unique relationship between a man and a woman, each offering to the other distinctive gender differences for their mutual good.

Same sex marriage weakens marriage by “eroding marital norms.” Marriage becomes primarily about emotions and therefore “increasingly takes on emotion’s tyrannical inconstancy.” Marriage is living out vows, but this is replaced by the elusive nature of emotions. “If marriage is primarily about emotional union, why privilege two-person unions or permanently committed ones? Children thrive when reared by their biological parents.” The genetic union of a male and female (father and mother) cannot be duplicated by an emotional union only.

The legal ideal of children being reared by a father and a mother would be legally abolished by the recognition of same sex relationships as marriages. This is critical. To affirm same sex marriage is a declaration that either a father or mother is not necessary in child rearing. As is emphasized by the authors, “mothers and fathers have different parenting strengths... Their respective absences impede child development in different ways.” Boys without fathers make a major contribution to “higher rates of aggression, delinquency, and incarceration.” So now we are being told that boys don’t really need fathers.

Another consequence of the advocacy of same sex marriage is the harm that would extend to anyone who holds to traditional marriage. In our society public enemy number one has now become anyone accused of being anti-equality. Where is this taking us? Defenders of heterosexual marriage only “would become, in the state’s eyes, champions of invidious discrimination.” The First Amendment is under attack by the Trojan horse of legalized same sex marriage. How will those viewed as in the same category as racists be exempt at the minimum “from revoking certain civil privileges or bring civil claims against them for living by their views.” Christian schools, organizations, and churches have been put on notice by the Solicitor General of the United States that “It is ... going to be an issue.” What is? Religious liberty is in jeopardy in the wake of legalization of same sex marriage.

A final consequence of a proposed redefinition of traditional marriage is the undermining of friendship. The prevalence of the same sex marriage view would “make things harder on single people ... As marriage is defined simply as the ... most valuable or only kind of deep communion, it becomes harder to find emotional and spiritual intimacy in non-marital friendships.” If two males are said to have a special love for one another must it have a sexual component? The

possibility of special loving relationships becomes clouded by the shallow but deadly reasoning espoused by a federal judge who states in striking down California's traditional marriage law, "marriage is the name that society gives to the relationship that matters most between two adults" (Perry v. Brown, February 7, 2011).

Admittedly, these harmful effects of legalized same sex marriage do not take into account the abundant biblical wisdom available to the Christian. But there is common grace wisdom found in these warnings. Let the seeker of truth beware of fallacious ideas being spread regarding legalized same sex marriage. Buyer beware!

Baltimore and the Battle for Truth (May 10, 2015)

"Could someone please tell me what the truth is?" A frustrated Pilate wanted to know what the charges were against Jesus. Never mind that the truth was standing right there in front of him. Pilate's words have been eternally etched into the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.

During the riots of recent days in Baltimore, Maryland could very well echo the words of Pilate, "What is truth?" There is no shortage of people willing to tell us what the truth is in the riot scarred blocks of the inner city. Who is to blame, the six police officers, the entire police department, the rioters who set buildings on fire and threw rocks at the police? How sad that the city where Francis Scott Key penned the words of our national anthem became a cauldron of so much hatred, anger and violence. Where do we start in trying to find the truth? The truth search must begin with the following facts.

God's people can and must pray. Pray for those in authority (peace facilitates the spread of the gospel, 1 Tim. 2:1-8). Pray for the bereaved – a father and a mother are grieving over a son who died. Pray for America, that its moral slide and its social unrest will become the occasion for a sense of desperation that seeks God. Pray for a judicial system that will adhere to the rule of law, seek justice, protect its citizens, and punish evil doers. Pray that the gospel believing churches in Baltimore will stand in the gap offering hope, mercy, and grace to their communities. Pray that these churches will act in wisdom to address the grievances of their communities and be peacemakers. Pray for the police, for their safety, their judgment in dangerous and volatile situations. Pray for the Sherwoods and others like them who are living as hope-givers in Adair Park in Atlanta. Pray for Berachah Bible Church that we will seek and find ways to live and proclaim the gospel in our neighborhoods.

There is another point of truth. Watching anger and violence on non-stop news can have a corrosive effect on people. We must not allow anger, discontent, and schism to find a place in our hearts, motives, thoughts, and relationships. Righteous anger in the face of evil, sin, violence, hatred, injustice, and all proposed unrighteous solutions can be a powerful force. Unrighteous anger is destructive. It is an open door for Satan to advance his purposes.

Do not let a critical, resentful, suspicious spirit rule your relationships. These attitudes can take over your mind. Recommit yourself to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in our church. Please take warning. Many in the news media have an agenda, a narrative they advance, that racism divides us all. Racism, police corruption, absent fathers, and drug trafficking find their source in sinful human hearts. Why don't we talk about this? There are toxic assumptions and

presuppositions that govern the media and education (especially the universities). The materialist explanations for human behavior, the idea that economics explains human behavior, that environmental threats should be our greatest fear, and that the concept of what constitutes a marriage should be redefined are all fictions of a liberal mind-set. Give your energy, thought, plans, resources, and gifts (natural and spiritual) to redeeming the time in our church and communities. Get involved in the life of the church. Thank you for turning in your Vision 2020 survey with thoughtful proposals for gospel action in Berachah Bible Church.

Monitor yourself while watching the news. Take heed. Don't allow bad news to chase you into hiding, passivity, and silence. In this feel-good age weaker souls don't want to deal with things that disturb them. There is the danger of framing your thoughts and actions based on news commentators and political pundits whose worldview is hostile to that of biblical Christianity. Read books that will give you a truth-based understanding of our world and the root causes of the moral rot that is defining our culture.

Identify something special you can do in the coming weeks to bring hope to someone without the gospel, someone who is struggling with family problems, and poverty. Seek out information on a church or Christian organization located in Baltimore or Atlanta which is gospel-centered and involved in inner city ministry. There is an excellent article at thecripplegate.com/embers-to-flames-a-pastors-perspective-on-the-Baltimore-riots. The pastor is George Lawson, a Master's Seminary graduate.

Where is the truth? Truth is that which is in accordance with the facts. The facts of the gospel offer a "shout-out" to the truth that reigns over all other truths. What is our greatest need? May God give us churches by the thousands in our cities and urban areas where the gospel pulsates in spiritually alive churches. Let the truth of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the life-transforming work of God's Spirit spill over into poverty-stricken, drug-infested communities everywhere. And lest we think only urban areas need the light and salt of gospel living, what about the alcohol and drug culture that afflicts more communities in Fayette County than we are willing to admit? How many suburban teens are able to fly under the radar screen of accountability because of parents and other authorities who are looking the other way? Like Pilate, are we asking, "What is truth?" and He is standing right before us, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Right side of History (June 21, 2015)

"Animus, n. 1. violent hatred; ill will; active dislike or enmity; animosity
[< Latin animus spirit, feeling]"

Christians, would you have ever imagined that a ruling from the Supreme Court of the United States would determine that our support of traditional marriage is based on "animus" toward gay couples? Justice Anthony Kennedy has already used this language in past gay rights rulings. Ponder this for a moment. Those of us who believe that God's design for marriage (as between a man and a woman) would be in the same moral category as racists.

This is a stunning development, but not totally surprising. The moral tide in our nation has been shifting for decades. The sexual revolution of the 1960s unleashed legions of philosophical demons, one of which is that "consensual sexual expression is the ultimate American right, even

above religious rights” (Daniel James Devine, *World*, June 14, 2015, p. 52). What is especially unsettling about the same-sex marriage onslaught against traditional marriage is the seeming passivity and confusion of many evangelicals. Liberal indoctrination from elementary schools through the university system has created a generation of moral relativists. Under the guise of tolerance and non-judgmentalism attitudes and values now embrace a virulent anti-Christian worldview.

What is to be our response as Bible believing Christians if SCOTUS rules in favor of redefining marriage? In the first place, arguments advanced asserting that the Bible either allows for or supports same-sex relationships are baseless exercises in rewriting the Scriptures. Attempts to unloose the moral strictures of the Bible regarding homosexuality are well worn fictions: that only exploitive homosexual practices are condemned, not loving, same-sex relationships; that homosexuality should be put in the same category as slavery and segregation; that eating of shellfish is forbidden (Lev. 11:9-12), then why is homosexuality forbidden. A helpful critique of six basic arguments supporting same-sex relationships is offered in “The Bible and Same Sex Relationships, A Review Article” written by Tim Keller (the aquilareport.com, Tuesday, June 9, 2015).

The fundamental fact regarding the approval of same-sex marriage is that it strikes at the very heart of the gospel. Our sin separates us from an infinitely holy God. All are under sin. “None of us is righteous” (Rom. 3:9, 10). Our unbelief, the refusal to worship God, condemns us. We are guilty of many sins: immorality, drunkenness, adultery, idolatry, homosexuality, thievery, greed, slander, to name a few. As unforgiven sinners we cannot enter God’s coming kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Jn. 16:9). The sin that is the source of our disease is our refusal to believe in Christ. There is only one remedy for our sinful condition, and that is the free grace of full forgiveness through faith alone in Christ alone. But if homosexual offenders are not guilty of sin, then what of immorality of other kinds? Why then the necessity of being “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” (1 Cor. 6:11)? What is the gospel, if it is not “that Christ died for our sins” and “that He was raised on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:3-4)?

A final matter deserves reaffirmation. No matter what the world claims in its spiritually blind conclusions, it is those who reject the authority of God and twist the Scriptures who are on the wrong side of history. Our generation is the first in human history to propose a change in the definition of marriage. The self-proclaimed moral superiority of this is narcissism on steroids. As Tim Keller has rightfully noted, “This idea of inevitable historical progress developed out of the Enlightenment optimism about human nature and reason” (ibid), is what underlies the flawed reasoning of same-sex marriage proponents. Jesus Christ told His followers to expect the same hatred that was poured out upon Him (Jn. 15:18). “If we believe in the Bible’s authority, then shifts in public opinion should not matter. The Christian faith will always be offensive to every culture at some point” (Keller, *op. cit.*). To assume that one is on the right-side history presupposes some kind of ultimate authority, either human opinion or God.

The American secularist movement would have evangelical Christians to sit in the back of the cultural bus and make no noise. “Have your private devotions. Enjoy your Sunday gatherings in your box. Just stay out of the public square. Let progress march on toward love and brotherhood.” Don’t believe it. Secularists are intolerant of the Christian faith. It is viewed as an obstruction to the utopian dreams to be realized in the here and now on this earth.

The call of Christ to the church is to lovingly, obediently, and courageously plant the flag of the truth of gospel throughout the world. Those who are resting the full weight of their minds on the final authority of God's Word, who refuse to call that which is evil good and good evil and look forward to the return of Jesus Christ to establish His kingdom on earth are on the right side of history.

The Rainbow (July 5, 2015)

I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.
Genesis 9:13

For millennia the colors of a rainbow in the sky have borne witness to God's covenant that He will never again send a universally destructive flood. Three other times besides its occurrence in Genesis the rainbow is spoken in Scripture and in each place, it is associated with grace, mercy and judgment (Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 4:3; 10:1). This is noteworthy.

The White House was recently bathed in the colors of the gay pride rainbow flag celebrating the Supreme Court's decision making same-sex marriage constitutional. The leading headline of the AJC on June 28, 2015 read, "On the Edge of Change." And change there will be, but not the kind of change many will welcome.

What are some of those potential changes looming on the horizon? (1) The traditional Christian view of marriage and resistance to the moral legitimacy of same-sex marriage will be mocked and its adherents demonized. (2) There will be increasing cultural clashes and litigation as workplace pressures, charges of discrimination, and tax-exempt status issues present themselves ("The same-sex marriage ruling will unleash the legal furies against those who disagree with it." William McGurn, WSJ, Tuesday, June 30, 2015). (3) The democratic process, having been preempted by Judicial fiat, will further strengthen dictatorial powers of the State. (4) It is only a matter of time before other marital options will seek their seat at the table of social and legal acceptability (e.g., polyamory).

The church of Jesus Christ has been given its instruction for times such as this.

1. For clarity's sake, believers in Jesus Christ are not at war with homosexuals. Our struggle is against "the rulers against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). A new creature in Christ knows that it is only by God's grace that we are forgiven sinners. We fight against sin in our own lives every day. Thank God for the indwelling, life-changing power of the Holy Spirit, and God's all-sufficient Word, the Bible. The sin of homosexual intercourse is one among many sins (gossip, slander, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, faithfulness, heartlessness, ruthlessness) that are indicted by God, sin holds us all guilty before a holy God (Rom. 1:24-27; 3:21-28). We all need a Savior, and we have one "who bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24).
2. Be angry and sin not. There is a place for righteous anger (Eph. 4:26). Sin within and sin everywhere it is found is not our friend. "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13). A benign response to evil is not a virtue but a vice. Righteous anger focuses on God's

honor. Sinful anger is self-focused. Celebration over the things God hates should cause grief among God's people.

3. Don't put a stumbling block in the way of other disciples of Christ (Matt. 18:6). Those who follow Christ are not to be hindered by their fellow disciples. Parents who tolerate a bad marriage are doing harm to their children. The next generation needs clear examples of what it means for a father and a mother to love one another. Our culture is confused about what constitutes gender identity, what love is, and the dangers of sexual sins.
4. As Christians, we must recommit ourselves to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16). Our primary calling in life is not to save our nation by political action, but to win the lost through gospel proclamation. Love the gospel. Live the gospel. Speak the gospel. The gospel is our only hope because "there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God;" (Rom. 3:10-11).
5. Don't retreat from the public square (Rom. 13:1-8). We are "to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). Be politically active, but not politically obsessive. God used William Wilberforce (1759-1833) who led the fight against slavery in the British Empire. Martin Luther King Jr. had the courage to challenge the conscience of America through non-violent activism. Christians need to know about worldviews and how political Leftism is an ongoing threat to a host of biblical values. Dr. Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers a call to the colors of biblical truth, "We must contend for marriage as God's gift to humanity – a gift central and essential to human flourishing and a gift that is limited to the conjugal union of a man and a woman. We must contend for religious liberty for all and focus our energies on protecting the rights of Christian citizens and Christian institutions to teach and operate on the basis of Christian conviction." ("Everything Has Changed and Nothing Has Changed – The Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage," AlbertMohler.com, June 27, 2015).
6. Pray fervently for our governing authorities (1 Tim. 2:1). Pray against evil court decisions (Psa. 83:1-2) and every other anti-God scheme no matter what branch of government, Executive or Legislative, sponsors it. Pray for revival in the church in America. Pray for fellow believers who are facing enormous pressures in the workplace to bow down to the idol of redefined marriage.
7. Be wise to the strategies of evil at work in our nation (Rom. 12:9). What has happened in the last fifty years to create the developed approval of normalization and institutionalism of homosexual behavior? A not-so-subtle conspiracy of favorable news reporting, movies, the entertainment industry, schools, and politicians have shouted down and slandered all opposition to the same-sex marriage agenda. Feelings have taken over as the standard for right and wrong. Love, human dignity, equality, discrimination, and bigotry have been redefined and enlisted in the war against truth. Sadly, many young people have drunk the Kool-Aid of the culture. Slinging the charges of "judgmentalism," "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone," and "We are not to condemn others" are valid cautionary warnings. But when ripped from their biblical contexts, they can be attempts to nullify personal responsibility for sinful behavior.

8. Brace yourself, Christian, for legal, work-related, and public persecution (Jn. 15:19-20; Matt. 5:44). There are enemies arrayed against the Christian faith, who have vast resources of money and influence. This is not a new thing, but the church in America is in for ramped-up ridicule, mockery, intolerance, and vindictiveness. Charges of bigotry, hate-speech, and discrimination will drive lawsuits and media hostility, when Christians have the audacity to take their stand for truth in the political arena and education. The social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) will continue to launch charges of intolerance and lack of love. The best response is to love our enemies. Bitterness, sinful anger, sullenness, and name calling are to be rejected.

True rainbow people live out the truth of the beautiful sign God has placed in the sky. I love the way long-time seminary professor, now with the Lord, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. has expressed it so eloquently. (Believers Bible Bulletin, "The Universal Covenant," April 1, 1979). "The sun's rays falling upon the departing dark clouds vividly portray the conquest of judgment by divine grace. It is the grace of God breaking in on the darkness of man's sin in this evil world. The glory of the rainbow against the gloom of the cloud points ultimately to the saving ministry of the Son of God against the blackness of human rebellion (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). What a reassurance it has been and may be for those who understand!"

Flags and Rebel Souls (July 19, 2015)

When I was in the fifth grade there was a special knife that caught my eye. It was under the glass counter in a little country store. It was gray with two Confederate flags set in a cross position. The Civil War and my childhood view of it fascinated me. Growing up around its battlefields in south Atlanta my brother and I "reenacted" war games as we imagined them. Tim, my brother, was the northern army and I was the Confederate army. Our mother even played special martial music for us. I look back on those childhood games with mixed emotions. What did I know about the horrors and carnage of Civil War battles? Even more telling, the evil of slavery and what was at stake in the war of brother against brother were not a part of my ten-year-old worldview. Yet some sort of southern loyalty and sentimentality won the day.

The Confederate battle flag has been pushed front and center by recent events in Charleston, South Carolina. A seriously disturbed young man walked into a church Bible study and killed nine African Americans in cold blood. Pictures soon appeared of the killer displaying the Confederate flag. Racist motivation had pulled the trigger in an unspeakable crime of hatred. The response of the families and church was stunning. Forgiveness and racial reconciliation took over the story. It was amazing. There were no riots, only grief soaked in love.

But the Confederate flag and its association with the old south, slavery, and segregation ignited a fresh debate. Many began to clamor for its disappearance from all tax-payer related properties and celebratory events. The sad reality is that the Confederate battle flag is viewed by many, especially African Americans, as a symbol of hate and racial prejudice. There are those who resist this charge, arguing for it as a symbol of southern heritage and honoring the remembrance of Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. My friend and fellow elder in our church, Ed Sherwood, offers a helpful perspective on these issues.

“A FORGOTTEN PERSPECTIVE. What seems lost in the Confederate emblem-symbol debate is that after the war many in the North wanted vengeance on and retribution from the South. After all, they were the victors! Cooler and more prudent heads in the North prevailed. The effort for the most part was on reconciliation and restoration of the union. It was not easy nor without setbacks. Reconciliation was encouraged often led by the very men who fought and killed each other on the battlefields of America’s bloodiest war. Their effort was to honor and respect each side’s sacrifices and terrible losses. Even so, slavery remains a stain on our entire nation’s heritage, not just for the South. The blot extends its reach well throughout the northern states where merchants, industrialists, and ship owners benefited and were enriched by slavery. The North’s population at large was not greatly concerned about the plight of slaves. Thankfully the abolition movement arose in the churches of the North. Tearing at the South’s heritage and honor now by removing statues, names, or symbols revives the hate, vengeance, and strife which was mitigated, but not ended after the war. All suffered. The war ended rightly. Slavery was abolished. Let’s return to a focus on forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Much progress against racial discrimination, tension, and conflict has been made. Still more needs to be done. We should not turn the clock back to allow the spirit of ‘killer angels’ to prevail in our great nation again. My hope is that the faithful churches of both the North and South will rise to the challenge. Can we continue our quest for “E Pluribus Unum” and “One Nation Under God”? These thoughts seem far removed from the present debate - - to our great shame and loss.”

These words bring needed biblical truth into the conversation about the Confederate flag conflict. Christians should seek the well-being of our nation working for unity, without attempting to erase historical realities. The Civil War has been over for 150 years. There is bridge-building to be done between blacks and whites. There is no gain to be found in needless continuing clamor over the Confederate flag. Political demagoguery, vengeance seeking, and racism disguised as southern patriotism do not call us to our better selves. Why do we not listen and learn from the pain and suffering in our history? The apostle James leaves us in no doubt about the source of wars and the miseries humans can inflict upon one another, slavery and racial prejudice being among them (Jas. 4:1-2). The injustices of our past are but symptoms of alienation from God and one another. Sin is the villain.

There are evils besetting us which can only be overcome by good. And the greatest good for followers of Jesus Christ is the flag of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rebels we were, enemies of Christ, haters of God, and enslaved to sin. Pain as a result of that rebellion, whether in body or soul, can be the occasion for the triumph of the gospel. Our war against God and our slavery to sin call upon us to look to the flag of truth. As C.S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*) has famously said,

“No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendments. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.”

Jesus on Our Minds (August 9, 2015)

I couldn’t get that tall blonde off my mind. She was in the freshman class when I was a sophomore in college. Who was she? Where did she come from? I had work to do. Beth has been on my mind and in my life now for over fifty-three years. God’s grace to me.

There is nothing better than to have the Lord Jesus Christ on our minds. The Gospels of the New Testament can do that for us. There are also the writings of gifted men and women in the body of Christ who can capture our imagination in their writings about Jesus. One such book is “The Lord from Heaven” by Leon Morris. It was published in 1958. It was given to me by a friend a few months ago. How did I miss it? In this 111-page book the author, theologian, scholar, exegete, and teacher leads the reader through thoughts about Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus’ view of Himself, Jesus the man, A Prince and a Savior, the Lord of glory, a Great High Priest, and God the Word. Dr. Morris has been something of a companion since 1971 through his classic commentary on the Gospel of John. Because of his deep and wide expertise in Johannine studies he is especially qualified in setting forth the wonders of “Jesus; God and man.” The brevity and breadth of the discussions fit well into an early morning read of a few pages at a time. It is a delightful thought starter about the Jesus we think we know.

Hard-headed Thomas would not believe Jesus had come back from the dead. Finally, after having touched the wounds of the resurrected Messiah, Thomas threw his doubts overboard and saluted Jesus with the words, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28). With that declaration the world and the universe changed forever. The disciples, lame as they were until Jesus came out of the grave, were never the same again. The filling of the Spirit at Pentecost propelled them out to the ends of the earth. Because of this we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and eager to tell others.

Have you thought much about the personality of Jesus? Was He a type A, a take-command and driven person? Was He shy, gloomy, just another face in the crowd? In the words of Morris, “Jesus was dynamic. His was a personality that gripped men.” Jesus was forceful. With a whip He single-handedly drove moneychangers out of the temple area (Jn. 2:13ff.). He inspired devotion. His disciples gave up everything to follow Him. People of all kinds were drawn to Him. And we are never to forget that all who came into close touch with Jesus came into close touch with God.

Jesus was absolutely sinless. He asked His enemies, “Which of you convicts me of sin?” No one took up the challenge (Jn. 8:46). Interestingly though, the Gospels never praise Jesus. “. . . It would be very difficult for any Christian today or for that matter in any age, to compose a writing about Jesus the length of a Gospel and never for one moment slip into praise. Yet this the four evangelists did” (Morris). Jesus’ sinless life was evident for all to see. Ponder that.

To grasp Jesus’ view of Himself demands an understanding of Him through the prism is His self-proclaimed revelation. Jesus’ favorite self-designation was “the Son of man” (over eighty times in the Gospels). It has its roots in the Old Testament (Dan. 7:13f.). This title presents Him as deity. Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. This tells us what Jesus was and came to do. He is the Servant. It is through the sufferings of this Servant that many are blessed (Isa. 53). This theme is highlighted in the Gospel of Mark (Mk. 10:43-45). Jesus is the Son of God, a bold declaration that He was God in flesh. Jesus is the Forgiver of sin. He unflinchingly claimed this for Himself knowing full well that it “offended the religious sensibilities of the men of His day” (Morris). Jesus demanded absolute allegiance. “If Jesus is divine there is no more to be said. We owe to God such allegiance and devotion and love” (Morris). Modern theologians think they are throwing bouquets to Jesus by saying He was “a good man.” The Lord of heaven was much more than merely good. He was the Lord from heaven and did not call men to a mere cause, but to Himself. Are we taking Him seriously enough?

Jesus was not confused about his identity as contemporary depictions of Him imply (a common theme in television specials at Christmas and Easter). He knew who He was. Jesus was God. He thought of Himself as God's Son, the one who possessed the very nature of God. Anyone who vacillates on the deity of Jesus Christ insults God the Father, second-guesses Jesus Christ (at best), and will have to answer for this.

Most fascinating is the idea of the limitations of Jesus' knowledge, which along with His temptation, is evidence for His genuine manhood. Jesus chose not to know the date of His second coming (Mk. 13:32). He asked questions, a lot of them, because He wanted to find out the answers. As Morris explains it, "This seems necessary if there is to be a real incarnation. It is the essence of human life that our knowledge is limited and that we must often act on the basis of that imperfect knowledge ... It would not be human life as we know it but something altogether different if we were not limited in this way." This is an amazing line of thought. The Creator of the universe "knowing all the time all the secrets of the universe" and much more, yet Jesus chose to limit what He knew. What went through His mind when He looked up at the starry host in the night's sky? Have you ever gone to bed thinking about Jesus in such ways?

I have only scratched the surface of the many thoughts about Jesus in this helpful little book. There is, however, a caution. To fill one's mind with thoughts about Jesus is not enough. It is possible to think right and not follow through with living accordingly. I am reminded of the song by Willie Nelson, "You Were Always on My Mind." Some of the lyrics go like this, "Maybe I didn't love you quite as often as I could have, and maybe I didn't treat you quite as good as I should have ... (but) you were always on my mind." It's one thing (and a very good thing) to have Jesus on our minds, but let's love Him by obeying Him and seeking to please Him in all our ways.

The Just Shall Live by Faith (September 27, 2015)

Do you have a life text? I mean one that would represent the most important truth in your life. For the Reformer, Martin Luther, it could very well be Romans 1:17. It is the text that changed the world. Like a trumpet calling for complete and life altering attention, the words "The righteous shall live by faith" radically changed Luther's view of God and himself. The year was 1515 A.D. Martin Luther had been lecturing theological students on the Epistle to the Romans. Simultaneously a great struggle was taking place in Luther's soul. Listen to his words.

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven ..."

As the author F. W. Boreham puts it, "The Just shall live by faith" became Martin Luther's text ([A Bunch of Everlasting; or, Texts that made History](#)). Everything changed when the church was challenged to live by this wonderful truth. Those words and the truth they represented were delicious to vast numbers who were enslaved to the works-righteousness system of the Roman

Catholic Church. In Boreham's words, "These, then, are the words that made the world all over again. I love the imagery of the ocean. What lies under the vast surface of water is another world. So it is with the simple words, "The just shall live by faith," a text found in Habakkuk 2:4 and quoted three times in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:36). In each place a different emphasis can be discerned. In Habakkuk God instructs the prophet in the assurance that suffering faith lives by the promises of God, not by self-centeredness. In Romans Paul declares that those who stand in a right relationship with God do so because sinners become righteous by an act of trust in God. The Galatian believers were told that experiencing a God pleasing life is made possible by resting in what God has provided, not by law-keeping (Gal. 3:11). The Hebrew Christians were encouraged with the truth that joyful endurance in the midst of persecution comes through acting upon the Word of God (Heb. 10:38).

Let's go back to those "open doors of paradise" of which Luther spoke. What is the key to those open doors? It is faith, that non-meritorious reception of God's free gift. Here is the good news, the gospel! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the righteousness of God revealed. Without this righteousness none of us can get into God's heaven. Some restaurants have signs which read, "no shoes, no shirt, no service." God says, "no righteousness, no heaven." Moral perfection is required. We have a problem, a big one. None of us is morally perfect. We have no merit to offer God. The human race is locked out of God's heaven and doomed to eternal judgment.

Many are swooning over Pope Francis in his first visit to America. But let it not be forgotten that "sola fide" is a hallmark of the Reformation. These Latin words mean, "faith alone." Without faith alone there is no true gospel. No sinner will ever be able to stand before a holy God and present his works in any form or fashion as earning one the right to be accepted in God's heaven. Catholic theologians are willing to say that justification is by faith but resist that it is by faith alone. This is no insignificant matter. Works that accompany faith do not justify the sinner (Rom. 3:28).

There is hope and help. God has provided through His infinite love "the righteousness which His righteousness requires Him to require." It is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the key to paradise through faith in Him. There is only one way to escape the wrath of God. It is to place my confidence in the Person of Jesus Christ, that He alone can remove the guilt of sin and grant me eternal life.

Think of it this way. This actually happened to me. You are at the check-out line in the grocery store. In your hurry to pick up your several bags of groceries you accidentally drop your wallet. You leave the store only to discover a few miles down the road that you don't have your wallet. You panic and go back to the store. As you walk toward the check-out line, the cashier tells you she picked up your wallet and turned it in to the customer service desk. As your wallet is turned over to you, you say, "thank you!" That is faith. In the words of theologian J. Gresham Machen, "faith means receiving something, not doing something, or even being something" ("What is Faith?"). Martin Luther has summed it up beautifully in one of his hymns.

In devil's dungeon chained I lay
 The pangs of death swept o'er me
 My sin devoured me night and day
 In which my mother bore me.

My anguish grew more rife,
I took no pleasure in my life
And sin had made me crazy.

Then was the Father troubled sore
To see me ever languish.
The Everlasting Pity swore
To save me from my anguish.

He turned to me his father heart
And chose himself a bitter part,
His Dearest did it cost him.

Thus spoke the Son, "Hold thou to me,
From now on thou wilt make it.
I gave my very life for thee
And for thee I will stake it.

For I am thine and thou art mine,
And where I am our lives entwine,
The old Fiend cannot shake it."

Disciple Making (October 11, 2015)

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20

What kind of disciple are you? The Lord Jesus gave to His disciples and all their spiritual children what we know as the Great Commission. Their task and ours is to "make disciples of all nations." But exactly what is a disciple? One startling thing about the word itself is that though it is found over 180 times in the four Gospels and about 25 times in Acts, it doesn't appear at all in the Epistles of the New Testament. But the fact remains that Jesus wanted His church to reproduce themselves in terms of believers who are baptized and taught to obey Him.

In pursuing the mandate to be disciple makers, we must work for clarity in understanding the New Testament concept of discipleship. The word "disciple" is quite elastic, being used in a variety of ways. Its basic idea is that of a student or learner. We all know that there are different kinds of students. One student can make an "F," another a "D," and yet another can make an "A." Some disciples of Jesus (learners) did not believe in Him (John 6:60, 64). It is possible to listen to Jesus' words and learn about Him but not put one's trust in Him for eternal life. Are you that kind of disciple? There are those who are entertained by Jesus. His teachings and His extraordinary example of servanthood and compassion are inspiring, but believing in Him for everlasting life is another matter. When Jesus fed the 10,000 plus people by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, He attracted many who saw Him as a potential political champion who could keep them fed and deliver them from Rome's rule. But when Jesus talked about eating His flesh and

drinking His blood (dramatic figures of speech for believing in Him) that was too much for them. Political saviors are more attractive than One who calls for bended knees before God. Dear reader, being interested in Jesus and impressed by His words and works are not enough. You may have learned wonderful things about the Lord Jesus Christ. That's good. But when that's all there is and your heart stops beating and you are pronounced DOA, there is no second chance. To fall into the hands of an angry God and suffer in torment forever is a frightening prospect.

Take the step. Become a disciple who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. After the first miracle of Christ it is recorded in this way: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11). The moment a learning disciple turns from his unbelief and puts his trust in Jesus Christ, he becomes a believing disciple. That's where you want to be. You don't have to make any vows. You don't have to give everything you have to the poor, hate your parents, or calculate what it is going to cost you. What must you do? Abandon your unbelief. The invitation is open, "For God so loved, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

In the split second that you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin, you are a true follower of Christ. What does this entail? It means choosing God's way in your thinking, plans, motives, words, and deeds. It is following the call of Jesus to keep moving in ever expanding ways of loving God and growing in your relationship to Jesus. This is what Jesus called abiding in Him (living a life of obedience to Christ). An ardent follower of Jesus will be aware of incomplete commitments. There are relational costs and personal costs (Luke 14:26-27; Matthew 16:24-27). Becoming a better disciple is not easy. Denying oneself and bearing one's cross become a way of life. Is this where you are, my friend? The truly good life is one of bearing the sweet fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit of God can make you into the likeness of Jesus Himself. Don't you want that?

The wonderful call of Jesus to be His disciples is matched by His call to make disciples of others. We do this by going to all the nations, moving through the widening circles of family, neighbors, other cultures, language groups, and every place where Christ is not known. Pray now and recommit yourself to being a more consistent witness for Christ. There are people all around us who admire Jesus but don't know Him in a saving way. Look for ways to help bring other believers to maturity in Christ. Making disciples should be our one holy passion. There is no better place to engage in this venture than the church of Jesus Christ. This is God's idea. Are you with us?

Our Unshakable God (October 18, 2015)

Disappointment in people can be a life altering experience. I know. I grew up in a home with a father and mother for whom disappointment in certain Christians changed their entire lives. My father was a student at the Nyack Missionary Training Institute in Nyack, New York. His letters to my mother in those early years revealed a heart that was fervent for God. I have read them with tears as I think of what might have been. Something happened. A series of events resulted in bitter disappointment. His desire to continue in school was thwarted. Confidence in a Christian friend was destroyed. His future father-in-law was overbearing in controlling people. My father yielded to discouragement. There were other issues that came into the picture. The horrors of war in the Marine Corp (1942-1945), alcohol, and financial difficulties resulted in grief and anger.

My dad abandoned the church, made alcohol his friend, and died at the age of 77 a sorrowful man.

My mother was a preacher's daughter. Sadly, she resented her father due to multiple personal disappointments in him. He was a moral man, a conscientious pastor, an excellent preacher. But he lacked the relational qualities of love and understanding, especially when it came to my high-spirited, strong-willed mother. She lived her entire life struggling to distinguish her father from God. Her disappointment in Christian leaders was always close by. I say these things not to garner any pity for me. Oh, the sweetness of God's grace to me. My parents loved and respected me as a pastor (A bit of holy irony having a son who became a Christian leader). However, I have seen what disappointment in Christians looks like when it is allowed to shape one's priorities, relationships, and the life we live as a result.

Our church is experiencing a host of sorrows. The severe pain of a disappointment of leadership failure has left an abundance of relational pain and suffering in its wake. Being sinned against by someone we have trusted can be disorienting. It can be the occasion for personal stumbling through loss of trust. Jesus had some hard words for those who lead fellow Christians into sin (Matthew 18:6). Perpetrators of evil who damage Jesus' disciples will have to answer to Him. Those who have been hurt by sin experience temptations to disillusionment, depression, and possible confusion. To whom do they go in such a time? The danger is that disappointment in a person or church can slide into disappointment with God. But the truth is, our shakiness needs the Unshakable. Only God is qualified.

In Psalm 46 the psalmist takes us to God who is worthy of our confidence and reassurance. In the words of the great Lutheran scholar, H.C. Leupold, "Few psalms breathe the spirit of sturdy confidence in the Lord in the midst of very real dangers as strongly as this one." Interestingly, this psalm was Martin Luther's favorite upon which he based his well-known hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." At the time Luther penned the words to this anthem for God's people Islamic armies were laying siege to Vienna, Austria (1529). Luther's world was being shaken in multiple ways.

Unsettled and anxious Christians need to know that God is their refuge. He is the defender of His people. Only God provides real security. Trusted Christian leaders may fail us and inflict deep wounds, but God does not. Even though sin may be permitted by God to break through and attack us from within our trusted circles, He remains "a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Calamities may challenge our confidence in others. God provides strength to overcome sin's wounds. He is big enough for every situation in life. Fear must not be allowed to rule us. Where else can we go but to God? It has been correctly observed that "We live in a fallen world, and sometimes it falls on us." I am reminded of the Apostle Peter's words in response to Jesus' question, "You do not want to go away also do you?" Peter answered Him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:67-69). Though disappointment clamors for our surrender, God alone is to be "a very present help in trouble." Where else can we go? There are believers in Christ who follow us. Will we be there standing in the gap for them?

"O Lord, keep us mindful of all your perfections. We confess that our fallenness at times overwhelms us. We long for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and His righteous rule on this

earth. We need you now, Lord, to give us clear heads to think in the ways that please you. We know you will help us through our trials. You are unshakeable. We lift our praise to you.”

When Worlds Collide (November 1, 2015)

A Preamble:

Today is designated Reformation Sunday worldwide. October 31, 2015 marks the 498th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Lest we forget, the gospel message of salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone must be guarded and proclaimed in every generation with a holy passion. No sinful human being can be made right with an infinitely righteous God without believing in the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins and raised from the dead on the third day. It is by a simple act of faith (without any works as a condition) that forgiveness of sin and eternal life is received.

The personal world of Martin Luther had been one of constantly trying to get on the good side of a just and angry God. His tortured soul could not find rest in doing enough works. Roland H. Bainton captures Luther’s dilemma in his classic treatment, “Here I Stand, The Life of Martin Luther.”

Luther probed every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God. He tried the way of good works and discovered that he could never do enough to save himself. He endeavored to avail himself of the merits of the saints and ended with a doubt, not a very serious or pertinent doubt for the moment, but sufficient to destroy his assurance.

Finally, the light of the gospel broke in upon Luther as he meditated on Romans 1:17. He saw its truth as he never had before, “For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘the just shall live by faith.’” There it was, stunningly beautiful before his weary soul. Only faith in Christ could make one just before God. The words *sola fide* (faith alone) became forever emblazoned in the story of the Reformation. Luther’s own words of soaring freedom and joy tell his story; “Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

However, there was another world, an ecclesiastical world, in which Luther lived and served. The Roman Catholic Church held its adherents captive to a maze of works-righteousness. Like an impenetrable fog, endless works had to be negotiated to satisfy God. The sweet freedom of forgiveness of sin and eternal life were lost in a suffocating system of sacramentalism. Religious rituals were to be performed in hopes of achieving salvation. Carrying out these works was said to be a means of grace according to the Roman system. The gospel words of grace and faith were emptied of their biblical meaning and made tokens in a salvation by works system. An act of moral courage was needed to challenge such a gospel-denying church.

In the year 1517 a gimmick was created in order to raise money to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. The device was known as an indulgence. For a sum of money an indulgence could be purchased, and in exchange the purchaser could receive complete forgiveness of all sin. Martin Luther protested vehemently this grotesque claim by posting his

now famous “Ninety-five Theses” on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This occurred on October 31, 1517. It became a theological shot heard around the world. Not only did Luther condemn the indulgence system, his commitment to *sola scriptura* (Scripture only as the final authority for faith and practice) led to a break with the Roman Catholic Church. These events constitute what we know as the Reformation. Our church exists as one of the theological children of what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

Our church’s doctrinal statement in Article II, Section 6 entitled “Salvation only through Christ” reads in part as follows.

We believe in salvation by grace through faith: that salvation is the free gift of God (Romans 3:24; 6:23) and because of the universal sinfulness of man no one can enter the kingdom of God unless born again; and that no degree of reformation however great, no attainments in morality however high, no culture however attractive, no baptism or other ordinance however administered, can help the sinner to take even one step toward heaven.

In this statement we stand with the Reformer, John Calvin, on the necessity of faith alone for our justification before God, “For, as regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God’s favor, but receiving from Christ what we lack” (Calvin, Institutes, III, xiii. 5). Calvin says further, “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ” (Ibid., III. Xi. 7). A critical point must be made here lest faith be misconstrued as a work of obedience. Obedience flows from faith. Faith is not obedience. It is the empty mouth of the soul receiving God’s free gift.

How then do works fit into salvation by faith alone? Are they not important in the Christian life? Absolutely! But let it be known that works are not conditions for obtaining salvation. Nor is it correct to say that works are a non-meritorious condition for entrance into heaven. We can do nothing whereby we obligate God to justify us or receive us into His presence when we stand before Him as our Judge. Is not God’s Word clear when it says that “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28)? Or when it says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9)?

Good works will flow as rivers of living water from those who believe in Christ (“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” John 7:37). New creatures in Christ were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Our good works will serve as the criteria of our judgment as the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). Rejoice in this dear Christian. We are a people for Christ’s “own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). This is the paradise, a new kind of world if you will, that Luther found, one that is filled with the delights of serving our Savior by His glorious grace in this world and the world to come.

A final salute:

What an astounding revelation! As Luther wrestled with the concept he saw indeed that faith is righteousness for the simple and profound reason that it means a trust in acts that God has

performed which are, by definition, righteous. God's acts were to judge our sin in the person of his Son, who thereby bore the just or righteous penalty: and, since his Son was without sin, to restore him whole by the resurrection to his heavenly estate. He thereby promises to those who participate by trusting acceptance in his death the matching purity, or righteousness, of the risen Christ. Neither the death is ours, nor the righteousness. To put it crudely, by cornering sin Jesus also cornered righteousness. We cannot say that 'he became sin for us' without adding that he became our righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). (No Other Foundation, Jeremy C. Jackson)

Soli Deo Gloria

Six Legacies of the Reformation (November 8, 2015)

In a recent article I attempted to identify the core contribution of the Protestant Reformation to the church. In what was actually a revival, the wonderful truth of justification by faith alone was brought out of the darkness of doctrinal confusion. Many believers began to get their theological house in order. Bible-based confessions were written. The Belgic Confession of 1561 states what it means for the sinner to be accounted as righteous in God's sight for Christ's sake alone. It says, "We do not mean, properly speaking, that it is faith itself that justifies us – for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness" (Belgic Confession XXII).

But the Reformation accomplished other things as well. Not only was the gospel rescued from the suffocating works righteousness system of the fourteenth century church, the Protestant Reformation also gave birth to what many say was "the greatest human rights movement in all of human history." I recently came upon an article by Rick Segal on the Desiring God web site which I find to be quite valuable. In it David W. Hall identifies six legacies from the Protestant Reformation. If you have wondered what is happening to the United States of America, your eyes will be opened to what has made our nation unique in the history of nations and the threats it now faces. As Segal points out, "These ideas are now known throughout the world as American ideas:"

- *A limited charter for the state (and conversely, opposition to totalitarianism)* – The state must take its place under the sovereign rule of God over all nations. The state is not god. Jesus declared, "render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Woe to that nation that attempts to banish God from its moral structures.
- *Checks and balances (and divided powers) addressed to the reality of human depravity-* Human sin is a reality that when denied is the father of incalculable evils. Our Constitution is a witness to the need for restraints on human pride.
- *A belief that all governments are judged by transcendent moral norms* – No human court can redefine God's righteous moral order. It does so to its own peril. Western secularism is a paper mache wall against Machiavellian political systems. Moral relativism poisons the minds of the so-called brilliant.

- *A persistent opposition to secular authority as the primary basis for political structure* – In the words of Dr. Albert Mohler, “No secular argument has any kind of traction against the theological figures of Islam. Secularists have no explanation for why 15-year-old girls are leaving London and a middle-class existence to become jihadi wives.” (World Magazine, October 31, 2015)
- *An abiding emphasis on the family as the essential building block of successful government* – When a majority of homes with children have no father or mother under the same roof, the consequences are devastating to societal stability.
- *A view of the law as necessary and not subjective* – When so-called compassion replaces the objective standard of law based on moral standards, anarchy ensues.

We are watching Western civilization, as we know it, crumble. Secularism is on the march. But as our nation continues to sink under the weight of those who seek to “radically transform” it by their vaunted wisdom, we need not despair. By God’s grace we live by His wisdom. Some of which is, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Proverbs 14:24).

Tis the Season to Be (December 6, 2015)

“Tis the season to be jolly.” So the line goes in a popular Christmas song. But the sobering fact is that the season can be framed in sorrow. Please don’t take me to be an Eeyore, the pessimistic donkey in Winnie the Pooh. We live in a fallen world. At least fourteen families in San Bernardino, California are not feeling particularly jolly right now. A loved one has been murdered. It makes for a Christmas of grief. In addition to this dark episode everyone reading this is sitting in his or her own pool of tears. But take heart. There is a psalm in the Old Testament that can change things.

God has given us the “psalms of darkness.” We know them as lament psalms. They enable the sorrowful to shape their experience when an emotional disturbance and disorientation have settled in. Stanley Hauerwas has described it this way, “The psalms of lament do not simply reflect our experience; they are meant to form our experience of despair. They are meant to name the silences that our suffering has created” (God, Medicine, and Suffering). Psalm 57 is an example of how to turn grief into gain, how to experience meaning in a season that quite often doesn’t deliver what it promises (a jolly old time).

Center your sorrows on God. Allow the first six verses of this psalm to melt on the tongue of your soul. Savor the sequence of the psalmist’s thought. It is from God that we can receive protection because He is gracious and full of mercy (v. 1). God is referred to 21 times by name or pronoun in this relatively small piece of poetic real estate. His power, loyalty, trustworthiness, and justice offer soothing music when evil struts around beating its chest. As Charles H. Spurgeon has perceptively put it, “Evil is a stream which one day flows back to its source.” One of the great battles of our time is with militant Islamic terrorism, dead men and women walking while delighting in suicide to take them to paradise. What a rude awakening is ready to welcome them. We must not give one mental inch to those who wish to use their demonically inspired theology to cow us and make us submit to fear. King David says of the terrorists of his day that

their “teeth are spears and arrows.” They revel in cruelty and despise peace. But don’t let them get to you. Keep reading and meditating on Psalm 57.

Instead, sing through your sorrows to God. The emotional focal point of the psalm is at verse 7. David was in the cave of Adullam when he wrote these words. He determined to make the darkness ring with song. Grateful hearts cannot help themselves, even in the midst of danger. We go to bed at night and the news is not good. The media is no help. It mocks Christians. Terrorists murder 14 people and the headlines scream, “God Isn’t Fixing This.” Truthless souls always want to blame the wrong things (e.g., more gun control). But back to David. Nothing could stop him, Satan, nor Saul, nor the Philistines. Likewise, a secular driven culture, one bereft of any sense of accountability to the Almighty, should not paralyze God’s people filled with boldness and gratitude. Let God be exalted in our refusal to fear jihadists. We can praise God through the night and embrace the dawn with prayer, knowing that the Lord God can fix anything. Are we taunting the unbelieving world with our praise and thanksgiving? Not at all. Our desire is that the world would know what kind of God we have. The gospel proclaimed and lived is a force to be reckoned with. Tis the season to sing joyfully even as we weep with those who weep.

Moving from Despair to Hope in Less Than a Minute (January 17, 2016)

All right, maybe a few seconds more. But first you have to read Psalm 13. It all starts there. David was at the end of his rope. His resources were exhausted, and he is desperate, but not recklessly so. The Lord must come to his rescue. One thing David knows is that his past reliance on the Lord has not been in vain. What is his conclusion? He rests in the assurance that he will live to praise God for renewed deliverance. Reading the psalm takes about a minute.

Several facts need to be noted. The psalm is a prayer. The value of a prayer is not measured by its length. We don’t know what was going on in David’s life, but a good guess is that it was an episode in his life as a fugitive from Saul and his henchmen. It didn’t look good for David. Follow his mental footsteps. Four times he cries “how long?” This is a sure sign of desperation. It’s the “how long” of endured trials. How long will I suffer pain, watching the wicked win and prosper, and yearn for justice to be done? How long must my sorrow last? The series of rhetorical questions is designed to motivate God to answer his prayer. To the psalmist it looked as if he was being ignored by God. Was God disinterested? Why was He delaying? (A reminder – feeling, not logic, can take over when we are down and out.) David is restless. He felt rejected by God because he was misinterpreting God’s providence and His seeming silence.

David’s mind is going a mile a minute. He feels as if God is not helping him. He is all torn up inside. He is struggling and faces defeat from his enemies. Personal humiliation and a perceived threat to his kingship are pushing him to the limit. It is at this point that David catches himself and calls upon God for help. He realizes that he needs divine wisdom. The triumph of his enemies would not be good for God’s reputation. So, what does David do? He throws himself into the embrace of God’s unfailing love, the loyal love the Lord has for those who put their trust in Him. And then he sings in acknowledgement of God’s goodness to him.

It’s amazing how quickly the sweet psalmist of Israel gets from his problem to God and thereby keeps his head screwed on right. Let’s rehearse the mental process necessary in developing hope in less than a minute.

- Face the problem squarely and ask your questions in a God-centered way. Talk to God about your troubles. Bear your soul to Him. Express your frustration. He can take it. You are seeking Him when you do this, and that's a good thing.
- Emotional distress must not be allowed to prevent right thinking. Feelings are not the enemy, but we can make them such if we let them tyrannize us and we end up only talking to ourselves in faithless ways.
- Pray for wisdom to understand what course of action should be taken. It takes spiritual skill to work our way through tangled and confusing situations. Sometimes our "enemy" can be a spouse, a child, a friend. But we can't let that blind us to what it means to love our enemy even if we have been wronged and deeply disappointed.
- We must not forget that failure to handle our problems biblically will only result in a hopeless state of mind. I was introduced to the wonderful promise of Isaiah 26:3 many years ago. It says, "You (God) keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You." The Hebrew of "perfect peace" is literally "peace, peace" meaning a peace that really is peace.
- Hope comes based on a proper understanding of God. He is loyal to those who belong to Him. This is the "lovingkindness" ("steadfast love" in the ESV) spoken of in verse 5. You will do yourself a great favor if you will study this word's use in the Psalms. The Lord is the best friend we have. No matter what happens to us, He has not abandoned us.

I will conclude by drawing attention to some wonderful comments at the close of James M. Boice's treatment of Psalm 13.

"If you are suffering from a sense of feeling abandoned by God, which is what the psalm is about, I cannot tell you when the emotional oppression will lift. But it will lift. The curtain of your despair will rise, and behind the veil you will see the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, who has been with you and has loved you all the time."

Oh, the delight of a sweet minute with the Lord!

The Winds and Fresh Breezes of Change (February 21, 2016)

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end. Psalm 102:25-27

As the weather changes, so does life. One life altering change visited the church which had been my spiritual womb. It was only two blocks from where I lived. The pastor preached the Bible. Home and foreign missions were prominent. I was converted to Christ in this church, and it was there that I determined that I would go into fulltime Christian ministry. It was a world-class church. Like shifting winds, change came. The culture changed. The community changed. Sadly,

the church did not handle it well. The leadership seemed to be unable to distinguish between the changes that were bad and the changes that were good. Defending the faith turned into defending the status quo. An effective church shriveled and disappeared from the community.

Change is a necessary part of creation that is groaning and a world system that is passing away (Rom. 8:22; 1 Jn. 2:17). Change never surprises God, but it does catch us off guard. Be thankful, however. God has designed us with a capacity for change in order to bring glory to Him (Isa. 43:7; Heb. 2:5-15). Even in a world into which sin and death had not entered, there would have been change. The earth was to be subdued. The garden was to be cultivated and kept. Change is not inherently bound up with sin. As the theologian, Wayne Grudem, has said, "As long as we are finite creatures, we will necessarily experience events one after another." Layer upon that the fact that the creation undergoes constant change because of the curse of sin. Sin has created complications in the succession of moments, in the events that follow one another. We live in a dying world. Our bodies are dying. Our universe is dying. Creation is one great symphony of sighs longing for its redemption. A robust and effective way of dealing with change must understand why change is a part of God's created order.

There is some good news, however. God is the only changeless being in a changing universe (Mat. 3:6; Jas. 1:17). The unchanging nature of God is the guarantee that He is unchanging in His being, perfections (Psa. 33:1; Num. 23:19). But because God is unchangeable, He can change in His dealings with a changing people in order that He might remain unchangeable (1 Sam. 15:29). Sounds like a conundrum. The fact is, because God is unchangeable, we can have stability in a world of change (Isa. 46:9-11). God will not forsake those who belong to Him. He is trustworthy. His Word, the Bible, is absolutely trustworthy. He can be trusted in anything He says. We have a compass as we contend with the winds of change. Because God is who He is we can change. He has made it possible to be forgiven. His judgment upon us due to our sin need not have to be forever a curse. We will come back to this.

All change is a part of the sovereign design of an infinitely wise and omnipotent God. His purpose is to bring glory to Himself (Eccles. 3:1-8; Eph. 1:11). For example, the changes that come with the aging process are an opportunity for the exaltation of God (Psa. 90:5-10). Not only does He control our life spans, every stage of life is an opportunity to grow in Christlikeness. Think of all the changes that are bound up in our personal relationships (Rom. 15:5, 6; 1 Thess. 5:14). These can serve God. A changing community with new cultures emerging and influencing our own, a changing church, a new set of friends, people who move away, new people in our church, and generational shifts in tastes and values can all be instrumental in bringing opportunities to be Christ's presence in the midst of change. God can enable us to embrace with joy changes in the economy, the workplace, and in our communities. There are changes because we change. We don't stay the same. Our outlook on life changes as we get older. Conversion to Jesus Christ changes us. Our choices change us. People change. Our children change. Our spouses change. In all of this don't forget. No matter what happens, those trusting God are safe (Psa. 46:1, 2).

Warnings accompany change. It can be mismanaged, opportunities to serve God missed. We can long for the past while ignoring the spiritual realities of the present. The Israelites created a fictionalized past. We, too, may build imaginary castles in the sky. Other ways to mishandle change are prolonged grief (1 Sam. 15:35), fear (Num. 14:9), self-indulgence (Ex. 32:1-10), unbelief (Jn. 20:25), anger (Jon. 4:1), and failure to learn from the past (Judg. 2:11). "Lord, keep

us from allowing change from becoming spiritual stumbling blocks. Help us finish well for your glory.”

We are unique because of God, not because of chance. No two of us have exactly the same set of circumstances. Change is the opportunity to know God in new faith-building ways (Heb. 11:8-10). Abraham’s story is a biography in faith-adaptation to change. He left a familiar environment for an unknown home. There were dangers, temptations, and risks. He was responsible for many people, not the least of whom was his beautiful wife. Scripture provides us a faith-building GPS as we, like Abraham, “look forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

All change belongs to the believer (1 Cor. 3:22; Rom. 8:28). The circumstances of life are in the hands of a loving, trustworthy, sovereign God. Christian pilgrims refuse thoughts of luck and useless circumstances. Instead, in the words of T.H.L. Parker, “the doctrine of providence (God’s control of all circumstances) tells us that the world and our lives are not ruled by chance or by fate but by God, who lays bare his purposes in the incarnation of his Son.” God has designed change to remind us of the transitional nature of life (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Changes in what is familiar and comfortable provide new ways to invest our gifts, time, and wisdom.

Change lays bare the affections of the heart (Ex. 15:25; Jas. 1:2-5). In varying degrees change involves loss of some kind. This can function as a blessing in disguise. Do I love what I am losing more than I love God? Awareness of my limitations and selfishness may come to the surface. This does not mean that all change is good or wise. Our response to change requires an ever-growing biblical perspective. Of this we are sure, God asks us, His children, to be willing to change. He wants us to look for new ways to serve Him. Ample portions of the grace of adaptability are available to those who ask for it.

May God grant us the wisdom and grace to look at the past and learn from it, to look at the present and know where we are and look to the future with a vision of what can be for the sake of the gospel. All the while we are to remain anchored to Christ as the winds and fresh breezes of change blow.

Lord, Why Us? (February 28, 2016)

Beth’s aunt Katie Rose loves puzzles. When we visit her in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, she welcomes us with a 1,000 piece puzzle. The pieces are piled up on a card table needing only some preliminary work. One person will work on the edges (nice straight lines), someone else the clouds, the next person works on a building, and so it goes. It’s teamwork. At ninety-seven years of age her mind is enviably clear. Everyone on the puzzle team does his or her part, but all share one thing, the picture on the front of the puzzle box. It helps.

Human suffering with all its pieces does not come with a completed picture on the top of the box. However, we do know a few things. Human beings are creative sinners unleashing untold misery on fellow planet dwellers. There is a supernatural villain, Satan. But there is one piece of the puzzle of pain and suffering that is a special challenge. That seems to always be the case in those 5,000-piece puzzles. Where does it go? It doesn’t seem to fit anywhere. Job helps us. His experience teaches us that not all suffering is because of personal sin. Some suffering in life can

only be attributed to the fact that we, as believers in Jesus Christ, are locked in spiritual warfare. God allows us to suffer loss without further explanation.

Ancient Israel wanted some explanation. In a national lament psalm, Psalm 44 is a cry of anguish. Israel was experiencing defeats on the battlefield which they could not understand. After all, were they not God's covenant people? Were they not promised prosperity for obedience (Deut. 28; Lev. 26)? If they were violating their covenant responsibilities, would they have not known? The body bags and humiliating losses were pieces of the puzzle that did not fit. We have those too. A God-loving, Christ-centered family happily waves good-bye to their sixteen-year-old daughter as she enjoys some new found driver's license freedom. Within hours the phone rings. Their daughter has been t-boned in a terrible auto accident. The prognosis is terrible. She will live with debilitating brain damage the rest of her life. Lord, why us?

Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, the sons of Korah penned a psalm for the nation to sing in their sorrow and bewilderment. Five chords carry a grieving people closer to their God. *The first of these is that struggles with the puzzles of life must begin with reflection on the faithfulness of God in the past* (vv. 1-3). Israel rejoiced in what God had done in giving her its possession of the land of Canaan. It had been Yahweh's strong arm that had given them victories in the past. Sing it, sufferer! Great is Thy faithfulness. God is trustworthy. *The second chord reveals that struggles with the puzzles of life must be met with trust in God in the present* (vv. 4-8). It is futile to place our confidence in human resources and abilities, the power of the human spirit, that indomitable refrain we often hear about when God is nowhere acknowledged. God's covenant people knew that it was not the skill of their warriors or the power of their weapons ("my bow," "my sword") that turned the tide of battle. Millions of dollars safely tucked away, a platinum insurance policy, and the greatest medical care in the world (we thank God for where it is available) is a lame substitute for rock-solid confidence in God.

James Boice has remarked that if Psalm 44 had ended at verse 8, it would have been a victory hymn. But it doesn't end there. *A third chord is struck. Struggles with the puzzles of life are best handled by expressing them to God* (vv. 9-16). We come now to the big question of the sufferer, "Why is God doing this to me?" Has He abandoned us? Faith in God was being tested to the breaking point. That phone call about one's daughter in a life altering wreck unleashes tears and staggering emotional trauma. There are times in our lives when losses leave us demoralized. Israel made charges against God (notice the six personal pronouns, "you"). The good thing about this struggle with God is that there was a struggle because of God. He welcomes our arm wrestling with Him. Talking to God is better than not talking to Him.

Movement closer to God is evident in the fourth chord (vv. 17-22). *Struggles with the puzzles of life do not necessarily mean that one's heart is not right with God*. We might pray as Israel did, "Lord have we not been loyal to you?" Know this. Walking obediently before God does not mean that we are insulated from losses. A drunk driver may hit us head on. Our four-year-old may develop chronic migraine headaches. A dear brother in Christ suffers excruciating pain as cancer breaks his bones. I lose my job because of my stand on ethical matters ("I will not lie."). The Dow Jones goes south and takes my retirement funds with it. Sometimes we suffer because we refuse to conform to this world. The words of commentator Derek Kidner are good, "The defeats which seemed to prove God's withdrawal in wrath, now suggest only His refusal to be hurried (v. 23ff.) or to do what everyone has expected of Him."

The final chord offers a ringing affirmation (vv. 23-26). *Struggles with the puzzles of life demand dependency on God's loyal love.* Just maybe our losses are designed to keep us settled in God's comfort and closeness. God is not asleep. We want His immediate attention. At the same time, He wants our full attention. So we might pray, "Lord, we have nowhere else to go. Our grief and disappointment have pushed us to the edge. You have to do something. Don't you see our misery?" What do the questions of faith tell us about the promises of God and the realities of life? The reality behind the apparent sleep of God is His unfailing love. The worst possible thing that can happen to us will not separate us from the love of God. Our "why's" in the face of inexplicable calamities must be a way to hold on to God more closely. The completion of those 1,000-piece puzzles are met with celebration, unlike our puzzles of pain and suffering which wait for heaven's perspective.

You Can't Get There from Here - Mark 10:17-27 (June 5, 2016)

Wealth, power, and morality can be a spiritually dangerous combination. Fame or power can create an unrealistic view of oneself (e.g., "I can do what I have to do all by myself."). Fortune can give one an unrealistic view of the future (e.g., "There's nothing like the security that plenty of money can guarantee."). Youth can bring with it an unrealistic view of time (e.g., "I have a lot of years in front of me. I am going to live for the moment."). Even morality itself can be intoxicating (e.g., "I'm a good person. Good people go to heaven.").

Jesus had conversations with thousands of people during His time on earth. One of the most remarkable of those encounters was when he was approached by a rich man who was struggling with insecurity about his eternal destiny. Would it be everlasting punishment or everlasting life? He had quite an impressive resume. He was wealthy, probably a ruler in the synagogue, and very moral. There he stood in front of Jesus with a sash of religious merit badges, but not sure he was doing enough to get into God's heaven. Respectfully, he ran up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

What results is a story with no resolution. Something was wrong with the question. Immediately Jesus revealed that the rich young ruler had a deficient view of the One whom he questioned. Jesus probed the young man's concept of Him and in so doing gives him a dose of reality. In the first place, his view of eternal life was not complete. He was viewing eternal life as something that belonged only to the future. The enjoyment of eternal life in the future is bound up in sowing to the Spirit. Living obediently will yield rewards (Gal. 6:7, 8). But at the same time eternal life can be a present possession. It comes to justified sinners (Jn. 5:24). Faith in Christ makes this possible.

But something else was wrong with the question. By calling Jesus "Good Teacher" he was giving Him a compliment, but not acknowledging Him in the way that God is good. The rich young ruler gets theologically schooled. Good in the ultimate sense can only be used of God. Jesus was not merely another human teacher. The fact is that Jesus cannot be good without being God. John Calvin expressed it this way, "as if he had said, 'Thou falsely calleth me good Master, unless thou acknowledges that I have come from God.'"

Before we can go further in understanding the significance of this conversation between Jesus and the rich young ruler, it is necessary to recognize that Jesus is not doing personal evangelism.

He is doing pre-evangelism. Needless confusion is created by claiming that Jesus' command "to go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor ... and, come, follow me" constitutes a call to salvation. Jesus is not giving a gospel invitation. The rich young ruler was being given a standard for devoted discipleship. Why? Only those who have a sense of their need for forgiveness of sin can be candidates for the new birth. Also, it is implied by Jesus that only Israel's Messiah could ask such a thing as to sell all he owned and give the proceeds to the poor. Following Jesus is made up of demands which unbelievers cannot attain. One writer grasps the point; "to give solutions when people don't think there is a problem is a colossal waste of time." We must not forget that the blessing of the children, by design, anticipates this encounter (Mk. 10:13-16). Children are not hesitant in expressing their needs. They are open and constant in their appeals for food, water, attention, a hug, and help when they hurt themselves. Children are trusting. Children, in contrast to the rich young ruler, acknowledge their need and demonstrate the nature of faith.

The rich young ruler had a deficient view of himself. He was leaning on law-keeping to guarantee him eternal life. He thought he had kept the law and was looking for that one thing he could do to put him over the top in getting to heaven. Therefore, Jesus gave him the full weight of the convicting power of the law. The law reveals sin, provokes sin, and condemns (Rom. 7:7-12). The young man thought he had kept the law. He considered himself a good man, blameless according to the law (Phil. 3:6). Because Jesus loved him, he told the rich young ruler to divest himself of all his poverty, sell off all his assets, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him to Jerusalem. It was the tenth commandment ("Thou shall not covet") that stopped him in his tracks. Worshipping the god of wealth (a violation of the first commandment) revealed the tragic fact that the rich young ruler was not ready for the gospel. He was spiritually dead and did not know it. He couldn't get to heaven from where he was. Where was he? He was like the monkey with his hand caught in the jar. In his fist was a nut. Jesus summed it up; "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were astonished. It is impossible to get eternal life by human effort. The picture of a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle is tragically humorous. Only God's grace can get the sinner through the eye of the needle into eternal life.

God isn't looking for our sacrifices, good intentions, sincerity, good deeds, counting the cost, willingness to obey, denial of self, taking up our cross, willingness to hate father and mother, or giving away all our possessions in order to receive eternal life. Eternal life does not come through anything we do. It is a gift from God. Contrast the rich young ruler with the woman at the well (Jn. 4). She was ready for the gospel. She knew she was not ready to meet God. Like a child she acknowledged her neediness. Jesus had to spend his entire conversation with the rich young ruler running a spiritual MRI on his heart (an example of "using the law lawfully," 1 Tim. 1:8). Only people who know they aren't good can receive forgiveness and eternal life. The road to hell is paved with the self-deception of one's personal goodness. Where are you, my friend? If "here" is depending on your own goodness and good deeds to go to heaven, then you can't get there from "here."

Another Run Down Peachtree (July 10, 2016)

I can't say it was a pleasure this year to make the annual trek from Lenox Square to Piedmont Park. For Beth and me and some other Berachah runners it was a swim through heat and humidity. I have run forty-three of these things and this was one of the toughest.

Running and road racing have given me a real-life illustration of the Apostle Paul's love for running metaphors. The Christian life is a racecourse to be run (Acts 20:24). We are called into the race by the grace of God, unlike the PTRR which requires an entry fee and for many, a pick from the lottery. We are to run the race to which God calls us by observing the rules (2 Tim. 2:5). Rewards in a race are determined by how we handle suffering. To run well is to be obedient to God. Part of the satisfaction of having run the 6.2 miles down Peachtree Street is to have endured the course and everything it throws at you. The downhill from Buckhead to Peachtree Battle gives way to the climb up the hill past Piedmont Hospital (cardiac hill they call it). It's the pull of it when you begin to get a little weary that makes it a challenge. Christ holds the universe record for enduring the most challenging course to ever be run, namely enduring the cross (Heb. 12:2). Followers of Jesus have to deal with the hills, heat, and humidity of pain and suffering for the glory of God. But our Savior has gone before us, set the record and calls us to follow His example.

To greater and lesser degrees, the PTRR is a social event. Beth and I ran our tenth race together. We enjoyed our fellow runners and the crowds, checked our time at each mile marker, and savored the pleasure of having finished together. It is to be like this in our long run to cross the finish line and be in the presence of Christ. Brothers and sisters in Christ encourage one another along the way. We all run with one goal in mind, to finish well according to our various gifts and God-given abilities. At the finish we compare stories, laugh, and delight in the shared experience of having served Christ. The cool breezes, soft grass, tee-shirt, water, delicious peaches and bananas and knowing it's over all make for a glad reunion with family and friends. One day we will be in the presence of Christ, rejoicing in our reunion with that great cloud of witnesses that has preceded us. Rewards will be given based on grace-enabled faithfulness. Crowns will be given; the crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19-20), the crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1-4), the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:6-8), the crown of life (Jas. 1:12), the crown of mastery (1 Cor. 9:25). Add to this the reward of special responsibilities (1 Cor. 6:2-3), and, above all, ruling and reigning with Christ (Rom. 8:18; Rev. 22:12). What a time that will be – without end.

God's Generous Hospitality (July 24, 2016)

hos·pi·tal·i·ty, häspə'talədē/

noun

1. the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.

synonyms: friendliness, hospitableness, warm reception, welcome, helpfulness, neighborliness, warmth, kindness, congeniality, geniality, cordiality, courtesy, amenability, generosity, entertainment, catering, food "we found nothing but hospitality among the local inhabitants.

Our God is a hospitable God. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you

anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psa. 23:5). The Lord as the faithful believer’s Host, His guest at a meal. The thought dances on the imagination with excitement and comfort. No enemy can penetrate God’s care of His servants. Don’t you love it? God spreads out a sumptuous meal, provides relief from the heat and dust of a hot summer’s day, and gives us a refreshing drink. The metaphors evoke a wonderful picture of the Lord providing for us in the midst of the pressures and dangers of life. He sustains us with power to experience peace in a hostile world and tops it all off with unexcelled happiness.

When the church of the Lord Jesus Christ exploded on the world’s scene in the first century, amazing things happened. One of those was the way in which Christians fleshed out the enormity of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The iconic story of the Good Samaritan spoke volumes. Christian homes offered oases of mercy, kindness, and love. Many of these homes became house churches where the joy and hope of the gospel was placed on full display to non-Christians (Heb. 13:2; Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9).

Have you thought of our church as it meets on Sundays as a grand opportunity for hospitality? We should. The spiritual reality of one body of believers sharing Christ in tangible ways is a force to be reckoned with. Before you stop reading this, allow me to mention some of those arms, legs, eyes, ears, feet, and tongues which can show Christ’s presence among us.

- Immediately I think of manners and courtesy. Love sacrifices for others. Arriving early to greet guests, opening doors, introducing people to one another, doing what is necessary to make visitors feel comfortable with unfamiliar surroundings.
- Institutional manners. What is that? A public building is not one’s living room. Walking on chairs and running up and down the aisles may be all right at home but not in a church auditorium.
- Creating a hospitality/welcome center can help newcomers get information about the church, get directions, and answer questions (e.g., “What is Eat-C?”). We are working on this. Thanks for your patience.
- Adding and improving signage to be clear and helpful to guests. Where are the restrooms? Where is the nursery? How do I get out of here? Improvements on signs are a dream of the future.
- Let’s come together and resolve to be more welcoming to guests. This is not a scold. It’s a form of recurrent training in our writing, preaching, conversations, SS classes, and small groups. Do I hear a chorus of agreement?
- The use of our nursery could help everyone in the auditorium to more fully participate in the worship service. My child’s cute noises may be someone else’s distraction.
- There is the desire to update our church’s website to be more helpful to guests and inquiring minds. Childcare information, what to expect, and service times would enhance our already useful website.

- Watch out for those “twosies and threesies?” We have all participated in them. They are those people with whom I feel most comfortable. A suggestion. For the five minutes after the benediction don’t group up with your familiar friends. Greet someone you don’t know very well first. You won’t be ticketed if you forget. But we can at least try.
- Have our Sunday School teachers look for, invite, and welcome guests in their classes. There are no members-only classes that I know of.
- Invite someone to have dinner with you when possible. Warning! Husbands don’t surprise your wives.
- Consider the possibility that you might have the gift of greeting people. I’m kidding, but then again, I am not. Some of us are naturals at talking with people we don’t know and helping them feel welcome. May your tribe increase and, in the meantime, exercise your God-given abilities.

Christ-centered, truth-rich, and love-soaked hospitality makes us more effective instruments in the hands of the Redeemer. We live in a world filled with spiritually hungry and thirsty people looking for happiness and hope. God is known for His generous hospitality. Should we not be like Him?

Growing Up (August 14, 2016)

One of the perks in growing older is watching the growth of small children into adulthood. It’s an amazing process. First, there is that helpless infant, dependent on someone else for everything. If there is a need there are signals. Hungry? Crying helps. Tired? Crying and irritability send a message. Fear? Crying helps. Wants attention? Crying helps. Wants to leave the room or change positions? Crying helps. Pain? Crying helps. The arrival of vocabulary is welcomed. But with that comes greater mobility. However, freedom without discernment spells danger.

Beyond infancy and early childhood comes adolescence with physical and mental development. More serious decisions require more breadth of knowledge and wisdom. Added to this may be failure to mature, wrong values, lack of self-discipline, and bad habits. Growing up can get very disordered. This is only the beginning of the challenges and opportunities of growing into adulthood.

Becoming a Christian and growing in the faith is also a messy business, sublime but difficult nonetheless. Jesus compares salvation from sin and entrance into the kingdom to childlike trust. To become a new creature in Christ requires the simple, uncomplicated act of faith. Faith, like the trust of an infant, is receiving God’s forgiveness and eternal life (Mk. 10:14). Spiritual life is conceived in the womb of the soul and a babe in Christ is born. Spiritual life is created by a supernatural work in the heart. The Holy Spirit does a miraculous work (Jn. 1:13; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; 1 Jn. 5:1). New realities in Christ begin there and with it hunger, a craving for the milk of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2).

There is more. At the moment of salvation many other changes take place; some of which are justification (Rom. 5:1), adoption (Eph. 1:5); redemption (Eph. 1:7), forgiveness (Eph. 1:7), sealing with the Spirit (Eph. 1:13), being baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13), delivered from the power of darkness (Col. 1:13). As many as thirty-three blessings become the possession of the new Christian (for a full list see Lewis Sperry Chafer's Systematic Theology, Vol. III).

What a wonderful life. But wait. Growth in the Christian faith is not automatic. God's goal for the babe in Christ is holiness (1 Pet. 1:15-16). To be holy is to be morally like God. This means to be set apart from sinful patterns in one's life. Old ways of thinking, living, and relating to people must be put off (Col. 3:8). A transformation of life is to take place (2 Pet. 1:4-8). An increasing likeness to Jesus Christ reshapes our values, decisions, and character. This development occurs from within to without and is measured in terms of love; love for God and love for one's neighbor. Hear J. I. Packer's way of stating it, "Love looks (not away from, but) beyond rules and principles to persons and seeks their welfare and glory." For example, God's child, who has been given to worry and fear, changes into a person of peace and love. A person given to anger is changed to patience. This is what growing up begins to look like.

Unlike physical growth, spiritual maturity is a never-ending process in this life. The relative spiritual stages of believers are addressed in 1 John 2:12-14. The babe in Christ can rest assured that his sins are forgiven, and he can know the Father. Those who are young in the faith can be spiritually strong, and those mature in the faith are deep in the wisdom of God. A life of faithfulness yields not declining spiritual health, but just the opposite. Fifty years in the faith can produce an Olympic qualified Christian. Training and trials develop the strength, stamina, and agility of a better understanding of God's Word and ways. The last lap of the race (2 Tim. 4:7) has the potential for the strongest pace of knowing God (Phil. 3:10).

Are you growing in your walk with God? You may remember when you were on the receiving end of an adult's exclamation (like my great aunt who kissed me on my cheek with lipstick left to prove it), "My how you have grown." To "no longer be children ... and grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15) takes time. Interestingly, the apostle Paul expected the Corinthian believers to have had enough time to grow up (about five years, Acts 18:1-7; 1 Cor. 3:3). Moving toward maturity can be interrupted and even reversed by sinful choices (Heb. 5:12). Life dominating sins, poor judgment, laziness, and lack of the nutritional value of the Word of God is the stuff of wasted time and spiritual reversion.

On our door frame off the breakfast room are pencil markings that go back a few years. We measured the heights of our grandsons and nephew. Now when they come to our house they can compare where they were with where they are now. Am I more self-aware of my need for help with my selfishness than I was two years ago? Am I less apt to strike out at my children with hurting words? What about my contentment in Christ? Do my spending habits reflect the values of kingdom living? Am I more consciously a servant of others than I used to be? "O Lord, grow me up to Christian maturity and give me the grace to stop wasting time and opportunities."

Where is God? (August 28, 2016)

They say it's virtually our next-door neighbor in space. They are calling it Proxima b. It is described as having some earth-like characteristics, rocky and orbiting its star, Proxima Centauri.

It does this so quickly that its year is about 11 Earth days long. Would you like to visit this near planet? Riding in the fastest spacecraft at 36,000 mph, it would take more than 76,000 years to get there. But who would be there if and when you arrived? God. He is as much there as He is on planet earth.

The God of the Bible presents Himself as a personal God, a God who is everywhere entirely present at the same time (Deut. 10:14 “Behold to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.”). “Immensity” is the word theologians use to describe that perfection of God that transcends all special limitations and yet is present in every point in space with His whole being. Think of it this way, like a bathtub full of water, God fills every part of space with His whole being. He is everywhere wholly and completely. God was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. There is no place in the entire universe where God is not fully present. Space does not spread Him thin. Ponder that.

Because of God’s immensity we speak of Him as omnipresent. If that is not enough to make your head swim, think of this. He is not equally present and present in the same sense with all His creatures. He does not dwell on earth as He does in heaven. He does not dwell in animals as He does in men. He does not dwell in the wicked as he does in the righteous. He does not dwell in the church as He does in Jesus Christ. Amazing, isn’t it? And consider this. Everyone in the world is immediately in the presence of God, just as everyone in this room is immediately in your presence. The Reformation Study Bible in a note offers this insight, “The barrier between God and us is not a barrier of space or time. To meet God, there is not a ‘where’ to go or a ‘when’ to occur. To be in the immediate presence of God is to step into another dimension.”

King David was surrounded by murderers his whole life. But he was confident in the midst of it all. We find him frequently quietly settled in the perfections of God. You see this in Psalm 139:7-10 where the reality of God’s everywhere-presence created calmness within David. The commentator, A.F. Kirkpatrick, captures the impact of this truth, “There is no place in the universe where one can escape from the control and authority of God.” The unwelcome guests of worry and fear should hang their heads in shame in the presence of God who will never leave or forsake me. He is always with me (Matt. 28:20) when I am in a strange place and no one knows me, when I am homesick, and when dangers are knocking at my door.

There are all kinds of ways in which the omnipresence of God is awe- inspiring. It is appalling how much lying takes place in our world - Olympic swimmers, politicians, government, the news media, sitcoms, teachers, and even preachers. In ancient Israel lying prophets, claiming to speak for God, made their audiences feel better by the use of deception, telling people what they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear. They were given a strong dose of truth, “‘Am I a God at hand’, declares the Lord, ‘and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the Lord. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ declares the Lord. ‘I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name . . .’” (Jer. 23:23, 24). There is no place to hide from God. This is not good news for nonbelievers. Yes, you can run, but you can’t hide. A holy God knows where we are and what we are doing. There is no escape. Even in the endless torment of hell, God is there. The tragedy is that His presence there is not accompanied by compassion, only by His wrath (Psa. 139:7, 8; Rev. 21:8). Think on these things. Eternity is at stake.

What Does God Know? (September 4, 2016)

“What did the president know and when did he know it?” These were the now famous words of Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee in June of 1973. A special Senate committee convened to investigate the 1972 break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office building. As the answer to that question was pursued, President Richard Nixon was found out to have conspired to cover up White House involvement.

But let’s move Senator Baker’s question to the highest level of the universe. What does God know and when did He know it? The short answer is God knows everything there is to know and has always known everything there is to know. His knowledge is perfect in every way. To begin with God fully knows Himself (1 Cor. 2:10-12). There is no self-discovery in God’s knowledge. Because God is holy (separate from sin and perfect conformity to His own divine character) and filled with self-knowledge, there is no darkness in Him (1 Jn. 1:5). God knows all things actual which is to say that He is not surprised by finding a new solar system in the universe. He doesn’t become smarter (Heb. 4:13). God does not have to wait to see what is going to happen. He knows the future perfectly.

There is no thought we have that He doesn’t know about (1 Sam. 23:11-13). You may remember the movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life?” George Bailey becomes despondent and considers suicide. Clarence, his guardian angel, gives George a look at life as it would have been if he had not been born. This kind of knowledge is not a problem for God (Matt. 11:21). He, in one simple act, is always fully aware of everything. If God wanted to tell us how many stars there are in the heavens, He would not have to count them (Psa. 147:4, 5). God knows the beginning from the ending, and He never learns nor forgets anything (Psa. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). When Israel needed comfort in the face of difficult days ahead, the prophet Isaiah made it clear that they had a big God; “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him” (Isa. 40:18). This was said by way of a comparison to the idols of the nations. For modern man the human mind is his idol. NPR had a program entitled “The Infinite Mind.” The only infinite mind in the universe is God’s mind.

When did God come to know everything that He knows? His knowledge is an eternal act. Theologian Wayne Grudem states it this way, “From all eternity God has known all things that would happen and all things that he would do.” Some “if” questions in relation to God’s omniscience need attention. (1) If God knows everything, why did He tell Abraham when He was talking about Sodom and Gomorrah that “I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, ‘I will know?’” (Gen. 18:21). The Bible often uses what is called “phenomenological language” (language that helps us to know what God is doing) or the “language of appearance” to describe God’s response to a human situation. In other words, it is God accommodating His communication to make the point that He was acting with full knowledge of the sinful conditions of the two cities and was giving His full attention to the matter. (2) If God knows everything, why did He speak of Judah’s practice of child sacrifice as something He “did not command, nor did it come into my mind” (Jer. 7:31)? Again, phenomenological language is used. It was God’s way of saying “nor did I wish for it, desire it, think of it in a positive way.” God did not even come close to approving of such an evil thing as the offering of children to the gods.

What are some of the moral consequences of God's omniscience? We can be sure that God knows us through and through. He never forgets us and gives us His full attention all the time (and all the other 6 billion and ninety-nine hundred million people on earth). As the song says;

*Why should I feel discouraged,
Why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely,
And long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion?
My constant Friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

Is that not a sweet reminder? There is no detail of our lives, our joys and suffering, that escape God's knowledge (Deut. 2:7; Job 31:4; Psa. 119:168; Matt. 10:30). The One who knows the very number of the hairs on our heads, the One who is infinitely wise and loves us is the heavenly Father of those have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. When I am in a low moment, dejected, and fretting about my disappointments, I can find comfort and encouragement in His care. "Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:8). There is never a moment when we are out of His mind. He is always thinking of us. May God be praised!

How Powerful is God? (September 11, 2016)

Do you want to know how powerful God is? Knowing God and knowing what He is like is the greatest quest in life. We will start with a short test.

The following is a true or false quiz. Do the quiz first. Read the following article then check your answers at the end.

1. God is not able to do more than He actually does.
2. There is nothing that God cannot do.
3. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is a display of God's power.
4. God's power is so great He can make round squares and married bachelors?
5. Nothing in the universe, except God and His will, is a necessary law. For example, God is free to mandate that we obey the opposite of the Ten Commandments.
6. God has limited power in order to allow evil to exist.

Four words speak to us on our currency. They remind 340 million Americans that there is a power higher than human beings: "In God We Trust." This reminder of our Christian heritage is still with us, though if some have their way it will disappear.

We don't know David's circumstances, but they were not favorable. David lived with a price on his head. Being God's anointed did not guarantee Israel's king a charmed life.

Psalm 62 is a beautiful picture of calmness in the midst of calamity. In this psalm an unmistakable contrast is drawn between the security of trusting in God and the insecurity of trusting in human devices. Climbing the summit of truth to gain the view needed when

surrounded by the schemes of evil, it is declared that we must trust God because no one else can be trusted (vv. 9-12). Human beings are bound by the treachery of sin and riches' bait and switch strategy. We have no one and nowhere to place our hope but in God, "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that *power* belongs to God, and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love" (v. 11). What a combination; strength and love. We need this confidence in a world that is at war with God and His people. Stewart Perowne in his wonderful commentary on the Psalms explains it this way, "This is the only truly worthy representation of God. Power without love is brutality, and Love without Power is weakness. Power is the strong foundation of Love, and Love is the beauty and the crown of Power."

Let's consider power as one of God's perfections. God is able to do all things that are consistent with His nature and character. Never forget that "the Almighty reigns" (Rev. 19:6). God is limitless in His ability. He is never exhausted by the exercise of His power. However, He does not exercise all of His power all the time and in every place. The theologian, Augustus Strong, captures this truth, "God can do all He will, but He will not do all He can." God cannot lie, sin, deny Himself, or be tempted with evil. He cannot cease to exist or cease to be God or act in a way inconsistent with any of His attributes. There is no nonsense in God (e.g., making a weight that He cannot lift). He has the power to limit Himself. He can do things that He does not do, like turning stones into people (Matt. 3:9). He chains His power to His purposes.

I recently heard about two very strong men who had to be hired to carry a 400-pound cast iron tub up three floors. It wore them out. Nothing wears God out. God's omnipotence ("all powerful"), for example, is fully on display in creation. "I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by Himself..." (Isa. 44:24). We know that God the Son upholds the universe by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). That is some heavy lifting since the sun itself weighs 2,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 kg (about 4.4 with 30 zeros lbs.). The mass of the Earth is about 5.97 times 10 to the 24th power kilograms. That is only a small beginning when trillions of universes weigh in. The entire universe came into being by God's creative power, *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), by a mere word, with infinite variety ("For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded; and it stood firm." Psa. 33:9). If you have never viewed the DVD "God of Wonders" you have missed one grand awe-inspiring experience. Rain, earthquakes, the rotation of the earth, and control of the oceans all leave one (if they are in their right spiritual mind) absolutely overwhelmed with the infinite power of God.

God's limitless power provides us with a guarantee. We have the hope of a marvelous resurrection body because of Jesus Christ's own resurrection, "... the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:19, 20). Our God has the power to bring life out of death. Have you embraced this hope through faith in Jesus Christ? In Christ the sting has been removed from the king of terrors.

True or False:

1.False 2. False 3. True 4. False 5. False 6. False

"... fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10

To God be the glory

Is It Possible to Know God? (October 9, 2016)

The words wafted over the air waves and became a number one best seller in 1971. George Harrison sought to further the cultural heresy of religious syncretism by blending the Hebrew word “hallelujah” with the chants of “Hare Krishna.” To Christians it offered the appealing title of “My Sweet Lord” combined with the plea to know God.

My sweet lord
 Hm, my lord
 Hm, my lord
 I really want to see you
 Really want to be with you
 Really want to see you lord
 But it takes so long, my lord
 I really want to know you
 Really want to go with you
 Really want to show you lord
 That it won't take long, my lord (hallelujah)

Deceptive and cunning - that's what it is. An entire generation cuts its musical teeth on such as this. However, there is a plaintiff cry bound up in Harrison's song. Can God, the God of the universe, be known? Is He the sum total of the gods of all religions? He is not. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself. But the sad news is that Christians for the most part are ignorant of God. A writer who helped whet my appetite for a knowledge of God more than five decades ago said, “The church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men” (A. W. Tozer, [The Knowledge of the Holy](#)). There is a spiritual viral effect when the concept of the majesty of God is absent in the evangelical mind; A widespread superficial view of the Christian life, the general inability of Christians to know how to worship God, and a resistance to ethical accountability all plague the church.

Right thoughts about God are absolutely necessary. Every Christian must know God and what He is like. God is knowable. Right thoughts about God are the pivotal point for much of the rest of theology. For example, clamoring for attention is the problem of evil. Can it be resolved? It can be safely approached only by a correct understanding of the perfections of God. Further, right thoughts about God form the basis for right thoughts about life, its purpose and problems. An understanding of the holiness of God makes us aware of our sinfulness and therefore, our desperate need for God. Right thoughts about God develop a conscience which is sensitive to moral matters, and a will to please God. To know Him means knowing that we are accountable to Him. Right thoughts about God protect us from the subtleties of idolatry. The presence of wrong thoughts about God is the building material for idolatry. Hold on to this. The human heart is an idol factory, and our culture fuels the purchase of its products. In the final analysis, our thoughts about God determine the kind of person we are and the kind of person we will become. Well then, you might ask, how can I know God and what do I need to know about Him? This will come in the next article.

I believe our nation is under God's judgment and, unless there is a move of God's Spirit, we have very difficult days ahead. It was in the context of imminent judgment that Jeremiah the

prophet told Israel that knowing God is all that really matters when judgment comes; “Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and *knows* me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.” Jer. 9:23-24

Making Disciples at Home and Abroad (October 23, 2016)

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20

What kind of disciple are you? The Lord Jesus gave to His disciples and all their spiritual children what we know as the Great Commission. Their task and ours is to “make disciples of all nations.” But exactly what is a disciple? One startling thing about the word itself is that though it is found over 180 times in the four Gospels and about 25 times in Acts, it doesn’t appear at all in the Epistles of the New Testament. But the fact remains that Jesus wanted His church to reproduce themselves of terms of believers who are baptized and taught to obey Him.

In pursuing the mandate to be disciple makers, we must work for clarity in understanding the New Testament concept of discipleship. The word “disciple” is quite elastic, being used in a variety of ways. Its basic idea is that of a student or learner. We all know that there are different kinds of students. One student can make an “F,” another, a “D,” and yet another can make an “A.” Some disciples of Jesus (learners) did not believe in Him (John 6:60, 64). It is possible to listen to Jesus’ words and learn about Him but not put one’s trust in Him for eternal life. Are you that kind of disciple? There are those who are entertained by Jesus. His teachings and His extraordinary example of servanthood and compassion are inspiring, but believing in Him for everlasting life is another matter. When Jesus fed the 10,000 plus people by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, He attracted many who saw Him as a potential political champion who could keep them fed and deliver them from Rome’s rule. But when Jesus talked about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (dramatic figures of speech for believing in Him) that was too much for them. Political saviors can be more attractive than One who calls for bended knees before God. Dear reader, being interested in Jesus and impressed by His words and works are not enough. You may have learned wonderful things about the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s good. But when that’s all there is and your heart stops beating and you are pronounced DOA, there is no second chance. To fall into the hands of an angry God and suffer in torment forever is a frightening prospect.

Take the step. Become a disciple who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. After the first miracle of Christ it is recorded in this way: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). The moment a learning disciple turns from his unbelief and puts his trust in Jesus Christ, he becomes a believing disciple. That’s where you want to be. You don’t have to make any vows. You don’t have to give everything you have to the poor, hate your parents, or calculate what it is going to cost you. What must you do? Abandon your unbelief. The invitation is open, “For God so loved

the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

In the split second that you receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin, you are a true follower of Christ. What does this entail? It means choosing God’s way in your thinking, plans, motives, words, and deeds. It is following the call of Jesus to keep moving in ever expanding ways of loving God and growing in your relationship to Jesus. This is what Jesus called abiding in Him (living a life of obedience to Christ). An ardent follower of Jesus will be aware of incomplete commitments. There are relational costs and personal costs (Luke 14:26-27; Matthew 16:24-27). Becoming a better disciple is not easy. Denying oneself and bearing one’s cross become a way of life. Is this where you are, my friend? The truly good life is one of bearing the sweet fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit of God can make you into the likeness of Jesus Himself. Don’t you want that?

The wonderful call of Jesus to be His disciples is matched by His call to make disciples of others. We do this by going to all the nations, moving through the widening circles of family, neighbors, other cultures, language groups, and every place where Christ is not known. Pray now and recommit yourself to being a more consistent witness for Christ. There are people all around us who admire Jesus but don’t know Him in a saving way. Look for ways to help bring other believers to maturity in Christ. Making disciples should be our one holy passion. Young person, give serious thought to the possibility of going to people and places where there is little or no gospel presence. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let’s recommit ourselves to the principle of the widow’s two coins (Mk. 12:41-44): “God measures not how much we give but how much we retain.” There is no better time to engage in this venture than right now. The Lord of the church has given us the command to go and make disciples at home and abroad. Are you with us?

Caesar in God’s World (November 4, 2016)

I have always viewed voting as a duty and privilege. Christians are to be exemplary citizens while not forgetting that they are citizens of the coming kingdom of Christ. It is estimated that millions of eligible evangelical voters did not vote in the 2012 election. Rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s offers unique opportunities and obligations in our form of government. The freedoms we enjoy are enormous compared to the rest of the world. I see voting as one way of fulfilling our responsibilities to “Caesar.” We are blessed. However, freedom is not free. Christians have the opportunity to impact their government and make a difference for good.

In my sixty years of following presidential campaigns never have I seen one as messy and conflicted as this one. And I might also add, in my pastoral ministry of fifty-two years I have never publicly endorsed a political candidate. This is not to say that I don’t have personal persuasions, but the pulpit and purpose of the church is not advanced by political endorsements. Considering that in a few days we must make our way into the voting booth, there are questions that need attention.

- Should Christians vote even if they don’t like the choices? Yes, they should. Because we live in a fallen world, living in Caesar’s domain presents challenges and difficult decisions. Early Christians couldn’t vote, but we can. The directives for Christian citizenship are

found implicitly in the Old Testament and explicitly in the New Testament (Jer. 29:7; Rom. 13:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Hard choices demand divine wisdom in working through a ballot. In my judgment, voting is better than not voting. Outcomes of elections do make a difference.

- Is there a best candidate? There is, but it takes information and wisdom to sort out the issues. Best does not mean ideal. That's the way it is in a fallen world with flawed human beings. One challenge we face today is the race to the bottom among presidential aspirants. The choices we have in any election are a mirror of the culture. We must do the best we can in gathering information on the candidates and understanding what the political parties stand for. Go on the internet and read the platforms for the Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians. Which is most compatible with a Christian worldview?
- Is a candidate's view on abortion a deal breaker? It certainly is more important than many other issues that get the spotlight. Government spending to facilitate the killing of unborn children is reprehensible. There are those who are critical of one-issue voting. What if a candidate believed racism is a good thing? There are single moral issues that can be deal breakers.
- Does it really make any difference who wins the election? It most certainly does. Though, as Christians, we know better than to pin our hopes on human government, there are blessings that come to that nation whose God is the Lord, such as freedoms (political, religious, speech, economic, the press), justice, and a clear moral compass. Our nation is unique in human history, outside of Israel's theocracy in the Old Testament, but to whom much is given, much is required. Christians can and should have a significant influence on government.
- Is America under God's judgment? Yes and No. According to Romans 1, when a people suppress God's revelation of Himself and defy His moral law, the jaws of judgment open wide to swallow the arrogant. At the same time there is a coming judgment when God will judge the nations and all unbelief (Rev. 19:15, 16). It is my belief that America is sitting down to a banquet of consequences. A nation that looks the other way when the innocent are slain in the womb, that redefines the God-given institution of marriage, that seeks to erase God's name from the public square, and scoffs at the creation order of gender identity is digging its own grave. Still this is not the time for Christians to evacuate the political arena and give up. The church is to be a light in a dark place and salt in an unsavory society.

May God have mercy on our nation and not turn us over to those who will do us the greatest harm.

A More Perfect Union (November 13, 2016)

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but

living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2:13-17

WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

In this preamble to The Constitution of the United States great aspirations mark the beginning our Republic. This grand experiment has endured incredible threats to its survival, not the least of which was a Civil War. The recent presidential election has placed renewed stress on our quest to be a more perfect Union.

“Stunner.” That was the word in large caps on the front page of the AJC the morning after the election. No matter how one voted it was a surprise. Now the stunning outcome seems to be giving way to angry protests and calls for a revolution. What are we to make of all this?

- Our church must continue to lay hold of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Assessment of our choices created frustration, reticence, even anguish. No matter which way one turned there were complexities. Christians have freedom to disagree about how to vote but we do not have the freedom to judge each other’s commitment to God based on political preferences. Now more than ever, we are to be peacefully bound by the “unity of the Spirit”.
- If our civilization is to survive it will require civility. Christians are admonished to “be subject to ruling authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). Kingdom citizens are to be respectful of those who are in authority, whether they be Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. Because God exists and has created us, meaning in life is possible. When God is rejected people attempt to create their own meaning. For many, meaning is found in politics and a particular political party or ideological persuasion. A kind of religious fervor takes over. Hope becomes invested with the outcome of elections. This kind of idolatry is dangerous to all.
- We must pray for the President and President-Elect in this time of transition from one administration to another. Collegiality, courtesy, mutual respect, and a magnanimous spirit are needed, especially after a long and bitter presidential campaign. Pray that the president-elect, Donald Trump, will surround himself with wise and experienced people.
- This presidential campaign has been a form of a worldviews struggle. Different views regarding the role of government, freedom, justice, the rule of law have been debated. There are Christians represented across the political spectrum. But no matter what your political views whether Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Libertarian, we are to pray for our governing leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-6). Freedom and peace are conducive to the spread of the gospel. Kingdom citizens (all who are born-again) see beyond flawed human leaders and the limitations of human government. Government is not God. Woe be to that nation whose allegiance to man surpasses that of its allegiance to God (Ex. 20:3; Matt. 22:21).

A friend of mine has expressed a Christian's perspective in a helpful way.

Our hearts are ugly, believers and unbelievers alike. And this election is drawing it out. My anger has come out. I've seen self-righteousness in Christians, anger and fear. I've seen unbelievers lamenting the possibility of losing women's 'choice,' slandering, hate, selfishness all running amuck. Our war isn't against conservatism or liberalism, but either what keeps us from God (flesh, world, Satan), or God Himself (for those who have seen their need and chosen to hate Him and anyone aligning themselves with Him). Problem is, people are inflamed with emotion or just plain spiritually blind, and don't see it. That's selfishness. May we remember the two greatest commandments, love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and others as ourselves. And all that goes with it.

Beloved, let us pray for our nation that peace will prevail. Let us pray for the church of Jesus Christ that revival will unleash the spreading flames of evangelism. The best hope for America is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The more perfect union desired by the founding fathers will never be achieved apart from what is proclaimed on our currency: "In God We Trust."

A Time for Thanksgiving (November 18, 2016)

Does Thanksgiving become a very uneasy time for atheists and secularists? I would think it would. After all, when the human spirit senses the need to express gratitude for all the good things we enjoy, to whom is that thanksgiving offered? Genetics? Government? Capitalism? Freedom? Chance? These are all abstractions. We who are Christians, and for that matter even many non-Christians, tend to direct gratefulness to God. That is as it should be. I think we are living to see a cultural decline in gratefulness. It is too often absent in the give and take of daily life. Allowing a car coming out of a parking lot to go in front of you on a busy street too often goes without any gesture of thanks. Children receiving gifts of time and money from parents without a "thank you" unless prompted is too common. One of the evidences of spiritual decline is ungratefulness (2 Tim. 3:2).

Of all people Christians should be known for their thankful spirit. At the same time, we would like for our national leaders to raise the standard of thankfulness to God Almighty for all the blessings He has poured out upon us. Abraham Lincoln experienced a dark night of his soul in multiple ways during the Civil War. Political opposition was fierce. The Civil War was not going well for the North. And, most grievously, his twelve-year old son Willie died in late 1862. Some believe that it was during this time that Lincoln became a Christian. It was the next November that he issued a proclamation of national Thanksgiving that reads in part:

The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of

military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union...

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

... I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise.

The phrase that Lincoln used, “While dealing with us in anger for our sins, {He} hath nevertheless remembered mercy,” was drawn from Habakkuk 3:2. It has been said that “Abraham Lincoln was so familiar with Scripture that his writings are sprinkled with quotations from it, as any reader of the Second Inaugural Address can testify.”

A national day of Thanksgiving is a good time to recommit ourselves to the habit of gratitude (“in everything give thanks,” 1 Thess. 5:18). I offer the following circumstances of life as fitting times for thanksgiving: When we pray (Phil. 4:6), when we eat (Acts 27:35), when we meet with God’s people (1 Cor. 14:16), when we have finished a project (Neh. 12:27, 31, 40), when writing and communicating with people (1 Cor. 1:4), when we receive good news (1 Chron. 16:8-12; 2 Cor. 9:12), when we receive bad news (Job 1:21).

I think it would be a wonderful moment if every family in our church would give special thanks for the gift of justification on Thanksgiving Day (Rom. 3:24). It was William Cowper, the famous hymn writer, who spoke of Romans 3:25 as “the door of Paradise to many.” The righteousness we need to be reconciled with God and live with Him forever is ours in Christ. All who put their faith in Jesus Christ are justified freely by God’s grace. Father, we thank you. Do I have a church-wide amen to that?

Cat Walking (December 2, 2016)

I have always enjoyed cats. Yes, they are independent and snooty. But they can be good companions even when it’s on their own terms. We had a cat we let sleep at the foot of our bed. However, it didn’t work out very well. In the middle of the night when I would move my feet under the covers the cat would think it was a mouse and pounce for the kill. The cat got a fast ride off the bed and had to find a cat motel. There was one thing about a cat that always fascinated me. Have you ever watched one walk across a sideboard or a mantle filled with pictures, fragile china, and other breakables? I’ve seen them do it, skillfully placing their paws without knocking anything over.

The King James Bible in Ephesians 5:15 has a word for cat walking. It is walking “circumspectly.” The Greek word is *acribos*, meaning carefully picking your steps along a dangerous trail. We get our word acrobat from it. The immediate context has to do with imitating God by walking in the light. The world is a dangerous place. Deeds of darkness lurk everywhere. We must watch our steps. In this context the non-Christian is called to wake up and “arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph. 5:14). This is a wonderful summary of the gospel.

Christ is the believer's sunrise and daylight. Next comes the punch line, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil" (v.15). Since we are Christ's people and light-bearers we must be careful how we live in this dark world.

There are actions we can take to walk cautiously. When I get up in the morning, one of the first steps I take is to my prayer chair. I work on my Scripture memory, pray, read the Bible, pray some more and seek God's wisdom for the known and unknown details of the day ("Set a guard over my tongue and keep watch over the door of my lips."). My tongue needs to be under control. Do you have the problem of saying the first thing that comes to your mind? That's not cat walking. What's going on in my heart? A cat-walking-way-of -life requires attention to motives. There are a lot of potential breakables on the sideboard of daily life. Is it gossip or a helpful exchange of information? Is it the truth or am I spinning it to fit my agenda?

Cats not only have feet. They have ears. Do I listen to gossip containing criticisms of another person, accept it as truth, and let it shape my attitudes? Uh oh! I think I just broke something. But walk we must. Thoughtfulness (yes, I know cats don't think; they function by instincts) implies a scale of values, priorities, and balancing life's demands. In a Christmas season it's easy to throw financial caution to the wind. Then January rolls around and the bills show up. Do you have a gift budget? Is it within reason? Does it reflect the realities of your income? When our children were young Beth and I set a limit on the amount we would spend on Miriam and Eric. It required agreement and planning. A limited income required it and by God's grace we were able to stay out of debt.

It takes good eyes to walk safely in the dark. Feline vision is exceptionally good at night and is known for excellent peripheral vision. Their eyes have six to eight times more rod cells, which are more sensitive to low light, than humans do. Cats can sense motion in the dark much better than we can. All the better to catch that mouse in the corner. In the context of the imperative, "be careful how you walk," is the warning to "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (Eph. 5:11). Situational awareness plays a key role in avoiding sins lurking in the dark. With one click of the mouse (no pun intended) pictures can appear on a computer screen that should not be there. Men, we are especially susceptible to temptation through the eye gate. Thousands of years ago Job had the sense to guard his eyes ("I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin." Job 31:1). The flames of sexual lust can be brought to a blaze when the uncontrolled eye looks in the wrong places. Cat walking has a keen eye for avoidance of moral breakages.

Cat walking is wise, gospel driven living in a dark world. Watch your step.

The Gift (December 25, 2016)

God has made us to enjoy gifts, both the giving and receiving of them. The Christmas season highlights this reality in life. The wise men upon visiting the baby Jesus brought him gifts. It seems to us the natural thing to do. After all, the King of kings was in Bethlehem by divine appointment. The visit of magi has always been one of the puzzling parts of the birth narratives in the Gospels. The identity of the wise men from the east and their worship of the Christ child leave us with questions and a statement of truth. This we do know. The gifts of gold and

frankincense and myrrh were an expression of worship, adoration, and respect. They were lavish and expensive. Such gifts were definite upgrades well beyond Yankee candles and gift cards. They may very well have financed the family's trip to Egypt. There also seems to be some prophetic anticipation of that glorious day when "the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into" the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:24).

Lest we forget, the Receiver of gifts is the Gift Himself. Eleven times in the New Testament Jesus Christ is said to be the gift of forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that He was the gift of God (Jn. 4:10). Justification (being declared righteous on the basis of what Christ has done on the cross) costs absolutely nothing. Of course, it cost Christ His life (Rom. 3:24). At the core of the coverage of all that has been done for the believer in Christ are references to Him as "the gift" in Romans 5:15, 16, 17. In contrast to Adam's act of sin and its disastrous consequences is Christ's act of obedience on the cross as an act of grace. A billion plus sins couldn't stop Christ, but instead only activated His free gift. Paul dances with joy over "grace abounding over abounding sin." Sins pays it wages day-by-day. It pays in death, but "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

God's extravagant gift of salvation in Christ is reflected in our grace-gifts to one another (2 Cor. 9:15). The gifts we Christians exchange at Christmas, and for that matter all our giving, can serve as gospel parables. Sacrificial giving for the sake of others is a reflection of a gospel truth. At the pinnacle of New Testament texts describing the gospel offer is Ephesians 2:8, 9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Could salvation as a free gift be stated more plainly than this? Deliverance from God's wrath is not something that can be bought. No amount of sincerity, accomplishments, good deeds, religious rituals, or any merit whatsoever can earn our acceptance by a holy God. God's free gift of forgiveness of sin and eternal life is just that. It is free. Salvation is not a cooperative venture in which both God and man contribute their parts.

It is freakish and an insult to God to attempt to inject works as a condition for the gift of justification. On Christmas morning children by the millions will eagerly open presents. I have vivid memories of Christmas mornings as a child. After having worked myself into sleep the night before Christmas, I awakened in the morning with wide-open energy. Cowboy movies had shaped my expectations. Cowboy boots with spurs, a cowboy hat, chaps, and the whole cowboy look. But best of all was the thought of strapping on a two-gun holster. Cap gun shoot-outs were in the plans. I raced to the Christmas tree gleaming with silver ice cycles and bubble lights. My unwrapped presents revealed what I had hoped for. In a flash I was outfitted with my cowboy outfit. Soon shots rang out. The smoke and smell of caps was everywhere. I received the gifts I wanted. Stop the story. Let's rewind it. What if my parents had told me that I had to earn my presents? There were duties to be fulfilled; dishes to wash, ironing to be done, and yard work. Would that not have changed my gift to a non-gift?

The idea that salvation from hell is a totally free gift is denied by many. We are told that eternal salvation must cost us something. Some say we have to be baptized. Others tell us that justification is an ongoing process based upon good works done in faith. Salvation is not a gift if receiving depends on our obedience. Such a requirement contradicts the good news that eternal life is a free gift of God. We have the words of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ on this matter. He has said, "I will give to him who thirsts from the spring of water of life without cost" (Rev. 21:6).

My dear friend, have you received the free gift of eternal salvation? Jesus paid the complete price. There is nothing left for us to pay (1 Pet. 1:18, 19). The gift is Jesus Christ. Faith is the hand of the heart reaching out to receive God's gift. If you have received the gift of Christ, is He becoming more dominant in your desires, thoughts, words, and behavior? He is not merely the present we unwrap and soon toss aside. Not in the least. He will be eternally celebrated as the Gift in the courts of heaven.

Setting our Sights on the New Year (January 15, 2017)

There is no crystal ball into which we may gaze and receive definite knowledge of the world in 2017. But there are critical issues that we need to see within the sphere of biblical truth.

"But man is born to trouble. As the sparks fly upward" Job 5:7

See the church suffering. Eliphaz astutely observed that afflictions in life don't sprout from the ground, but are sown in the soil of human existence. Cancer, brain tumors, strokes, pneumonia, high blood pressure, migraine headaches, the flu. This list is endless. We also struggle together fighting the ravages of sin and the wounds it inflicts. As Christians we are not cast about on the shoals of suffering without hope. Do you know someone fighting pain and suffering with the all-too-often attachments of anxiety and fear? Pray that God's love and abiding presence will flood their minds with soul-satisfying grace. Make this a year of consistent and informed praying for one another. As the sparks of trouble fly upward, so must our hope soar to the heavens.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable. . ." 2 Timothy 3:16

See the church devouring the Scriptures. Sufferers need minds that think right. This requires soul-food. It is to our shame that we attempt to live while at the same time defying the words of Scripture, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Some use the Bible reading plan that takes them from Genesis to Revelation in one year. Others prefer the two-year plan. I have a Bible app on my phone which is a wonderful convenience. This makes it possible to read Scripture while waiting on my "eye-shot" in the doctor's office, even with dilated eyes. To whom much is given, much is required. Do the "profitable" thing and put yourself on a Bible reading plan of some kind for the New Year. "Lord, increase our appetite for your Word."

"I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings, and all who are in high positions . . ." 1 Timothy 2:1-2

See the church praying as citizens of heaven. Seeking government solutions to human problems is not our Great Commission. It is getting the gospel out to all people everywhere. One of the best brief articles I have read on the recent presidential election and its results can be found on "Moody Church Media, Erwin Lutzer" entitled, "A Word to Both Sides of the Aisle." No matter what your political persuasion, as Christians we are under obligation to pray for our government and its leaders. We are given a call to pray all sorts of prayers for all sorts of people. Think of some definite way you can pray for unsaved people and share the gospel in the coming year. Our personal evangelism class in the second hour on Sunday mornings can be a good place to start.

". . . for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye." Zechariah 2:8

See the church as loving Israel. It is true that Israel has lost her favored position before God due to her rejection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 11:15), but this is not a license to persecute God's chosen people. Regrettably some of our Christian brothers and sisters think that the O.T. promises to Israel have been transferred to the church. This is a misreading of the Scriptures, but not in the same league as the virulent anti-Semitism found in the United Nations. Recently the U.N. Security Council pounced upon Israel (again) in Resolution 2334 which in the words of Douglas J. Feith, in the Wall Street Journal, "describes Israel's West Bank towns and East Jerusalem neighborhoods as settlements that are a 'major obstacle' to peace." Arab opposition to Israel's existence is a stubborn fact that can't be ignored. Pray for the nation of Israel. This tiny democratic nation surrounded by authoritarian powers in the Middle East is under assault, in the name of peace, by her enemies who say Israel has no right to exist. We long for that time at the end of history when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26).

"For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Romans 1:17

See the church celebrating the gospel of grace. The year 2017 celebrates the Reformation of five hundred years ago. On All Saints Day, November 1, 1517, a Roman Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther hammered a nail that was heard around the world. He posted a list of ninety-five theses for debate over the matter of indulgences. This act initiated what became a theological revolution in the medieval church. It was two years after Luther nailed the ninety-five theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church that his eyes were opened to the liberating truth of justification of the sinner by faith alone. In his own words he expresses his life-changing breakthrough. "There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith." The shackles of bondage to a works-righteousness system were broken. In the words of Michael Reeves, "God does not want our goodness but our trust." This is the year to celebrate the Reformation when the gospel of the grace of God was rescued from the suffocating system of sacramentalism (that God's grace comes through the sacramental ministry of the church) in the Roman Catholic Church. We can rejoice in the legacy of the Reformation. Look for special studies this year that will highlight our spiritual and theological history celebrating the glorious gospel of the free grace of God.

How to Live Under the New President (January 29, 2017)

Life has a way of going on no matter who is President of the United States. I am into my fourteenth president. As one has said, all the presidents will be footnotes in the greater story of the drama of redemption. However, there are those who come at their politics and presidents with religious fervor. Christians should know better. The nations (including the U.S.A.) are "like a drop from a bucket" (Isa. 40:15). God is sovereign over all nations. He raises up kings, dictators, and presidents and replaces them with others. The following points of truth are designed to assist in setting our mental, moral, and spiritual compass for the next four years. My last offering of this was in 2009. Here is an adjusted version.

Live by confidence in the rule of God over all our circumstances (Psa. 145:3; Dan. 4:34-35; Rom. 8:28). God in His infinite wisdom determines who our elected officials are. This does not mean that God approves of a politician's character or the way in which he governs. The pagan Persian king, Cyrus, was referred to as God's anointed (Isa. 45:1). He carried out God's purposes without being aware of it.

Christians are to submit to governing authorities and conduct themselves as law abiding citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). It is God-honoring to accept and work within the nation or governmental system in which God has placed us. Participating in marches and protests within the bounds of the law is permissible. Riots, the destruction of property, and violence against people are a defiance of God's moral law and undermine the well-being of society. If and when a government demands that Christians violate God's commands, then civil disobedience is allowed. The legality of abortion on demand cannot be the basis for refusal to pay taxes and rebellion against the government. As citizens we can exercise our right to vote and work for change by moral persuasion.

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the crown-jewel of God's redemptive plan (Eph. 1:3-12). Never underestimate the power of the gospel to change lives and alter the course of history. This can be seen in some of the great revivals in both British and American history (e.g., The First Great Awakening in the 1840s). While we do not proclaim the gospel to save the world or America, we do so call sinners to believe on Christ and flee the wrath of God (Rom. 1:16). The moral breakdown in our nation, though a matter of great concern, must not eclipse the greater work of calling the lost to salvation in Christ. Refuse to allow any "idolatrous confidence in the power of government to save us" and take the place of the sufficiency of Christ and God's Word.

Pray for our governing authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-4; Prov.21:1). I prayed for President Obama over the last eight years, and I expect to pray for President Trump. Our prayers can affect decisions at the highest levels. Set up a place in your daily prayer list for lawmakers, the Supreme Court, state and local government, and pending legislation.

Fear, worry, and anger must not become boarders in our homes (Phil. 4:6-7; Eph. 4:26). The matter of fear as to what President Trump may or may not do has been an understandable issue for many reasonable-minded people. President Trump's rhetoric, especially throughout the presidential campaign, was at times unwise, insulting, unsettling. As a friend of mine commented, "We gain nothing by blindly praising him (President Trump) unless we do so strategically and with sensitivity to what others think." Pray for our president, for his wisdom in decision making, and that he will make wise appointments to his cabinet, and other positions he is constitutionally authorized to do.

The current political climate in America cannot be understood without a a knowledge of the importance of worldviews. Wayne Grudem in his book, "Politics According to the Bible" offers six basic principles for establishing an overall Christian worldview. I highly recommend Grudem's book for "understanding modern political issues in light of Scripture." Two foundational principles in a Christian worldview are (1) The one true God reveals Himself and His moral standards clearly in the Bible and, (2) Because Adam and Eve sinned, there is moral evil ("sin") in the heart of every human being. There is a worldview war taking place in our nation. A few questions make this apparent. What is the source of human rights? Government or the Creator? Human nature - is it basically good (therefore society is primarily responsible for evil)? Or is it not basically good (therefore the individual primarily responsible for evil)? For further help see "A Guide to Basic Differences between Left and Right (some opposing definitions in the American political lexicon)" by Dennis Prager, January 17, 2017. All news sources function with an underlying worldview. Sadly, the credibility of the "mainstream" media has been deeply eroded by its own self-professed agenda.

I submit the above principles in the hope that we may live America's twenty-first century version of the Apostle Peter's admonition, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17).

Immigrants, Government, and the Gospel (February 3, 2017)

God loves immigrants. He made this very plain to the nation of Israel in the formation of her theocracy. The United States of America is a nation of immigrants. The immigration of our ancestors may have been voluntary or involuntary, but nevertheless we are bound together by arriving in America from a host of nations. God reminded Israel of her responsibility to "sojourners" by reflecting on her own history, "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9).

The arrival of immigrants to our shores has always been a part of the American story. But tensions have arisen in recent years due to illegal aliens and refugees from Islamic nations. Is America to have open borders? What should be done about immigrants who are here illegally? Should there be a limit on refugees entering our country? Is it legal and/or moral to permit sanctuary cities (where illegal aliens are protected from deportation)? Must immigrants be expected to assimilate into American society? These are some of the many connected issues that dominated our recent presidential election. President Trump's executive order on refugees has only exacerbated the national debate. To further complicate matters, Jesus and the Scriptures are invoked on placards and in the media to support personal views on immigration. Certain pastors interviewed approved of a temporary ban on refugees from some Muslim majority nations while increased vetting is enacted to screen out potential terrorists. Other pastors are adamant and dismayed that more Christians, "have not vigorously opposed the ban." And another of the same persuasion, asserted on Facebook: "Your silence ("your," i.e. white Republican Christians) is impacting the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Still another preacher, adding more heat than light said, "I wonder what Bible they are reading. I wonder have they spent much time with the one whom we call Lord and savior (sic). Because if you spend time with Jesus, I don't know how you crush the poor."

What does spending more time in the Bible reveal about immigration, the government, and the gospel? One sign held aloft by those protesting the Presidential executive order identified Leviticus 19:34 as an answer; "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself..." My intention at this point is not to consider every text in the Mosaic Law regarding immigrants ("sojourners," "strangers"). However, it is beneficial to survey some of the instruction on the treatment of non-citizens in Israel, and their responsibilities. (1) Israel gave certain limited religious and civic privileges to non-Israelites. For example, they were entitled to asylum in the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15; Josh. 20:9). (2) Aliens were subject to certain laws such as being forbidden to work on the Sabbath (Ex. 23:12). They were entitled to the same justice as Israelites (Deut. 1:16) and were liable to the same penalties (Lev. 20:2; 24:16). (3) Foreigners were to be loved and treated like native Israelites (Lev. 19:34). What principles can be drawn from Israel's relation to aliens? In the first place, it must be stressed that Israel was a theocracy and unique among the nations. The United States is not a theocratic nation. We cannot deduce exact parallels for our own government. Secondly, our government, as a sovereign nation, has a God-given right to form its own Constitution, establish

its borders, and set conditions for citizenship. Wayne Grudem in “Politics According to the Bible” correctly observes that “the laws that God gave to Israel can still provide useful information for understanding the purposes of government and the nature of good and bad government” (p. 84). Plucking verses regarding immigrants out of their biblical, theological, and historical context only leads to further confusion, and in some cases self-deception.

The immigration policy of the United States should honor the well-being of its citizenry. Our government operates within the bounds of biblical teaching when the following policies are followed. (1) Legal aliens are due the rights of citizenship, whereas illegal aliens are not permitted these same privileges. (2) Our government has the right and responsibility to protect its borders and deport all known criminals. Locking our doors at night and putting security and safety measures in place are not unloving actions. (3) Government is to seek the good of its citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). Grudem emphasizes that “the immigration policies of a nation should be designed to bring benefit to that specific nation” (p. 471). Our government pursues the best interest of its citizens when it promotes assimilation. Failure to do so Balkanizes society by creating divisions that weaken national stability. (5) Our government should take the necessary Constitutional measures to defend our nation. Decisions to regulate the number of refugees are within the bounds of serving as “God’s servants for our good” (Rom. 13:4).

Where does the church fit into immigration? Christians are aliens dispersed throughout the world on their journey to heaven (1 Pet. 1:1-2). Our dual citizenship requires us to be good citizens while never forgetting our higher allegiance. Our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ is a call to be gospel people above all else. American churches are to offer the embrace of biblical love and truth to all immigrants. Hospitality, kindness, generosity, and gospel declaration are to be our signature welcome. Illegal aliens are to be treated respectfully and encouraged to follow the path to becoming legal citizens. Our church can be the right kind of “safe place” which offers a merciful and truth-rich environment for our community. Christians must be careful not to be sucked into the hysteria created by the media over the “outrage” of the day (and very selective I might add). Christians may disagree over our President’s executive order on refugees which, arguably, may have been unnecessary and clumsy. We should find ways to constructively enter into reform of the immigration system. Insularity and hostility toward refugees, no matter what their ethnic, national, or religious background, has no place among those who represent the Savior of the world. The gospel is God’s Statue of Liberty calling out; “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Sola Scriptura: “Scripture Alone” - The Erosion of Authority (February 17, 2017)

Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Soli Deo Gloria

The five “solas” of the Reformation are designed to enable us to understand the theological intentions of the Reformers. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was ground zero in the sixteenth century movement to rescue the gospel from its obscurity. Roman Catholic Medieval theology had clouded the free grace of justification by faith. It had done so by establishing the authority of tradition as equal with the Bible. The sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ was drained from the gospel by replacing it with the mediating power of the church as the dispenser of grace. Grace was turned into “a thing” which could be acquired through obedience

to the sacraments. Faith was transformed into faith plus works. In and through all of the above, human effort gets top billing in salvation rather than the glory of God.

Sola Scriptura:

We affirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.

We deny that any creed, council or individual may bind a Christian's conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, The Cambridge Declaration

"I did nothing; the Word did everything." The great Reformer, Martin Luther, said it all in these words. He believed and practiced the truth that Scripture alone is the final authority for faith and practice. Luther speaks for himself on this matter. In his debate in July of 1519 with the Roman Catholic theologian, Johann Eck, a theological bombshell was dropped:

"A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without it. As for the pope's decretal on indulgences I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture, we should reject pope and councils" (Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther, 90).

Scripture alone states the truth that the gospel stands upon the final authority of God's Word, the Bible. Implications of this can be summarized in the following statements.

The truth of Scripture alone was like the bright light of the sun that burns away the clouds of false teaching. The Medieval Roman Catholic Church claimed the right to interpret the Scriptures. The claim of the Catholic Church today is the same as it was in sixteenth century:

"As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, S82).

This helps us to understand the world in which Martin Luther lived. He did not see a Bible until age twenty. In many towns in Germany only one sermon could be heard in a year, at Lent. Images of the saints, the Virgin Mary, and painters substituted for a hearing of God's Word. When Martin Luther was eventually able to access Scripture in his studies and lectures, everything began to change.

The truth of Scripture alone opened eyes to the wonders of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. From 1513 to 1517 Luther lectured on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews while on the faculty of theology at Wittenberg. It was during this time, or perhaps in 1519, that Luther had his theological breakthrough of justification by faith alone. As he was seeing Scripture in a new way the dominoes began to fall. Indulgences, the authority of the pope, and the gospel-obscuring-sacramental system were challenged by the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.). The superiority of the Greek New Testament (published by Erasmus in 1516), Luther's translation of

the New Testament into the German language, and printed sermons and pamphlets (thanks to the printing press), created a revolution throughout Europe. We must listen to Luther's understanding of the changes taking place as he said, "Let wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God" (Luther and Erasmus, 41).

The truth of Scripture alone was rescued from theological Bible-abuse. When the Reformers began to study and preach the Bible, they exemplified what the Bible says about its own nature and how it interprets itself. Luther's conviction on the inerrancy of Scripture was settled, "Because we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I – in short, all men, may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err" (Luther, Large Catechism, in The Book of Concord, 1959, 444). But there was more than the trustworthiness of Scripture. There are the matters of Scripture's clarity and sufficiency. The Roman Catholic Church had obscured the plain teaching of the Bible. It claimed that the Bible needs to be interpreted by the church. Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, would have none of this as he put it, "When the Word of God shines on the human understanding, it enlightens it in such a way that it understands and confesses the Word and knows the certainty of it" (Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God, 75). Nor does the Bible compete with additional revelation. The "enthusiasts" (God-within-ism) of Luther's day were a pest. These were the God-revealed-this-to-me people, who in effect, created their own authority, namely their subjective impressions.

The truth of Scripture alone is in danger of becoming eclipsed in our own day. The Reformation is not over. In some sense it is to be a continuing mind-set. Attacks upon the authority of Scripture and the gospel are as numerous as there are demonic powers. Satan's strategy of "has-God-said" comes disguised in every generation. *Sola Scriptura* is assaulted by "the new papacy of the biblical scholar" (The Legacy of Luther, ed. R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, 116). Beware of the idea that "scholars alone" can tell us what the Bible says. Laypersons and pastors do not have to depend on experts to understand the basic meaning of Scripture. One of the most alluring subversions of Scripture alone is the new tradition of experience. Feelings and impressions can easily become a tempting shortcut to truth. Personal experience and anecdotes must always be submitted to the final authority and complete sufficiency of the Scriptures. Luther said in no uncertain terms, "People generally think: 'If I had an opportunity to hear God speak in person, I would run my feet bloody... But you now have the Word of God in church . . . and this is God's Word as surely as if God Himself were speaking to you'" ("Sermons on the Gospel of John", in Luther's Works, 22:526-27).

Scripture alone demands that we live as Bible people. Are we reading the Bible every day? Luther read the Bible through twice a year. Let's memorize Scripture. It is said that Luther had memorized much of the New Testament. We must not allow our church to grow soft in teaching the Scriptures to the next generation. May we never retreat from the Bible as our final authority and its sufficiency for all things pertaining "to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3).

Solus Christus: "Christ Alone"- The Erosion of Christ-Centered Faith (February 26, 2017)

Solus Christus:

As evangelical faith becomes secularized, its interests have been blurred with those of the culture. The result is a loss of absolute values, permissive individualism, and a substitution of

wholeness for holiness, recovery for repentance, intuition for faith, feeling for belief, chance for providence, and immediate gratification for enduring hope. Christ and his cross have moved from the center of our vision.

We reaffirm that our salvation is accomplished by the mediatorial work of the historical Christ alone. His sinless life and substitutionary atonement alone are sufficient for our justification and reconciliation to the Father.

We deny that the gospel is preached if Christ's substitutionary work is not declared and faith in Christ and his work is not solicited.

*The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals
The Cambridge Declaration, 1996*

Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Number 62 should be noted, as it reads, "The true treasure of the church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." We must never forget that the Reformation, from beginning to end, was about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This brings us to Solus Christus, the center-truth of the five solas. Without a biblically accurate understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, nothing else matters. We will proceed along four lines of truth in placing the flood light of attention on what "Christ alone" means to our salvation.

Christ alone means that the Lord Jesus Christ stands at the center of the gospel. Luther said, "Therefore, one must teach as follows: 'Behold, Christ died for you! He took sin, death, and hell upon Himself and submitted Himself. But nothing could subdue Him, for He was strong; He rose from the dead, was completely victorious, and subjected everything to Himself. And He did all this in order that you might be free from it and lord over it. If you believe this, you have it'" (Martin Luther, "Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter").

To further emphasize this W. Robert Godfrey succinctly states that, "Luther recovered for the church from the Bible the centrality of the person and work of Christ in redemption" (*The Legacy of Luther*, 161). Jesus Christ has gospel-supremacy because of His person. The Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 affirmed "that Jesus is truly man and truly God and that the two natures of Christ are so united as to be without mixture, confusion, separation, or division each nature retaining its own attributes" (*The Reformation Study Bible*, 2279). Jesus Christ also has gospel-supremacy because of His work. Luther called Christianity a theology of the cross. The substitution of Jesus on the cross, suffering God's wrath for our sins, is the focal point of redemptive history. Christ's work of redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation for sinners is witnessed to by the entirety of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation through the movements of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" is the big story.

Christ alone for justification by faith alone was obscured by the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church agreed on orthodox Christology. The collision occurred in reference to Roman Catholic error on the appropriation of Christ's atonement. How is the sinner saved? Stephen Wellum identifies the issue as follows: "The Reformers . . . in affirming Christ alone, were predominately opposing Rome's sacramental theology that undercut and compromised Christ's all sufficient work" ("Solus Christus: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters"). The battle ground was the doctrinally flawed view of the Catholic Church regarding the work of Christ. Justification and sanctification get blended

in the Roman Catholic system. Roman Catholic theologian, Ludwig Ott, frames it thusly, “It (justification) is a supernatural sanctifying and renewal of the inner man” (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, 250). Justification is viewed as a process wherein the merits of Christ are mediated through the church. The Protestant position is that justification is not a process but a moment in time when by faith alone (not based on works) the sinner is declared righteous before God.

Christ alone exalts God and the glory of His gospel. The Roman Catholic theology of justification is a system of salvation by good works. The glory goes to man. In contrast to this the Reformers taught that Christ’s substitutionary atonement was necessary in its cause and sufficient and final in its benefits. The writer to the Hebrew Christians lays out in great clarity the necessity of the atonement. Authority over the creation was originally committed to man, not angels (Heb. 2:6-8). This authority over creation was lost by Adam but wonderfully recovered by Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:9). The suffering of Jesus our Captain (our trail blazer) and His learned obedience qualified Him as our redeemer (Heb. 2:10; 5:8). His suffering was necessary to complete His identification with humanity and to disarm the devil (Heb. 2:14-16). The redemptive plan of God is suffused with God’s love (Jn. 3:16). God is holy and demands sinlessness in order to enjoy fellowship with Him. Because He is just, sin must be punished. Forgiveness and eternal life are possible through faith alone in Christ. The good news is that God saves the hell-deserving sinner by having demonstrated His love in the death of His obedient Son. His death is the final offering for sin (“He sat down,” Heb.10:11-14). The saving work of Christ was completed at the cross (“It is finished,” Jn. 19:30). A million masses cannot add one thing to what God has done. There is no need for a continuation of sacrifices. Salvation was accomplished by Christ alone. All glory goes to God alone.

Christ alone wraps the believer in the benefits of being in union with Jesus Christ. Luther reveled in the joy of being in union with Christ:

“Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom ... It follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the believing soul can boast and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits” (*The Freedom of a Christian*).

In Christ the believer is free from the dominion of Satan and is enslaved to Christ. What a Master! Because of Christ alone we are not our own but are bought with a price. We belong to Him (1 Cor.6). Because of Christ alone we are part of His body, the church. We are connected to one another in Christ (1 Cor. 12). Because of Christ alone we have our identity in Christ. Because of Christ alone we have the power to break free from our old life. Because of Christ alone our values and decision making, our core convictions, are centered in the word of Christ. Because of Christ alone all things are working together for good (Rom. 8:28). Because of Christ alone our future is fixed on Christ. We live in hope. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Sola Gratia: “Grace Alone” - The Erosion of the Gospel (March 3, 2017)

Unwarranted confidence in human ability is a product of fallen human nature. This false confidence now fills the evangelical world; from the self-esteem gospel, to the health and wealth

gospel, from those who have transformed the gospel into a product to be sold and sinners into consumers who want to buy, to others who treat Christian faith as being true simply because it works. This silences the doctrine of justification regardless of the official commitments of our churches. God's grace in Christ is not merely necessary but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.

We reaffirm that in salvation we are rescued from God's wrath by his grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

We deny that salvation is in any sense a human work. Human methods, techniques or strategies by themselves cannot accomplish this transformation. Faith is not produced by our unregenerated human nature.

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, The Cambridge Declaration, 1996

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” The words and the melody strike a sweet chord in our hearts. But what is amazing about God’s grace is the astounding truth that everything has been done to save hell-deserving sinners. Grace is a GIFT of God, but there are those who take the “a” out of amazing and make grace a “maze” of confusion and complicated theological error. Listen to Martin Luther’s clarion call: “The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and *everything is already done*” (Thesis 26, *Luther’s Works*, 31:56, emphasis added). The Reformation was fought to retrieve grace from the clutches of an apostate church which taught that grace must be earned.

Grace alone is the unmerited favor bestowed by God apart from man’s ability or merit. It is unearned and unearnable. Paul, the apostle of grace, speaks of it in no uncertain terms, “and we are justified by His grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24). In the same context he strikes a blow at human pride by asking, “Then what becomes of our boasting? Is it excluded” (Rom. 3:27). Is this not clear to the merchants of salvation by works? A gift costs absolutely nothing. Such grace is necessary because of the human condition (Rom. 3:9-20, 23). We are sinners and have nothing to offer God for His forgiveness and acceptance. God doesn’t help those who help themselves. He saves those who can’t help themselves because they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Sinclair Ferguson pointedly summarizes the desperate condition of sinners:

“Luther was profoundly conscious that by nature we are totally depraved and therefore totally disabled spiritually. Neither biblical commands nor our moral obligations to live for God’s glory should be misread as assuming or implying our ability to fulfill them. *Homo incurvatus in se* is incapable of converting himself to God” (*The Legacy of Luther*, ed.: R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, 147).

“Jesus Christ is the grace of God personified” (Charles Ryrie, *The Grace of God*, 9). Grace is undeserved, a favor, and an act of kindness. God gives it. It is not a work of man (“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace,” Rom. 11:6).

Grace alone was and is eclipsed by the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. The Council of Trent (1546 – 1563) was Catholicism’s response to the Reformation. It affirms its system of salvation by a sacramental system:

“If anyone says that men are justified either solely by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness for solely by the remission of sins ... or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Canon 11).

The Catholic view of grace is a maze of human works whereby grace is infused into the recipient. Grace, like a can of Red Bull, is poured into the individual when he receives the sacraments. According to the Roman Catholic system, “God does not save by grace, but that grace is given to those who are ‘prepared’ for it, who do ‘what is in them’ to be fit for grace” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 82). What is startling is that Luther himself, before he was converted, taught his students that salvation was by grace, “not because of our merits ... given out of the pure mercy of the promising God” (Luther’s Works, 11:396-97). The subtlety of his error should not go unnoticed. Luther was in step with medieval Roman Catholicism when he taught his brand of salvation by grace (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 81). Biblical words can be emptied of their true meaning and redefined to support heretical teaching. It takes the Holy Spirit to open blinded eyes (2 Cor. 4:4).

Grace alone credits the sinner with the righteousness which God requires. The muddy waters of Rome’s theology of justification made grace “a thing, a force.” “Grace was regarded as more or less a substance infused into the individual, not the disposition of God toward the individual” (Sinclair Ferguson, The Legacy of Luther, 145). By the grace of God, Martin Luther discovered that grace is the personal kindness of God by which He does not merely enable us but actually rescues us. “In Reformation thought, grace was no longer seen as being like a can of spiritual Red Bull. It was more like a marriage” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 85). Luther likens the story of the gospel to the marriage of the divine bridegroom Christ who marries a wicked harlot. It’s a powerful drama of the grace of God through the gift of Jesus Christ.

Grace alone brings the sinner into union with Jesus Christ. The believer “can know a confidence as secure as Jesus himself.” But this brings us to the criticism of the humanist scholar, Erasmus: “Lutherans seek only two things - wealth and wives ... to them the gospel means the right to live as they please” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 33). This was essentially the charge of “cheap grace.” There are two enemies of the grace of God. One is legalism, “do this and you can be saved.” The other adversary is antinomianism, reordering God’s grace in Christ to create loopholes for selfish living. Paul hammered these distortions in Galatians and Romans. “Grace without Jesus Christ was precisely what the Reformers were stepping away from” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 91). John Newton’s words sound the note of true grace, “T’was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.”

Ephesians 2:8-10 shows us the way to begin breathing the atmosphere of our heavenly rest beckoning us homeward:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Sola Fide: Faith Alone - The Erosion of the Chief Article, Part 1 (March 12, 2017)

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. This is the article by which the church stands or falls. Today this article is often ignored, distorted or sometimes even denied by leaders, scholars and pastors who claim to be evangelical. Although fallen human nature has always recoiled from recognizing its need for Christ's imputed righteousness, modernity greatly fuels the fires of this discontent with the biblical Gospel. We have allowed this discontent to dictate the nature of our ministry and what it is we are preaching.

Many in the church growth movement believe that sociological understanding of those in the pew is as important to the success of the gospel as is the biblical truth which is proclaimed. As a result, theological convictions are frequently divorced from the work of the ministry. The marketing orientation in many churches takes this even further, erasing the distinction between the biblical Word and the world, robbing Christ's cross of its offense, and reducing Christian faith to the principles and methods which bring success to secular corporations.

While the theology of the cross may be believed, these movements are actually emptying it of its meaning. There is no gospel except that of Christ's substitution in our place whereby God imputed to him our sin and imputed to us his righteousness. Because he bore our judgment, we now walk in his grace as those who are forever pardoned, accepted and adopted as God's children. There is no basis for our acceptance before God except in Christ's saving work, not in our patriotism, churchly devotion or moral decency. The gospel declares what God has done for us in Christ. It is not about what we can do to reach him.

- *We reaffirm that justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. In justification Christ's righteousness is imputed to us as the only possible satisfaction of God's perfect justice.*
- *We deny that justification rests on any merit to be found in us, or upon the grounds of an infusion of Christ's righteousness in us, or that an institution claiming to be a church that denies or condemns sola fide can be recognized as a legitimate church.*

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, The Cambridge Declaration, 1996

Suppose by a time warp you could have a conversation with the Reformer, Martin Luther. You ask him, "Dr. Luther if you were to die today would you go to heaven?" This, of course, is the Luther who has just become an Augustinian monk. What do you think he would say? He, most certainly, would confess to a lack of such assurance. He might explain his efforts in doing righteous deeds. After all, he was committed to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that justification was a process over a lifetime. The Reformer gives us his thoughts about this matter: "But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes" (*Martin Luther Discovers the True Meaning of Righteousness*," as cited in [Why the Reformation Still Matters](#), 25).

Luther was vigilant in pursuing a performance-based system of accumulating merits through the sacraments of the church. It was an oppressive and depressive kind of gospel, and an utterly false

gospel. Historian Steven Ozment describes the uncertainty that characterized a sixteenth century Roman Catholic:

For medieval theologians the present life remained an anxious pilgrimage; man lived in unresolved suspense, fearing damnation and hoping for salvation, ever in need of confession and indulgence, discipline and consolation, saintly intercession and the self-help of good works. Nothing seemed more impossible than this-worldly certitude of salvation; such was self-deception and presumption at best, seditious rejection of God's church at worst. Saving faith was constantly developing faith, *fides charitate formata*, faith formed by continuous works of love and charity" (The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of the Late Medieval and Reformation Europe, 374).

In order to understand what the Reformers meant by "faith alone," it will be necessary to see what the word "alone" stressed and how this impacted Martin Luther. It was Scripture alone that asserted the final authority of the Bible over the pope and the councils of the church. Christ alone is sufficient for sinners' justification, not the sacramental system mediated by the church. It is the gift of God's grace that releases the unbeliever from the shackles of sin, not pipelines of grace flowing from the sacraments.

Faith alone is the only way to enter the narrow gate of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ. The simplicity of faith without works is vividly illustrated in God's provision of the bronze serpent for Israel in the wilderness (Num. 21:5-9; Jn. 3:14-20). Physical death from snake bites, a serpent of bronze, and healing as a result of looking to the serpent of bronze is a dramatic picture of the look of faith and trust toward the Lord Jesus Christ that brings eternal life. Faith is the assurance and conviction that what God has said is true and that it is to be acted upon (Heb. 11:1). This faith is not a leap in the dark. To the contrary, knowledge, conviction, and trust are indispensable elements in saving faith. The content of faith knows that Jesus is who He said He was, God in the flesh (Jn. 8:24; 14:10), that we are sinners and under God's judgment (Jn. 3:18), that Christ's atoning sacrifice and His bodily resurrection make our pardon by God possible. The Holy Spirit prosecutes the case of the sinner's guilt and need for divine forgiveness. The Spirit's work of persuasion takes place in the intellect and the will enabling the spiritually dead to receive the gift of justification.

Faith alone became eclipsed by the Roman Catholic system of faith plus works. Medieval Catholic theology was plagued by the belief that humanity is not totally depraved, only morally sick. Because we are not dead spiritually, we can cooperate in salvation by good works. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) states the official Catholic position: "If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which forgives sin for Christ's sake; or that we are justified by this confidence alone; let him be anathema" (Session 6, Canon 12). This brings us back to Luther's problem. Good works and obsession with not overlooking sin kept the Augustinian monk in despair. Was there any hope in a system that offered no assurance of justification and leaves the sinner with a dark, cavernous uncertain future?

Faith alone is the light that leads the way out of the hopelessness and darkness of salvation by works. In what is one of the high peaks of the Alps of the truth of justification by faith, Paul tells us that, in Christ, God credits us with the righteousness which He requires (3:24). There is only one way to receive God's forgiveness and eternal life. And that is to believe on the Lord Jesus

Christ (3:27-28). Could it be any plainer, “justified by his grace as a gift?” Luther’s “eureka” moment came bursting out of an understanding of Romans 1:17 as found in his own words:

“I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e., that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.” All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open doors.”

Faith is not a work, and it ceases to become faith when it is downloaded with conditions, as well intentioned as they might be. “Luther saw people as passive in the process of justification” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 29). When Martin Luther saw the light that grace was not an energy drink, but God’s unmerited favor, he was stopped in his tracks. When he realized that faith is simply receiving Christ because of what Christ has done, his life changed.

Sola Fide: Faith Alone - The Erosion of the Chief Article, Part 2 (March 15, 2017)

Faith alone brings the sinner to the sweet embrace of the whole Christ. To be justified by faith alone, by Christ alone, and by grace alone is not a singular spiritual miracle unrelated to the life of a new Christian. We are not justified by works but works will follow. Luther and his followers were accused by their adversaries that “faith alone” was only a ruse for seeking “wealth and wives ... to them the gospel means the right to live as they please” (Erasmus). Luther did not mince words in his reply. He picked up on Paul’s answer to his critics in Romans 6:1-2, “I (Luther) answer: not so, you wicked men, not so. He explains:” (Why the Reformation Still Matters).

“Although, as I have said, a man is abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all he needs, except insofar as this faith and these riches must grow from day to day even to the future life; yet he remains in this mortal life on earth ... and therefore it is his (the believer) one occupation to serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained” (The Freedom of a Christian).

The movement of the heart of new-found faith in Christ is rightfully expected to be toward love for God and others. At the moment of faith in Christ, new spiritual life is imparted. Some theologians believe that regeneration precedes faith, but such a claim is unwarranted, creating the idea that one is already a Christian when they believe (Jn. 5:24, to believe is to pass from death to life). Scripture is clear. The gospel offer is “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). It is best to understand faith and regeneration as the simultaneous work of the Holy Spirit. Faith is a human responsibility yet performed under the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:8, 9). Having trusted God for justification leads to trusting God for growth in the Christian life. The epistles of the New Testament are rife with admonitions to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). Luther’s position on the relationship between justification and sanctification was not ambiguous:

“Luther would argue strongly that, while we are not justified by works, works should follow faith as its fruit. Saving faith will always be active in love. And this love is not expressed in religious duties to earn merit before God, but in practical service of one’s neighbor” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 33).

Calvin and Luther were in agreement on the relationship between justification and sanctification. However, Calvin stressed that:

By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life. Of regeneration, indeed, the second of these gifts, I have said what seemed sufficient. (*Institutes*, 3:11.1).

Faith alone still matters today. Does anything matter more than justification? The Reformers answered, absolutely not, which brings us to some final matters. Is believing easy? The phrase "easy believism" has become quite popular in recent years. "Easy" means a faith that makes no demands, failure to call to discipleship, no surrender, mere intellectual assent, etc. But making demands a part of faith is essentially requiring obedience for salvation. The fruit of salvation is being confused with the root of salvation. This line of thought brings confusion. Faith alone is just that, "alone." It needs no additives. "Faith means receiving something, not doing something or even being something" (J. Gresham Machen). Believing in Jesus is not easy. "Too much is at stake, the more that is at stake, the harder it is to believe" (Charles Ryrie). It is simple but not easy. For Luther faith was simply taking hold of Christ. It is receiving what Christ has done. "If faith is not without all, even the smallest works, it does not justify; indeed, it is not even faith" (Luther). "Faith is the hand of the heart" (Godet), the required response for the imputation of righteousness. It is a volitional response and "contributes no merit. It is the nature of faith, indeed its very genius, that by it we actively receive justification in Christ without contributing to it" (Sinclair Ferguson). It is a theological failure to imply that only believing is somehow deficient. As faith acquires add-ons the clarity of faith alone begins to diminish. Faith alone does not need more muscle. It already possesses the strength and beauty of simple receptivity.

To emphasize the supernatural simplicity of the fact that believing is to trust Christ for salvation, I will offer an illustration and an example. First, I will give an illustration.

What kind of faith saves? Bishop Munsey tells a parable of a man who, while walking along, suddenly fell off the edge of a cliff. As he hurtled down, he was able to reach out and grab a limb jutting out of the rock. He grasped it and hung suspended over the jagged rocks below. The story goes that an angel appeared, and the man pleaded for the angel to save him. The angel responded, "Do you believe that I *can* save you?" The man saw the strong arms of the angel and said, "Yes, I believe you are able to save me!" The angel then asked, "Do you believe that I *will* save you?" The man saw the smile on the angel's face and replied, "Yes, I believe you will save me!" Then the angel said, "If you believe that I *can* save, and if you believe that I *will* save you, *let go!*" That "letting go" is faith. We quit clinging to our baptism, our good deeds, our own efforts to please God. We turn from our own sinfulness and transfer our trust to Christ. (Erwin Lutzer).

Now for the example (a true story): Some months ago, a neighbor told me that he needed a colonoscopy. His wife had recently died, and he had no children. So, I offered to take him to Piedmont Fayette for his procedure. The day came and we began to talk on the way. A few years ago, my neighbor had been convicted of embezzlement. He had a serious gambling problem. He said that he was too big a sinner to ever be forgiven. This gave me an open door. I told him who

the Lord Jesus Christ was and what He had done on the cross for us and how he was raised from the dead. He could not offer God anything to save him, and that he needed Christ's righteousness. I didn't tell him he had to surrender to Christ's lordship, give up gambling, or any other work to be saved. Because of the love of God, the righteousness which He requires could be his by simply trusting Christ for the free gift of forgiveness of sin and eternal life. He listened but offered no significant response. I gave him a Gospel of John as I took him home. A few weeks ago, I noticed a car in his driveway. I had not seen my neighbor in a couple of months and sensed something may be wrong. His sister-in-law told me that he had died. After I had spoken to her about some of our conversations, she said that she had found a Gospel of John on the coffee table by his chair. The Gospel of John does not include the verse, "If any man wishes to come after me, let him deny himself ..." Could my friend have trusted Christ upon reading the Gospel of John? I believe he could. Did he trust Christ? I do not know. But I do believe what Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

Soli Deo Gloria - The Erosion of God-Centered Worship, Part 1 (March 26, 2017)

Wherever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God's, and we are doing His work in our way. The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us.

God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption, or our own private spiritual interests. We must focus on God in our worship rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God's kingdom, not our own empires, popularity, or success.

We reaffirm that because salvation is of God and has been accomplished by God, it is for God's glory and that we must glorify him always. We must live our entire lives before the face of God, under the authority of God and for his glory alone.

We deny that we can properly glorify God if our worship is confused with entertainment, if we neglect either Law or Gospel in our preaching, or if self-improvement, self-esteem, or self-fulfillment are allowed to become alternatives to the gospel.

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, The Cambridge Declaration, 1996

Johann Sabastian Bach (1685 – 1750), the great composer, created timeless music. The Brandenburg Concertos, the two Passions according to St. Matthew and St. John, and numerous works, oratorios, and cantatas, have the emotional effect of making one feel they are sitting on top of the universe. I will never forget long hot afternoons while on a teaching ministry in Guyana, S.A. With little to do but study and swelter in an apartment preparing for my next day's lectures, the music of Bach transported me to another realm, one of majesty and glory. What I experienced was some of "the rich ripe fruit of the entire Reformation." For Bach his music,

“was not merely a job, it was a vocation ... writing music to the glory of God was his vocation, as he usually proclaimed at the end of his scores with the initials SDG – “Soli Deo Gloria” (Calvin R. Staphert, *My Only Comfort*, 27).

The Reformers of the sixteenth century in rescuing the gospel from the spiritual killing of salvation by works opened up vistas of forgiveness, assurance, freedom, and joy. The fifth sola is a key summary of Reformation thought. “The Reformation pushed all the achievement of salvation away from humanity and laid it at the feet of God” (*Why the Reformation Still Matters*). Bound up in the final sola is what the Westminster Shorter Catechism declares: “Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever (1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 11:36; Ps. 73:24-26; Jn. 17:22, 24).” To glorify God means:

“To glorify is to publish his greatness, which entails making it public; it is for the glory of God alone that the communion of the saints must somehow become visible. We glorify God when we show the world the goodness of his attributes and the goodness of his gospel, including our unity in Christ” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 180).

The glory of God alone shines brightly through the theology of the cross. The crown jewel of salvation, justification by faith alone, changes everything. When this truth began to run through the arid wastelands of sacramentalism the landscape of life took on the brilliant colors of truth fed by the waters of grace alone. Luther contrasted “a theologian of glory” and “a theologian of the cross.” The difference was the pitiful idea “that humanity itself has its own glory or that humanity has the ability to please God and perform righteousness” (Stephen J. Nichols, *The Legacy of Luther*, 26). The theologian of the cross is the man who, with the sense of his own lost condition, humbles himself before God. The contrast, therefore, between the two, is one of proclaiming a salvation by human works and the salvation of God’s grace. Luther described it this way:

“It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ (with the result that) He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (*The Twenty-Eight Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation*).

The theology of the cross is drenched in grace alone, in Christ alone, and in faith alone. The attempt to be accepted by God by human merit is a dark hole from which sinners cannot escape. The blazing center of the gospel is Christ’s righteousness, His merit. In this is the sinner’s only hope.

The glory of God alone is eclipsed by the perversion of a false gospel. The Council of Trent (1546-1503) in an effort to extinguish the flames of the Reformation declared justification by faith alone an anathema. The tragedy of such a pronouncement is that the exaltation of human glory through salvation works (“the works of the law,” Rom. 3:28) cancels the glory of God. Among other things, such a doctrinal belief divides the world into the spiritual and the secular. The sacrament of the Mass says that “the essence of Christianity takes place away from day-to-day life.” In the Roman Catholic system, the sacred place was the mass. The entire system of saying masses, the priesthood, and monasticism focused upon the saving power of good works. The sacred place was the mass. Vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, thought to put the priesthood on the fast track to salvation, were man-glorifying labors. The effect of merit-seeking was a repudiation of the workplace, economic vocation, marriage, parenthood, the family, and

civil authorities. Everyday life was treated as not nearly as important as religious duties. Martin Luther's rejection of Rome's worldview thinking is explained:

“Luther's discovery of justification by faith swept away the impetus for such activities; God did not require religious duties as a kind of payment toward salvation. If justification is through faith, then the focus and nature of religious activity shifts radically” (Why the Reformation Still Matters, 182).

The glory of God alone spreads the light of the gospel into all the details of everyday life. Luther took “good works” to a whole new level of meaning. All of life for the Christian is a vocation, a calling. No longer should certain works be singled out as holy. Every believer is a priest (1 Pet. 2:9). Good works come as a result of becoming new creatures in Christ (Eph. 2:10). In what has been called “Luther's colorful and comical language” Luther puts the idea of “holier work” in its place:

“A miller maid, if she believes, does more good, accomplishes more, and I would trust her more if she only takes the sack from the donkey than all the priests and monks if they sang themselves to death day and night and tormented themselves until they bleed” (Gene Edward Veith, The Legacy of Luther, 184).

Work is to be viewed as a gift from God. As the Christian goes about his or her calling in life, whether as a mechanic, carpenter computer technician, teacher, housewife, student, coach, policeman, etc. God is there. Vocations, according to Luther, are “masks of God.” Work was given as a way to serve God. The church, the household, the state, and what Luther called “the common order of Christian love,” these - and not the man-made orders of monasticism - are the holy orders. It was no accident that the Reformation call to justification by faith alone reordered medieval Roman Catholic thought. Eugene Veith goes to the heart of the matter:

“Roman Catholicism taught that Christ's sacrifice is reenacted in the Mass. This is why ministers in the Roman Catholic Church are called ‘priests,’ a term Protestants avoid for their ministers. And yet, all Christians are called to take up their crosses and to present their ‘bodies as a living sacrifice’ (Rom. 12:1)” (Gene Edward Veith, The Legacy of Luther, 187).

The danger of the artificial distinction between the secular and the sacred is exposed. Is it that pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers have a calling and not airplane mechanics, schoolteachers, business men and women, and civil servants? No, it is not correct to think and live in such a way. Loading dishwashers, waiting on tables, running errands, landscaping, and teaching special education all are callings to be conducted for the glory of God. The normal course of life creates sacred ground and time.

Lucky Duck (April 2, 2017)

If the title got your attention, please continue to read. I confess that as a kid some comic book characters were of special interest to me. One of them was “Lucky Duck,” one of Donald Duck's relatives. He lived a charmed life. All kinds of good fortune came his way. Money on the sidewalk and barely escaping mishaps, of course it was childhood fantasy. Not only is life not that way, the whole idea behind “luck” is a theological fiction. “Down on one's luck,” “in luck,”

“out of luck,” “push one’s luck,” and “worse luck” may be useful literary devices, but chance is part of a non-Christian worldview.

The psalmist of the Old Testament did not function by thought of luck or chance. David did not assess his circumstances in terms of fate. Trust in God oozes out of his spiritual pores. Psalm 62 is a beautiful picture of calmness in the midst of calamity. Insecurity is a terrible master. God is worth our confidence because He controls everything, and I mean everything. Hear the words of a man who, though beset by people who were up to no good, refused to brood over the bad things others did to him: “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him” (v.5).

Devotional books have come and gone in my life. My grandmother and aunt nourished their souls on Streams in the Desert for years. However, daily devotionals are too often characterized by verses out of context and “God-told-me” anecdotes. In the last couple of months, I came across The Daily Sacrifice by H.A. Ironside. It had been hiding in my study. It is subtitled “Daily Meditations on the Word of God.” Ironside (1876-1951) pastored the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago from 1930 to 1948. I grew up hearing about the famous Harry Ironside. He has come back to visit me. In my reading on March 28, he had some nourishing words on Psalm 62:5:

The man of faith recognizes no second causes. He takes everything as from the Lord, either directly or by His permissive will. Therefore, we can look up to Him in every circumstance and count on God’s sustaining grace in every hour of trial and testing. They who wait upon Him, we are told, shall never be ashamed. They are enabled to mount as with eagles’ wings above the mists of earth into the clear sunlight of divine love ... Therefore, the trusting soul goes on his way with gladness, looking to Him alone to meet every need.

As we read further along in Psalm 62, the truth becomes apparent that we must trust God because no one else can be trusted (vv. 9-12), certainly not ultimately. Secularists who deny the existence of God are left holding an empty bag. Why would you want to put your hopes on finite and frail man’s wisdom, theories, and philosophies? God is infinitely strong and loving. He is sovereign in the events of history, my history and your history, including dangers and sorrows that threaten us.

Do you need to run to Him right now? Is there some disappointment or fear that is weighing heavily on your soul? Are you allowing circumstances to tell you a story that is not true? Samuel Longfellow approaches God in quiet peace:

“Thy calmness bends serene above
my restlessness, to still.
Around me flows Thy quickening life
to nerve my faltering will;
Thy presence fills my solitude;
Thy providence turns all to good.”

SDG

Who is this King of Glory? (April 7, 2017)

Famously sung are the words from “Handel’s Messiah:”

“Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, The Lord mighty in battle, Lift up your heads, O gates, And lift them up, O ancient doors, That the King of glory may come in! Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory” (Psa. 24:7-10).

Stop the music. This is a prophetic announcement of Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world as He ascended into heaven after His victory over sin and death. It also triumphantly anticipates the coming of the King to rule and reign over all the earth. One could think that it fits what is mistakenly called “The Triumphal Entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem. The prophetic words from Zechariah 9:9 are chosen by Matthew to describe Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the “passion week” leading to His suffering and death on the cross: “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden’” (Matt. 21:5). The contrast is majestic in scope.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem no one but He understood what it all meant. The crowds were oblivious. They were thinking only of politics. Like the masses today who are only interested in a political messiah. No political party points us to our greatest need, reconciliation with God. The disciples were ignorant. They seem to carry lingering hopes of a strong-arm approach to Rome. And speaking of Rome, they must have been nervous about notions of revolution among the Jews. One well-known writer composed a poem in which the donkey thought the parade was all about him.

The donkey did not know it, but he was carrying Israel’s true King. If donkeys could talk and had knowledge of Genesis 49:8-12 and Zechariah 9:9 (use your imagination here), he may very well have spoken of the precision of the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. One thing is for sure. We see the Lord Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, in full control of the events leading to the presentation of Himself as the One who would crush the head of Satan. In a few days Jesus would serve sinners by giving His life as a ransom for many.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin once said, “There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.” He thought much of himself and the great things he was going to do for Russia. In her book, *Lenin on the Train*, Catherine Merridale describes Lenin’s journey by train from Switzerland to Russia in 1917. The reviewer of her book says that “on that April day began a ride across Europe that led, within months, to catastrophe and, over time, to the loss of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions of lives.” When Lenin brought his “ragbag of revolutionaries and their family members” into Petrograd’s Finland Station, few grasped “what the returning hero had in mind for them.” A nightmare of seven decades and millions of millions of “guiltless victims” was about to be unleashed. The Soviet people, longing for the utopia of a worker’s paradise, would play a central role in the bloody twentieth century. Ah, the dreams of men since the dawn of human rebellion against God. The self-deception of evil on parade as the salvation of mankind marches to Satan’s drumbeat.

The true King, Israel’s Messiah, does not satisfy the expectations of the spiritually blind. Polls so often reflect the ignorance and folly of the masses. The crowds, the religious leaders, and Roman politicians had no place in their thoughts that a redeemer for sin was the great necessity. The

Passover, which millions had come to Jerusalem to celebrate, was to be fulfilled by the Suffering Servant, riding on the back of a young donkey. This is how God makes foolish the wisdom of man. The value of the ransom paid by Jesus is not determined by the evaluation of human opinion.

Make no mistake. The King has come. He was rejected. He is coming a second time. His kingdom will become a reality. The King of glory ascended into heaven receiving a joyous welcome by the angelic host. One day when He returns, He will establish His thousand-year reign on earth. Expectations of the final triumph of the King are not shattered dreams. For over two thousand years the King has been calling out kingdom citizens to rule and reign with Him. What must we do? Receive the King. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Serve others. Spread the gospel. The Lenins of this world offer their dupes a kingdom without Christ. They run up bills paid in the blood of their “ragbag of revolutionaries.” On this Palm Sunday lay hold of the precious truth of the crown rights of God’s Servant, Jesus Christ. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem two millennia ago supplies us with a missing message in today’s moral and political crusades. The King of glory who ascended into heaven offers forgiveness of sin and eternal life. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (Jn. 1:12).

Lost and Found (April 14, 2017)

A dream of frustration. Do you know what it is like? I’ve had one. I was in a city with which I was totally unfamiliar. There were no street signs. Tall buildings hovered all around. I had no cell phone, and it was getting dark. I was looking for my car in multiple parking lots and couldn’t remember where I had parked it. The more I searched the greater my frustration. In the dream this was all emotionally very real. It qualified as a low-grade nightmare.

Jesus loved to tell stories. He told good stories with an economy of words. They are called parables, which are everyday experiences that were used to illustrate biblical truth. Anyone who has ever lost something (e.g., cell phone, car keys, wallet) can identify with the frustration underlying a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost child (Lk. 15:1-32). The key to these three stories is found in the criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees; “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (15:2). These theologians were not thinking like God. Jesus defends His association with the lost. Three words stand out through His three parables, “lost” (eight times in this chapter), “found,” and “rejoicing.” Heaven celebrates when one lost sinner is saved and reconciled to God. This gives us a valuable window into the heart of Jesus. He came to earth to seek the lost, a theme that is woven through the Gospel of Luke, culminating in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

A shepherd values his sheep and makes the search for a lost one his priority. A woman loses a silver coin and spares no effort in looking for it. Finding it was worth a party. A son demands his share of the inheritance due him, catches a plane to Las Vegas, squanders his wealth, and finds a job feeding pigs. The reality of his stupid decisions catches up with him. The lost son returns home and is joyously welcomed by his father. The older brother grouses about the extravagant welcome his sibling received. Like the self-righteous Pharisees, the older brother rejected the penitent son. But the father is jubilant, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your

brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found” (15:32). At the end of each lost and found story God embraces those who turn to Him (15:7, 10, 32).

What a treasure it is for the lost to be found. At the same time, a reality barks for attention. Mankind is lost. Lost from what? We have lost fellowship with God. All of us are “under sin” (Rom. 3:9). God’s gavel has announced that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We have all broken God’s law. But the greatest sin of all is our unbelief, not believing in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (Jn. 16:9). If you want to go to hell, then do not put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Thankfully, I woke up from my dream. My cars were in the driveway. I knew where I was. Frustration gave way to relief, a five-star emotion. But reality is more than just emotion. We have been created in the image of God. However, the spiritual “DNA” of the human race has been altered, and for the worst. Because of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God we are all lost. They were expelled from paradise and barred from reentering (Gen. 3:24). The tree of life, which could have granted immortality, was no longer accessible. They and all their descendants were doomed to wander in a world beset by the curse of sin and death. When Adam sinned, the entire human race fell with him. We are all under the curse of condemnation and death (Rom. 5:18). One of the tragedies of sin is that it creates self-deception. Our thought processes are seriously deranged. We think we are good, that by our sincerity we can be reconciled to God, that there is no God (we die like animals as we perceive ourselves to be). What fools we have become. The fact that because of sin we are condemned to eternal judgment doesn’t cross our minds. We are not as bad as we can be, but we are as bad off as we can be. This is what it means to be lost.

But the story does not end there. There is a way out of our lost condition. Though the wrath of God hangs over our heads like a guillotine, this does not necessarily determine our destiny (Rom. 1:18; 2 Thess. 1:8, 9). Here is the good news. God’s holy wrath and hatred against sin was poured out on His Beloved Son on the cross (Rom. 3:25). Yes, you heard that right. In a public display of God’s love for us, His wrath fell upon Christ. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God’s judgment of His Son in our place satisfied His holy demands. This was announced long ago, “He was wounded for our transgressions” (Isa. 53:5). Why? Because “all we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa. 53:6). Sin and death had to be defeated. On the cross the full payment for the guilt of sin was made. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave full proof of God’s acceptance of His Son’s sacrifice was declared. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, the way back to paradise and the tree of life is now open (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:14). Are you moved deeply by this wonderful provision of God? Good. But that is not enough. To experience God’s forgiveness and receive His gift of eternal life, ask Him for it. This is called faith, the hand of the heart accepting what God has provided. There is no cost. It’s free. Jesus Christ paid the price on the tree upon which our sins had placed Him. If you have never put your trust in Christ for salvation, right now is the best time. Saying a prayer or walking an isle cannot save you. Remember, we cannot do anything to save ourselves. However, the following is a suggested prayer that can help you if you desire to place your trust in Christ alone for your eternal salvation.

“Dear God, I know I’m a sinner. I know my sin deserves to be punished. I believe Christ died for me and rose from the grave. I trust the Lord Jesus Christ alone as my Savior. Thank You for the forgiveness and everlasting life I now have. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

With the ears of faith, we can hear the joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The sinner who was dead is alive; the one who was lost is found.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. . . And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:14, 17).

Soli Deo Gloria - The Erosion of God-Centered Worship, Part 2 (April 21, 2017)

As we progress in our understanding of the “gospel in five onlys” we must pause and reflect. The reason for the adjective “only” is to stress the importance of the purity of the gospel. A lack of ideological purity may help to advance political agendas, but when it comes to the gospel even one milligram of error is lethal. There is no other way to enter God’s heaven than through the Lord Jesus Christ. The offer of eternal life is by grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone. The terms of salvation must be clear, be clear, be clear.

The glory of God alone is radiantly displayed in Christian unity. This truth requires an explanation of two realities. God is most glorified when His people experience the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3; Jn. 17:20-22). The essence of biblical unity is revealed in Christ’s high priestly prayer in John 17. The anticipated multiplication of believers during the church age was the occasion of Jesus’ prayer for unity. Jesus’ request for unity was made analogous to the relationship between the Father and the Son. Trinitarian unity is to be exemplified within the church. Believers at the moment of the new birth, regardless of their sex, race, nationality or social standing, become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Being “new creatures” in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and being joined to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) presents countless opportunities to display the unity for which Christ prayed. The purpose of this unity is the maintenance of a convincing testimony before the world to the revelation of God in Christ and to His love for the disciples (Jn. 13:35).

The second reality is the conflict that emerged among the Reformers. Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the meaning of the ordinance of communion. Luther refused to budge from his belief in a real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper (consubstantiation). Though he rejected transubstantiation (that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ) as taught by the Roman Catholic Church, Luther insisted that, “It is God who commands, ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’ I request, therefore, valid scriptural proof to the contrary.” Zwingli, on his part, could not be dissuaded from his conviction that the communion table was a memorial. In the matter of baptism Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli believed in infant baptism. The Anabaptists, who taught believer’s baptism, were a burr in the saddle of the Reformers.

On March 7, 1526, the Zurich city council decreed “that no one in town, country, and domain, whether man, woman, or girl shall henceforth baptize another. Whoever hereafter baptizes someone will be apprehended by our Lords and, according to this present decree, be drowned without mercy.” (Erwin Lutzer, Rescuing the Gospel, 158)

Many Anabaptists made the ultimate sacrifice holding to believer’s baptism only with Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli adamant in their opposition to those who rejected infant baptism. The fact remains that there are to this day doctrines that divide the heirs of the Reformation. So, was the

Roman Catholic Church right in its claim that the Reformers were creating a colossal mistake in breaking away from the “mother church?” Mark Dever offers a clear and truthful statement on this matter, “The authority of the Bible has been sufficient to assure that millions upon millions of Protestants have believed and shared the same gospel for centuries” (The Unquenchable Flame, 7). The truth is that there can be no true unity when the truth of the gospel is denied. Organizational unity is not true unity. Where then is the glory of God alone in the Reformation even when doctrinal divisions persist? Kevin J. Vanhoozer offers a helpful thought:

No one at the time of the Reformation was explicitly denying the rightness of glorifying God alone. However, the intent of the other four solas was to ensure that all the glory for salvation and true interpretation alike be given to God alone. (Biblical Authority after Babel, 182)

The glory of God alone is achieved in unity that is based on truth and expressed in love for one another. The unity that Jesus prayed for allows for differences of opinion and personalities, as well as differences in gifts. Jesus was not praying for conformity but unity in diversity within the body of Christ. Several images are used in the Bible to express the unity of the church before a watching world. The church of Jesus Christ is a family (1 Pet. 1:22), a fellowship (Phil. 1:5; 1 Jn. 1:1-4), and a body (1 Cor. 12). Relationships, responsibility and interdependence are to be trademarks of Spirit-directed unity.

In order to see the meaning of the Reformation in a biblical perspective, the words of Michael Reeves serve us well.

In the Reformation mind-set, salvation is a gift of God’s grace alone (*sola gratia*), found, not in any pope or Mass, but in Christ alone (*solus Christus*), and received by simple faith alone (*sola fide*). And we can know this for certain only through Scripture (*sola Scriptura*). Only if all these things are true, the sinner contributing nothing to his own salvation, can all the glory go to God. Reformation thinking therefore had this as its guiding light for all theology: does the theology lead one to say, “to God alone be the glory” (*solus Deo gloria*), or does man retain some of the glory for himself? (The Unquenchable Flame, 106)

Comfort in Suffering (April 30, 2017)

Suffering has its busy seasons. This is not to say that suffering only comes and goes like a bad cold. There is a consistency to troubles (Job 5:7). Even our own bodily afflictions may not hound us unrelentingly. By the grace and mercy of God He gives us times of relief. Rejoice in these (Jas. 5:13). In recent days the pain and suffering of people I know has noticeably increased. I recorded ten of these names and circumstances in my prayer list. At the same time my mind has been drawn to the amount of suffering Martin Luther, the Reformer, endured. Keep in mind that sixteenth century medicine and remedies left a lot to be desired to today’s medical advances; no aspirin, antibiotics, effective surgeries, limited medical knowledge, and all with some “prescriptions” making matters worse.

Martin Luther’s physical afflictions were many. His list of maladies, especially the last fifteen years of his life, was staggering. These included stomach disorders and other chronic problems. Luther said of these, “The Lord has afflicted me with painful [disorders]. I did not sleep all night and still have no peace.” Kidney stone attacks were frequent. Headaches, and probably what

were migraines, forced him to stay inside on bright and sunny days. Known for his sense of humor, Luther joked about his headaches as being, “the Devil’s ride through my brain.” He was beset by gout, near death experiences with the plague, colds that lasted for months, sores that would not heal, buzzing, ringing in his ears, dizzy spells while preaching, heart problems, gallstones, increasing deafness, shortness of breath, and to top it all off, a condition which he referred to as *Anfektionen*. This German word is difficult to translate into an exact English word. We would call it spiritual depression. It was understood by Luther as a mental condition of doubt and despair for the world (David Calhoun, *The Legacy of Luther*, 69-72). As David Calhoun has noted, “Toward the end, Luther began to question his own sanity and even had thoughts of suicide. But he was able to say, ‘Well, all right. If I go mad, God will remain sane, and Christ my Lord will be my wisdom.’”

Luther found solace in his suffering through, “a combination of faith, humor and commitment to ministry ... to endure what Paul called, ‘the thorn in the flesh’” (2 Cor. 12:7) (Eric W. Gritch, *Christian History, Unstoppable*). Also aiding the Reformer was his wife Katie with care, almond broth, cooking, and homemade remedies. Grief and constant pressures associated with Reforming labors were unrelenting. Luther’s fourteen-year-old daughter, Magdalena, died in his arms. It was then that he said, “Du liebes Lenchen (an endearing nickname), you will rise and shine like the stars and the sun. How strange it is to know that she is at peace and all is well, and yet to be so sorrowful” (Erwin Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel*, 137).

God has not left us to endure the sorrow of suffering without sources of comfort. The apostle Paul speaks of this.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

God administers His comfort in a variety of ways. The Holy Spirit (God’s presence with us) and the Scriptures (God’s Word for us) are the medicine which God supplies, clearing the mind, settling the soul, and giving hope. No hospital or drug can equal this. How often I have found God’s generous supply of comfort in dealing with stress, anxiety, and physical problems (those of mine and my family). The public hearing of God’s Word must never be underestimated in its calming and steadying effect (1 Cor. 14:3). God’s embrace through His presence and promises are sweet and reassuring when a young girl struggles with the grief of being shut out of her father’s attention and affection.

God has ways of lightening our burdens by the mere presence of kind people. The apostle who said, “and apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28), found solace from the company of compassionate friends (Eph. 6:22; Phil. 2:19; Col. 4:8; 1 Thess. 3:2). Luther’s Katie brought this to him. There is good reason to understand why he spoke of his wife as “Katie, my rib.” Kate “became a master of herbal medicines, poultices, and massage.” Luther’s years of bachelorhood gave way to the comfort of a loving wife. He said, “Before I was married the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat.” This qualifies as mercy to a hard-working and pressure-laden man. Husbands, this is a two-way street. What are we doing to surround our spouses with tender mercies?

Husbands and wives can be wonderful instruments in the hands of the Comforter. In his Genesis commentary, Luther wrote, “With the woman who has been joined to me by God I may jest, have fun, and converse more pleasantly” (David Calhoun, The Legacy of Luther, 55).

I know how to pray more effectively for my friends who are in the midst of a season of suffering. May God comfort them.

“After Darkness, Light” (May 14, 2017)

Calvin “belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters in history.”

-Eric Fromm, Author

Calvin was the “cruel and the unopposed dictator of Geneva.”

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church

“But we shall always find it hard to love the man [Calvin] who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.”

-Will Durant, Historian

“. . . he [Calvin] was the most Christian man of his age.”

-Ernst Renan, French Historian

“Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done the most good to mankind.”

-William Cunningham, Scottish Theologian

Who is this man, John Calvin? Such condemnation and adoration leaves one confused about the great sixteenth century Reformer. I grew up with John Calvin. Well, sort of. While in my teens as a young Christian I heard older Christians speak admirably and disparagingly of Calvin. I heard through the grapevine that my pastor was a Calvinist. I had no idea what that meant. But one thing I did know was that the pastor of our church believed in a loving and all-wise God who was sovereign over all of life, including our salvation. Pastor Van Gorder preached through books of the Bible. He was not afraid to expound on predestination, election, and the gospel of the grace of God. It was God’s gift to me that I could live only one block from a church where God’s Word was taught in three beefy services on Sunday and Wednesday.

But back to John Calvin. If you are in the same theological boat I was in during my youth, my intention is to write several articles on John Calvin and his contribution to the church and the world. After Martin Luther came John Calvin. Martin Luther was born in 1483, John Calvin in 1509 in Noyon, France. Unlike Luther, Calvin was a shy, retiring man who loved his books and the quietness of a library. Church historian, Philip Schaff gives a helpful comparison of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin:

Calvin “had the great advantage of building on their foundation [Luther and Zwingli]. He had less genius, but more talent. He was inferior to them as a man of action, superior as a thinker and organizer. They cut stone in the quarries; he polished them in the workshop. They produced new

ideas; he constructed them into a system. His was the work of Apollos rather than of Paul: to water rather than to plant, God giving the increase.”

Unlike Luther, Calvin transferred from the priesthood to study law. With a brilliant mind Calvin threw himself into the world of books, Greek and Hebrew, and the developing Reformation in France. Through his reading of Luther’s works on justification by faith alone, Calvin said he had become, “a lover of Jesus Christ.” It didn’t take long for the twenty-seven-year-old scholar to begin to feel the heat from being identified with the “sedition” of the Reformation. The martyr’s fate of being burned at the stake awaited those who believed the truth of Hebrews 7:27, “He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, for his own sins and then those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” This life-changing truth of the finality and sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ called out the lie that the daily sacrifice of the Mass was necessary.

In the providence of God John Calvin, escaping the persecution in France, found himself in Geneva, that beautifully situated city at the southern tip of Lake Geneva. Surrounded by the Alps and Jura mountains, it seemed like a good bed and breakfast stop-over. But it was not to be. The Reformation had been welcomed by the Genevans. The coins of the city were struck with the motto, *Post tenebras lux* (“After darkness, light.”). They had embraced the light of the Reformation. With a bit of heavy-handed coercion from Guillaume Farel (read the story), Calvin was convinced that the pulpit of St. Peter’s Cathedral, Geneva’s largest and most famous church, was just the place for him. It was also at this time that the first edition of his “Institutes of the Christian Religion” was published, one of the most influential books ever written in Christendom. However, with hardly enough time to unpack his suitcase, the citizens of Geneva decided that they did not want as much Reformation as Calvin did. In 1538, two years after arriving, the Reformer was “encouraged” to leave. And leave he did, going back to his favorite place on earth, Strasbourg, France.

At this point in his life, bachelorhood became inconvenient for Calvin. Friends assisted him in finding a bride. The search went forward with his own specifications:

“I am none of those insane lovers who, when once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This only is the beauty which allures me – that she be chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, patient, and careful for my health.”

Calvin found her. He married (1540) Idelette de Bure, a poor widow of an Anabaptist with two children (she converted from Anabaptism for the sake of Calvin’s household). Idelette bore him one child who died in infancy and struggled with poor health, dying after nine years of marriage. Grief became Calvin’s to bear for the final fifteen years of his life. His last nine years were beset by headaches, asthma, dyspepsia, gout, and fevers. A long illness in 1558-1559 drained him of what little strength he had, suffering with repeated hemorrhages of the lungs. Michael Reeves describes his last hours:

The end of his decade of pain came in 1564. Sensing his imminent death, he made his will confessing, “I have no other defense or refuge for salvation than his [God’s] gratuitous adoption, on which alone my salvation depends.” Confined increasingly to his bed, he asked all the pastors of Geneva to visit him one last time, imploring them, “Brethren, after I am dead, persist in this work, and be not dispirited.”

John Calvin died in bed on May 27, 1564. He asked to be buried in the common cemetery in an unmarked grave.

A Wisdom Shout Out - “Wisdom cries out in the street” (Proverbs 1:20) (May 21, 2017)

In old movies when breaking news took place you would see newspaper boys shouting out on the streets, “Extra, extra, read all about it.” Wisdom has something to say because it is about living life God’s way. Wisdom is not found in high school, in our universities, in the movies, in popular music, in the media, in sitcoms, in opinion polls, or in popular culture. It may break out here and there, but by and large it is scarce. The Bible has a lot of shout outs about real wisdom. We congratulate all of our graduates. Your progress is an encouragement to us. Now for some reminders of wisdom for the days ahead.

Seek God above all else. The first command is first for a good reason (“You shall have no other gods before Me.”). The Lord is one. There is no other god. Loving God is the most important thing you can do, period. There are all kinds of counterfeits clamoring for adoration and a following. Memorize Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 and repeat it every day.

Read the Bible daily. God’s revealed truth is sweeter than honey (Psa. 19:10). It informs the mind, instructs the conscience, sets the emotions in the right direction, sets our moral compass, gives discernment, satisfies the soul, and ignites righteous motives. The capacity for habit is God-given. Make Bible reading and Scripture memory a habit. Start today.

Know Christ and make Him known. These words were placarded on the auditorium wall in my church and college in my early years. Loving Christ will shape the contours of my mind, aspirations, and imagination. Jesus said if you love Me, keep my commandments. Knowing Christ starts with knowing who He is and what pleases Him. All people everywhere need to know about Jesus, His cross and His resurrection. There is no other way to be with God for all eternity than through faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16). Don’t keep this a secret.

Pray often. Jesus tells those who belong to Him to ask, seek, and knock (Matt. 7:7, 8). Are you worried about something? Then talk to God about it. Are you thankful to God for all He has done for you? Then tell Him. Do you have a need? Then lay it out before God.

Know yourself God’s way. Knowing oneself, contrary to the world’s wisdom, is not the key to meaning and happiness. Romans 3:9-20 should cure one of the ideas that treasures of insight are bound up in the human heart. We are sinners. Yet we are made in the image of God. God formed us in our mother’s womb. He has gifted us appropriately. We cannot trust in our own hearts for cracking the secrets of the spiritual universe. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Likes and dislikes? This goes deeper than whether you like vanilla or chocolate ice cream. What do you want and why do you want it? God’s Word and prayer go a long way in opening up our self-awareness and critiquing the thoughts and intents of our hearts (Heb. 4:12).

Don’t kick your parents in the teeth. If you want to become buzzard bait, then treat your parents disrespectfully and rebel against their God-given wisdom (Prov. 30:17). It is appalling how many youth insist on climbing up fool’s hill and don’t realize it or care. Don’t be one of those.

Don't be seduced by drugs and alcohol. The road to a wasted life is paved with the wrong use of chemicals (Prov. 20:1). *The Message* (a paraphrase of the Book of Proverbs) says it this way, "Wine makes you mean, beer makes you quarrelsome, a staggering drunk is not much fun." If you want to rewire your brain, then start taking drug trips. It's a journey from which many have never returned. What can drugs and alcohol give you that God can't?

Don't ignore your siblings. Translated, that means love your mother's and father's other children. Work at building a relationship with that brother who annoys you. Don't relationally dispose of that sister who is a drama queen. And by the way, have you looked in the mirror lately? You may be difficult to live with yourself. Humble yourself and ask God for the grace to be a servant to those who share a lot of your own DNA.

Remember that there are only two sexes. I recently read in the newspaper of a "man" who had a hysterectomy, and a few days later went into septic shock and lost oxygen to his brain and died. There are many different problems in this statement. Sadly, a precious human being died at the age of 25. But did you notice the pronouns? We are reading a lie reported as news. Men don't have hysterectomies. No generation has had to face the twisting, distorting, and denial of moral realities like young people do today. Don't let Genesis 1:27 disappear from your reality check-up.

Don't expect a big wedding to guarantee a good marriage. I am saying more than meets the eye. Viva la romance! Cupid sends his arrow, and you are smitten. Many a great marriage has begun this way. But too often cupid's arrow is dipped in poison. Emotion is not to be a substitute for wise judgment. Notice how often the Book of Proverbs gives warnings about getting saddled with the wrong kind of life's partner (Prov. 21:9).

Be aware that college can be the creature from the black lagoon. With the best intentions young people take what everyone says is the necessary next step, namely, go to college. Do you have any idea of what is waiting for you there? Universities are a microcosm of the wider culture. It is not pretty. Alcohol and sex without marital responsibility are everywhere, even in your dorm room, if you don't knock. Professors love to rattle their students with attacks on the Bible, Christianity, and "Sunday School" myths. Evolution is a "fact." Socialism is the future. Don't check your convictions and God's truth at the door. Ask God for courage to stand for the truth. Remember Daniel and his three friends. The University of Babylon did not eat their theological lunch.

The above has been written with the hope that those with a heart to please God will find the path of wisdom and walk in it all the way to the final graduation.

Commencement Speeches - The Best of All (June 2, 2017)

Time has served up an innumerable number of graduation speeches. They have a long tradition. I barely remember my high school baccalaureate. What lingers is best forgotten. It seems that at those seminal moments when a substantive, truth-based, inspirational speech is sorely needed it becomes a no-show.

Mark Zuckerberg's Commencement Speech to the Harvard graduating class of 2017 is a classic example of personal success being confused with wisdom. Wisdom still looks for an opportunity to speak at that august occasion. The speech lasted 34 minutes (I watched it). The theme was how to find purpose in one's life for, as the audience was reminded, a personal sense of purpose is the key to happiness. The billionaire founder of Facebook in his early thirties explained what purpose looks like; the manufacturing of solar panels to help solve the problem of climate change, a universal basic income, healthcare not confined to one employer, everyone being able to vote on-line, a new "new deal," building a great society, and building community by seeing oneself as a citizen of the world. Welcome to a millennial's vision of a better world.

The absence of the real purpose in life and where it is to be found is a tragic void in the secular world of modern America. Zuckerberg mentioned "church" twice. In its first appearance it was given passing recognition of being one of the ways a past generation found purpose. Then the Harvard gathering was taken to a bolder vision for creating a world where everyone has a sense of purpose. The greater works of human creativity were touted as the hope of the future. I was reminded of the words of one of the wisest men on earth three thousand years ago, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Purpose without the fear of God in a fallen, confusing, frustrated world is a dead-end street. Credits to King Solomon (there is an idea for next year's Commencement speaker), though he would not be welcome in America's universities. He would be deemed very politically incorrect.

However, there is an even better idea. At the end of the ages God has spoken in an extraordinary way. Gather all graduates wherever you are. Gather all peoples from everywhere. Listen to Him.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:1-3).

Allow my sanctified imagination to run wild. Imagine (forget John Lennon's fiction) a speech that runs immediately to the reality that we have all been made in the image of God which has become disfigured by sin. We have been made for God and our purpose, if it is ever to be discovered, is found in our relationship to the Creator. More specifically, God has spoken eloquently through the prophets of old in a great variety of ways of a coming Messiah. But in these last days in the great arch of the divine plan God has given His final word in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you want meaning in life? Listen carefully. Jesus Christ is infinitely better than anything this world has to offer. Build your communities? Agonize over saving the planet from the disasters of climate change? Revel in being citizens of the world? Create a bigger government to save us from ourselves? Declare God's moral law obsolete? Establish a universal basic income? You will never. I repeat. You will never experience the happiness and utopia you long for apart from bowing your knees to the Lord Jesus Christ. Put your trust in Him and turn from your flimsy, fictitious idols. Do you not know that God has spoken directly through His Son? Do you not realize that this world belongs to Him? It was He, God the Son, who brought all things into being by a mere word. It is He who rules over history and holds all things together. Do you want a better world? God provides it in His Son in the coming kingdom. Will such a speech be given at future graduations? What would be the response of the Harvards of this world and every high school graduating class? Hear the words of the Son of God, the Father's valedictorian, the most successful human who has ever lived:

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19, 20).

Know this. Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice for the sin that has killed us all. Only He can free us from the tyranny of sin and death that blinds us to our only real hope. Receive God’s forgiveness and eternal life and enjoy God forevermore.

Alone But Not Forgotten (June 11, 2017)

King David knew what it was to be alone. But somehow, I can’t quite imagine him singing “I Ain’t Got Nobody” or “The Last Word in Lonesome Is Me.” I know this because I am familiar with the songs David composed when he was at one of the low points in his life. He was alone in the cave of Adullam. He had been anointed to be the next king of Israel, but he was on the run from King Saul who wanted to kill him. I have been in this cave. It is a good place to hide, but it can also become a trap. David wrote two psalms in this experience: Psalm 57 and Psalm 142. They are interesting companions. In Psalm 57 David appears to be “bold and animated, almost enjoying the situation.” In Psalm 142 David is reaching up to touch bottom. In reading them together we sense he is on an emotional roller coaster. This is understandable. Sanctified troubles are like spiritual caffeine. Grief, fear, aloneness combined with physical exhaustion can create a run on the emotional scale. At the same, and most importantly, David is confident that God is with him.

Psalm 142 is a lament psalm. Almost half of the Psalms fall into this category. These “psalms of darkness” enable us to shape our experience when our lives are disturbed, and we become confused. They teach us how to commune with God when caught in emotional dust storms. We are told it is a “Maskil of David.” The word means “instruction.” I am inclined to go with C.H. Spurgeon when he says, “This Maschil is written for our instruction. It teaches us principally by example how to order our prayer in times of distress.”

David’s thoughts run along two tracks as he sorts out his dilemma. In the first four verses we observe how aloneness is the opportunity to turn pessimism into prayer. We can feel David’s desperation in his repeated cry of “with my voice ... I pour out my complaint.” David is not searching for a thought. He wants God. Urgency grips his voice. Affection for God displays itself in bringing one’s afflictions to God. When there are none to help but God, should this not move our prayers up a notch? James Boice says, “What does it take to lift our prayers from the wasteland of mere routine to the high ground of actually pleading with Jehovah?” God welcomes our insistence and candor in prayer. David asks God to “Look to the right and see there is none who takes notice of me.” This was no theological lapse. God knows everything. David knew that, but heartfelt prayer talks to God as one person talks to another. When we come to the end of our resources, when we feel cut off from everyone, when our feelings are giving us the wrong message, that is the time to lay hold of God.

There is a second track of thought that emerges. Aloneness is the opportunity for biblically informed optimism (vv. 5-7). It wasn’t really the cave that was protecting David. God was his refuge. Truth saturated praying has the side effect of healthful self-talk. When David tells God

He is his “portion,” he is saying that God is all He wants. This leads to an important distinction. There is a difference between being alone and loneliness. Elijah was alone in the wilderness, but God was with him (1 Kgs. 19:1-21). Paul was deserted by others in a time of trial, but God stood with him (2 Tim. 4:16-17). For example, teenagers can have their times of feeling abandoned and friendless. The perception of parental rejection or having to stand alone for Christ in a hostile school environment is the time to be thankful that God is present with us as our loving heavenly Father. There is a sweet and satisfying calmness that comes even when we are lacking normal comforts and encouraging people, when we know that God is more than enough. He is able to deliver us from disappointment and discouragement. This is the basis of David’s petition, “Bring me out of prison.” He is acknowledging God as his Savior, for only He can deliver David from people who are stronger than he is. Our adversaries are no match for God.

It is at this point that the lament of David soars beyond the caves of his life. He savors the prospect that one day he will no longer be alone. God sent members of David’s family and others to supply needed company (1 Sam. 22:1-2). But David looked to a time when “the righteous will surround” him. No doubt “the psalmist envisions the godly crowding around him and listening to his thanksgiving for the great acts of God’s deliverance” (William A. VanGemeren). There is more here than first meets the eye. One day David’s greater son (of whom David is a type) would experience more aloneness than any human being has ever endured. Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Yet one day our sin-bearer “will see His offspring” (Isa. 53:10). The family of Jesus, all those saved as a result of His death, will gather around Him in joyful celebration.

Do you feel alone and forgotten? We will have those times when the loneliness of suffering disorients us to spiritual realities. The Lord Jesus Christ will never desert us or forsake us. P. B. Power, in his lovely little book, “A Book of Comfort for Those in Sickness,” brightens our darkest caves with the following thought:

But *being alone* is not of necessity *loneliness*. We cannot help being alone; the circumstances in which we are placed probably necessitate that we should be so; but much of the feeling of loneliness may come simply from ourselves. Jesus, when most alone as regards the world, was in communion with the Father. To be alone in the fearful sense of the word is one thing; to be alone with God is another.

Father Knows Best, ...or Does He? (June 18, 2017)

Rodney Dangerfield’s famous self-deprecating line, “I don’t get no respect,” could be a poster caption for contemporary fatherhood. Actually, it applies to men in general. Somewhere in TV history a war against males took shape. Script writers for sit coms and commercials seemed to have found some cultural purpose in portraying men, especially if they are played off against a wife, as kind of dumb. They can’t figure out how to save money, buy groceries, drive a car, or use a computer. As one observer has described it in a breakfast commercial “in which a father lies to his children because he values them less than the cereal’s desiccated fruit and nuts.” One is left wondering why intelligent women married such inept males.

Some of us were introduced to a different kind of father in 1950s television. Ozzie Nelson (“Ozzie and Harriet”), Andy Taylor (“Andy Griffith Show”), Steve Douglas (“My Three Sons”),

Chuck Connor (“The Rifleman”), and Ward Cleaver (“Leave It to Beaver”) all made more right decisions than wrong ones. And let’s not forget Robert Young in “Father Knows Best.” It became quite fashionable to mock the “Father Knows Best” kind of home and dad. The truth is that human wisdom is not the final arbiter of what constitutes a father who knows best. Fathers and fathers-to-be, let’s read the script that God has written.

Fathers know best when they know God (Jer. 9:24; Jn. 17:3). Understanding and knowing God is the highest of aspirations. This is not saying “know about” God in some mere intellectual way. To know God means having an intimate relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ and living in fellowship with Him. The future is not very bright for those who do not know God (2 Thess. 1:8).

Fathers know best when they honor their wives since they are heirs with you of the grace of life. This also involves living with their wives in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7). When sin entered the human race, it immediately contaminated the husband and wife relationship. Selfishness, blame-shifting, mental, emotional, and physical abuse became weapons in the marital relationship. Harmony was replaced by a combative disposition. Sadly, two married people can live together and not really know each other. Fathers, your children must see love in action. A husband honors his wife by acknowledging her strengths and helping her with her weaknesses. The man who knows his wife shows grace to her by pursuing a knowledge of her interests, feelings, fears, hopes, likes and dislikes, frustrations, expectations, desires, and goals.

Fathers know best when they are wise and strong. There is a difference between intelligence and wisdom. The man who thinks he is the smartest one in the room may very well have a low wisdom I.Q. Wisdom is living life God’s way (Prov. 4:1-9). Physical prowess is not the true measure of a man. Real strength is the ability to help others with their burdens, shouldering responsibility for the spiritual well-being of his children, and courageously taking on the dangers that threaten a marriage.

Fathers know best when money and possessions are invested in generosity. My father worked hard his entire life to provide for his family. We could not afford a lot of things and sometimes I didn’t understand why (e.g., trip to Washington, D.C. with the safety patrol), but we always had food and went on vacations. Camping in the Smokey Mountains every August are cherished memories. My father was generous, and it helped set my own money compass through a lifetime.

Fathers know best when they know the gospel and are not ashamed of it. Every father ought to be able to explain the good news of the meaning of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. We ought to be as conversant in how to put one’s trust in Christ for salvation as we are about the Falcons, the Hawks, the Braves, the Yellow Jackets, or the Bulldogs. Men, have your children made professions of faith in Christ? Of course, you cannot make this happen, but they do need to know the story of God’s redemption in Christ and that there is no way into God’s heaven other than by faith alone in Christ. Allow me to recommend that you read John 3:14-21 and explain its significance.

Fathers know best when they take seriously the demands of Christ to His followers. A God-pursuing, Christ-loving, Holy Spirit-driven father steps himself on an ongoing basis in what it means to deny himself and take up his cross as Christ’s man. He wants to be the kind of disciple that makes choices that are in the best interest of becoming wise in the ways of God. Saying

“yes” to doing God’s will is to be a father’s delight. The call to gain through loss is familiar to him (Mk. 8:34-38). He is valiant in the fight as a dragon-slayer, the dragon of self-centered living. Personal comforts, material prosperity, physically harmful habits, living to be served and admired are for those who live to throw their lives away. Wise fathers get it.

Fathers know best when sexual purity and absolute fidelity to their wives is their way of life (1 Thess. 4:3-6). This requires a hunger for God and having the sense and self-discipline to avoid lust inciting thoughts and behavior. Pornography must be a “no-go zone.” If you are involved in it, seek help immediately. Don’t rationalize, justify, or minimize it in any way. Sexual life-dominating sins are like a drug. They will diminish your capacity for genuine love for your spouse, cloud your thinking, and turn your soul into a desert. This is the beginning of a living death. Make your wife the object of your affection, have eyes for her only, and love her with a love that draws her to you in sexual intimacy.

Fathers know best when they work to balance life’s demands. Establishing priorities is every man’s battle. Having a lot of equal commitments is not easy. Family, work, government, church, and living in a disordered world (nature, people, things) present us with a challenge. Men, think of it this way with credits to my former teacher, J. Grant Howard. “Life is like a golf bag full of clubs. Which club is most important? It depends on where you are ... All the clubs in the bag are important, but they are not all pertinent to every situation.” We need the God-given skill to know what biblical truths are most necessary at the moment. How can I know the difference between legitimately using and worshiping a camper, computer, sports on TV, my child’s participation in summer travel ball, and credit cards (Prov. 1:7; 1 Cor. 7:31)?

May this be a joyful Father’s Day filled with renewed resolve to love as you are loved by your heavenly Father.

Soli Deo Gloria

Running to Win (July 2, 2017)

An early outlet for Alexander’s zest for life was to race his friends down the dusty streets of his village. No one could outrun him. He had a gift. He could run like a deer. In his teen years family and neighbors encouraged him to run in the Isthmian games in the city of Corinth. The fame of these games drew Alexander into rigorous training for ten months. The 200-meter dash was just right for him. A rigid diet, daily grueling work outs, and no wine were worth it to be able to run for the greater glory of Zeus. Finally, the day came. With all qualifications having been met and months of self-discipline, he was ready. Alexander won his race. The crowds were delirious with cheers. Standing proudly on the victor’s platform a pine needle wreath was placed on his head. A statue in his honor would be erected in his hometown. He would be welcomed home through a special hole knocked in the city walls. Parades, poems, and a front row seat at all public spectacles were just a few of the perks that came with victory. It was worth all the self-denial and every sacrifice he made.

The apostle Paul read the sports pages of the Corinthian Tribune, or at least the first century version of it. The Greek games fascinated him. He saw what a vivid picture they presented of the Christian life. If believers in the Lord Jesus Christ were as committed to discipline themselves

for the prize of the approval of Christ, as athletes were to compete for a temporal crown, the world would see the spectacle of the gospel lived out for the glory of Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle was generous with his running metaphors. Effective Christian service requires living by faith while running in the grace lane (Gal. 2:2; 5:7). Self-discipline in the pursuit of godliness is of far greater value than physical training for a temporal reward (1 Tim. 4:7, 8). The approval of Jesus Christ at the finish line of life is the most valuable and satisfying of all rewards (2 Tim. 2:5; Phil. 3:4).

One of the apostle's more daring illustrations was written in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control. Lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

The truth is “whatever makes a winning athlete will make a winning Christian.” At the same time a red-light blinks in the last word, “disqualified.” There is something that could be lost. The Corinthians had a problem. Should they eat meat that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 8 – 10)? Some in the congregation were convinced that it was a non-starter. Christian liberty did not prohibit the eating of meat offered to a false god in a heathen feast. After all, there were no real “gods.” So, what difference did it make? Buy the meat and have friends over for a BBQ. But there were other believers whose consciences would not let them do this. Paul's answer was summed in one word, “love” (8:1). The strong believers, those with a biblically informed conscience, should not put weaker believers in a position to violate their consciences. They needed love, time, and truth to understand their freedom in Christ. In chapter 9 Paul illustrates what it means to sacrifice for others. His example of sacrificial love for the spiritual benefit of others was seen in his preaching and living. Paul practiced what he preached.

Running to win vividly displays what it means for a servant of Christ to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. Every new convert to Christ becomes immediately a qualified entrant in the “race” of the Christian life. Rewards received at the finish line serve as an incentive for faithful service. Is it wrong to live to serve Christ for rewards? Jesus and the writers of the New Testament did not think so (Matt. 5:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:11; 2 Jn. 8; Rev. 3:1). What does it take to run well the race set before us? It requires commitment. Does pleasing Jesus mean enough to me to discipline myself, lay down my life for others, and set aside my rights for the sake of the gospel? Christian freedom involves serious effort. Races are not won by merely watching videos on how to train and run. Just do it! Self-control means mastering oneself instead of giving in to impulses or overindulgence. Another requirement is consistency. Training whenever you feel like it will lead to disappointment. Set your priorities. Establish a routine. I can tell you from personal experience of having run hundreds of races in a lifetime. Persistence despite rain, sleet, snow, or shine yields results over time. Studying your Bible, talking with God often, confessing your sins, daily obedience to Christ's commands, and serving others will be rewarded by the Savior.

Let's consider the red light blinking at the end of verse 27, “disqualified.” To be disqualified is to suffer loss of reward. Paul is not saying that the person who lacks self-control will not go to heaven or lose his salvation. Such an interpretation is alien to the context. Heaven is not the reward for having lived selflessly. The new birth is not a prize to be won. Self-control is not the

means of salvation, but is, rather, important to the believer's sanctification. The danger of being disapproved does not mean to be consigned to hell. Paul did not live with such a fear ("for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." 2 Tim. 1:12). Christ-centered assurance should belong to every servant of Christ. The possibility of loss is explained in 1 Corinthians 10. Israel failed to exercise moral self-control and was disciplined in the wilderness by God with a loss of His blessings. Believer beware. The warning of disqualification is a reminder lest we forfeit our abundant entrance into the kingdom (2 Pet. 1:11; 1 Cor. 3:15).

The Peachtree Road Race offers us a picture of the value of self-discipline. It is a 6.2-mile race from Lenox Square to Piedmont Park. Our own Bill Thorn has run in every PTRR. This year will make his 48th. He is almost 87 years of age. Coach Thorn has a daily routine that he has followed for years. He stays in shape by determination and daily self-discipline. His reward is the pleasure of finishing. Having known Bill for over forty-five years I can testify to what is his greatest joy. He put his trust in Jesus Christ almost fifty years ago and has faithfully served Him by impacting the lives of thousands of young people for the gospel. He will tell you that it has been worth it all.

A Kaleidoscope of Feelings, Part 1 (July 16, 2017)

"I've lost all feelings of love for my husband" . . . therefore, the marriage is hopeless.

"I just don't feel like reading the Bible" . . . so I don't do it.

"Tell me what you feel" . . . then we'll really know each other.

"Get in touch with your feelings." . . . for feelings are the magic key to personal integrity.

"Follow your feelings" . . . for feelings are the authoritative guide to personal fulfillment.

My thanks to David Powlison for compiling the above examples of where we are in our culture today, Christians included. I have encountered it first-hand more times than I can count. I once had a well-educated church attender tell me "not to be afraid of my emotions." Am I afraid? No. But I know that following one's feelings is an experience of the swamp of self-centered subjectivity. If this rattles your cage, wait I'm not though. The fact is, though, we live in a day when emotions are king. The word "feel" has been substituted quite often for "think." What one is affirming when they say, "I feel this way about God," is "I think this about God." I am not totally discounting the possibility that stating how one feels about something may be valid. The trouble is that the word "feeling" is used with the elasticity to communicate experience, emotions, thinking, and desires. This aspect of emotions is explained with biblically informed wisdom by David Powlison in Seeing With New Eyes (Chapter, "What Do You Feel?"). Before I leave this thought, I must stress the alarming degree to which a psychologized Christian culture has absorbed unscriptural ideas about emotions.

The problem is not emotions. We are made in the image of God and this likeness is seen in the degree and complexity of emotions. Our emotional make up may be illustrated by a kaleidoscope. The one I currently have is a tube containing bits of colored glass and two mirrors.

As it is turned, it reflects continually changing patterns. This pattern of bright colors is beautiful to see. Think about our emotions. It is astounding to realize all the emotions that can be active simultaneously. One writer describes the interaction of the following emotions:

“... in the complexity of emotions that we experience, once again we are different than the rest of creation. After watching my son’s baseball game, I can simultaneously feel sad that his team lost, happy that he played well, proud that he was a good sport, thankful to God for giving me a son and giving me the joy of watching him grow up, joyful because of the song of praise that has been echoing in my mind all afternoon, and anxious because we are going to be late for dinner?” (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 447).

And I might add, grieve over the recent passing of a good friend, experience anger over a bad call by the umpire in the sixth inning, and delight in relief that the game is over. What emotional creatures we are.

There is, however, an infinite difference between humans and God. He has perfect emotions because He has perfect knowledge. He is incapable of emotionally responding in the wrong way. God is never in a bad mood. God makes decisions based solely on His feelings. We do this because we are finite and sinners. God loves (Jer. 31:3). He feels pity (Psa. 103:13; 145:8). He grieves (Jud. 10:16). And He is always happy (Isa. 62:5).

God has made us emotional beings to move us toward Him in worship. We have the God-given ability to respond physiologically to our thought patterns. We see a beautiful sunset at the beach, our eyes send a message to our brains about the colors, the clouds, the softness of the sky, and our feelings respond, “Dear God, how beautiful is your handiwork.” We just can’t help ourselves. Whether we realize it or not we are pulled toward our Creator. At least that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Instead praise so often goes to chance through time. “What a marvelous accident of nature we are witnessing!”

Sin has disordered our feelings. We are turned in upon ourselves. We worship the creation rather than the Creator. We fear death and its threats. Our anger lashes out at others to do them harm (road rage?). We have a love-affair with ourselves. Depression can plague us for no apparent reason. What has happened? Sin broke our connection with God. We lost our fellowship with the God who made us. The problem, however, is not our emotions. They function very well. It is the wrong things that we respond to emotionally while living in broken bodies and a fallen world (e.g., feeling delight in the story of an adulterous affair). The first domestic disturbance became one of hiding and hurling (Gen. 3:10). Adam hid himself from God. He ran in fear of God because of his guilt and shame. The man then used his best available weapon against God and his wife. He threw blame at them. Our first parents gave us an inheritance of sin-darkened minds and desires that crave the things that do not please God (Rom. 3:9-18). We are left with “disoriented human motivation.” David Powlison has it right, “In fact, the mindset of the flesh, with its false beliefs and ruling desires, creates the misconceptions and emotional swamps that complicate” our sense perceptions (e.g., when we are stabbed by harsh words) and emotional expressions (e.g., “I feel angry”). “To say ‘feel’ doesn’t take into account such things as thoughts, attitudes, expectations, words, and deeds, as well as the more passively sensed ‘feeling’ of being angry” (Powlison).

In order to have a redeemed emotional experience in life the follower of Jesus Christ must move toward God's wisdom in all things.

The only human who has a perfect emotional life is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ always had the full range of human emotions. His incarnational life is instructive. His emotions were perfectly coordinated with His thoughts and actions. Follow Jesus through the Gospels and you will observe His perfect compassion (the emotion which is most often attributed to Him, Mk. 1:41). His love was boundless (Jn. 20:2; 15:9). Hypocrisy angered Him (Mk. 3:5). His feelings spilled out as He prayed (Heb. 5:7). He knew the grayness of discouragement (Isa. 49:4). Amidst His sorrows He experienced joy (Jn. 15:11). Do you feel emotionally drawn to Him as you read this? Dear friend, if you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ, He is the only one who can order your emotions to function for God's glory. Even in the midst of confusing and conflicting emotional dust storms He will be with you. Ask Him for the gift of eternal life. He who believes in Him shall never hunger or thirst (Jn. 6:35). The fear of death will be banished and your satisfaction in Him is permanent! Will you begin to have a perfect emotional life? No, but His joy will run to all the corners of your heart (Jn. 15:11).

To be continued

A Kaleidoscope of Feelings, Part 2 (July 30, 2017)

True or False:

- Feelings are more important than beliefs and desires.
- Feelings can send garbled messages.
- Feelings can convince us and others that one's own perception is truth.
- The full range of emotions may be godly.
- Feelings indulged and made the supreme authority in one's life are falsehoods masquerading as truth.
- Emotions can be manipulated by chemicals.

You may put your pencil down. The exam is over. You will find the answers further on in this article.

Earlier on it was said that emotions in themselves are not the problem. The villain is human nature. We are sinners. We push back against God's law. We don't like God and don't want him telling us what to do and not do. Our sin-darkened minds collaborate with our feelings for an unstable rule of life without God. Emotions can easily become the standard by which life is ordered. This is a potential disaster. Instead of working in harmony with the knowledge of God's revealed Word our kaleidoscope of feelings serve the individual and not God. We feel relief when walking away from a bad marriage and that settles it. Feeling happy becomes the gold standard for what is right and wrong, depending on the last movie or television program seen. Marijuana makes me feel relaxed. So, it must be a positive thing. The life lived by feelings is a fool's paradise.

Redemption changes things. When we become new creatures in Christ, we have new beliefs and desires (2 Cor. 5:17). A transformation of the mind begins. We are not bound to live by reason untethered to truth or by feelings with free range authority. Instead of feeling our way down

life's highway, being enslaved to false beliefs and self-serving desires, we are to be guided by divine wisdom. The Holy Spirit working through the Scriptures creates a marriage between truth and feelings as it is intended to be. Genuine affection becomes Christ's affection (Phil. 1:8). As children of God, we can love someone as Christ loves them. We can live with the confidence that the counsel of the Lord instructs us when worries leer at midnight. God can give us a glad heart (Psa. 16:7, 11). Because we fear God and not man bad news doesn't have to send us into an emotional nosedive ("He is not afraid of bad news, his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord." Psa. 112:7). That, my friend, is the makings of emotional well-being. I can personally testify to the calming emotional effect of God's tender instruments of comfort; memorized Scripture, the kind words of a friend, pondering the hope of seeing Christ face to face (1 Thess. 4:18). Peace can be found, not in a chemical, but by trusting in God's loving care in the midst of unexpected calamities (Isa. 26:3, I have a handwritten note in my Bible by this verse which says, "really needed this verse on 3-10-82.").

Below are some general principles which, I believe, can help the Christian navigate the river of emotional life. I do not claim originality for all of these statements. David Powlison has ignited my thoughts in the chapter "What Do You Feel?" in his book, Seeing with New Eyes.

- Feelings can send important messages (physical sense perception). This is an easy one, sort of. I "feel" dizzy. I "feel" nauseated. I "feel" an awful pain in my lower back. I surely did. It was a kidney stone. Unkind words can "stab" us like a knife (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29). But even this use of the word "feel" can be less than clarifying as, for example, "I feel hurt because I feel my husband wronged me." Questions remain, did he wrong her? Was it unmet expectations? Further probing is necessary.
- Feelings can send garbled messages (sense perception). "I feel anxious (too much caffeine?). "I feel depressed." "I feel guilty." The fuzzy factor is at work here. Conscience, thoughts, expectations, attitudes, words, and deeds are involved. What is "feeling" hiding?
- Feelings can send us wrong messages. Jacob felt that "all these things were against him" as he pondered the loss of his sons (Gen. 42:36). His feelings made him misinterpret the invisible hand of God. Joseph exemplifies an emotionally stable grip on the frown of divine providence (Gen. 50:20).
- Feelings can convince us that our perception is the truth. "True-for-me" replaces truth. "I am under a curse." Bad things that keep happening cannot be adequately explained by one's ill-informed thoughts and conscience. Wrong decisions have a way of bearing bad fruit. Feeling-based perceptions can be significant distortions of reality.
- Feelings can ride "shot gun" for deceptive desires. When our "feel-likes" are frequently desires of the flesh, they must not be embraced as good. Felt needs can be disguised idolatrous desires.
- Feelings are to be submitted to the critiquing power of biblical truth (Heb. 4:12). The gym where I work-out posts the claim that it is "a judgment free zone." Some judgments may be wrong. But maybe we should make some judgments. Obviously, a judgment has been made about judgment.

- The full range of emotions is sanctified in the process of growing up in Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). “Sheer joy is the characteristic emotion of true intimacy with God and with people.” (Powlison). Feelings provide the “technicolor” for our thinking, experiences, beliefs, and desires. This makes it all the more important to have the story of redemption as the main feature of our life.
- Feelings when sanctified are truth wrapped in love, convictions are held with passion, and satisfaction is clothed with joy. Thoughts and desires are adorned in their appropriate clothing. “Mal-functioning feelings are those that baptize the longings of sinful hearts.”
- Feelings indulged and made the supreme authority are falsehoods masquerading as truth. Feelings untethered to truth can drive their slaves to harsh bondage.
- Feelings can be valuable indicators of unnoticed soul conditions. We may say that we are being stretched too thin and feel great stress. Why is this so? Have we taken on too much? Is vainglory shaping our priorities and commitments? Do we have the wrong expectations? Or maybe we are going through really hard times. Feelings of being overwhelmed often drive people to God, to self-evaluation, to seeking help.
- Feelings should not be the basis for the assurance of our salvation. Assurance rests upon the slab of Christ and the gospel promise (1 Jn. 5:12; Jn. 5:24). Subjective feelings associated with assurance (doubts, questions, sin) are not irrelevant and can be useful pathways to evaluating biblically our beliefs and unbelief.
- Emotions can be manipulated by chemicals. Illegal drugs have slain their millions. Legal drugs require wise use under the supervision of good doctors. Alcohol may help sedate those who are pressure dominated. At what price do chemically-modified moods come?
- Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, and whatever is of good repute is far more important than how we feel. Who cares if you are happy while at the same time your thoughts, beliefs, desires, and behavior are displeasing to God?

Soli Deo Gloria

Moon Night in the Day (August 20, 2017)

Try to identify a song with “moon” in the title. There are scores of them. Some of my favorites: Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata,” Debussy’s “Claire de lune” (moonlight), Jim Reeves’ “Moonlight and Roses,” Andy Williams’ “Moon River,” Patti Page’s “Allegheny Moon.” There is one song that tops the list, but I will save that one until the end.

President J. F. Kennedy called the nation to put a man on the moon. It was on July 20, 1969, that Apollo 11 landed on the moon. Some of us will remember those famous words by Neil Armstrong, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

God placed the moon in the sky on the fourth day. There was theological significance to the moon's creation. The order of events in Genesis 1 is deliberate and meaningful. In the words of Dr. John C. Whitcomb, "The Creator is infinitely superior to the creation, including the astronomical creation. Therefore, no visible heavenly body, including the moon, may be worshiped." And what did sinful, fallen man do? He worshiped the moon. It was a spiritual disaster. Israel was warned not to emulate the pagan nations of Canaan, as well as the Egyptians, in elevating the moon over the Creator, worshipping the creation instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:20-25).

The creation of the moon is an object of wonder and evidence of God's wisdom and power. Job speaks of "the moon shining in splendor" (31:26). Solomon, the poet of love and female beauty, said "beautiful as the moon" (Song of Sol. 6:10). David announced that after looking at God's creation he was amazed that finite man should have such a responsibility over it (Psa. 8:3, 4). The moon was evidence of God's loyal love (Psa. 136:6, 9). The apostle Paul was mindful of the "glory of the moon" (1 Cor. 15:41). We are right to gather from these responses of God's people that their understanding of the creation account in Genesis 1-2 left them in worshipful awe of God's handiwork.

Suddenly on the fourth day of creation week, the moon appeared in the sky. Instantaneously its function began. This is in contrast to the theory of cosmic evolution which pleads for millions of years for the moon's appearance. By the creative word of the Lord Jesus Christ, "Let there be . . ." (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14; Psa. 33:6, 9), it was hung in space. We should not be surprised by this. Take note of the miracles of Jesus during His earthly ministry (Jn. 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; 2:11; 20:31). Christ's glory was on full display when water was turned into wine instantly and when a leper's rotting flesh became healthy skin. Storms were stopped in the midst of their fury. Bread and fish appeared immediately to feed thousands of people. A four-day-dead Lazarus walked out of his tomb whole and fully alive. Sadly, many believers have been cowed into thinking that Jesus did not create the sun, the moon, and hosts of the stars supernaturally, suddenly, and with the superficial appearance of age. Were the days of Genesis literal 24-hour days? The evidence points in that direction. The numeral ("first day," etc.) attached to the Hebrew word for day (yom) testifies to six literal days. The qualifying phrase, "the evening and the morning," reinforce the truth of a literal 24-hour day. The creation week was designed by God as a pattern for Israel's cycle of work and rest (Ex. 20:11; 31:17).

Cosmic evolutionists have offered their naturalistic theories of the moon's origin. At one time three popular naturalistic theories competed for explanation of the moon's origin: the fission or break-away theory, the capture theory, and the nebular or condensation theory. In recent years the collision or giant-impact theory has received a lot of attention. For a helpful analysis of the history of the moon see The Created Moon by Don DeYoung and John Whitcomb (2003).

Can we depend on the moon to sustain its place in our solar system? The prophet Jeremiah connects God's faithfulness and the dependability of the sun, moon, and stars. What is the destiny of the moon? From the perspective of earth, the moon's function will be significantly altered in the Day of the Lord (Matt. 24:29, "the moon will not give its light."). It will look "like blood" (Rev. 6:12), and its light will be reduced by a third (Rev. 8:12). We are also told that the moon will serve as a clock/calendar for Israel during the millennial reign of Christ on Earth following His second coming (Ezek. 45:18, 21, 25). After the millennial age the moon will no longer be needed (Rev. 20:11).

Millions of earth's inhabitants will be mesmerized by a solar eclipse on August 21, 2017. When part or all of the sun is hidden by the moon, we see a solar eclipse. Solar eclipses occur when the shadow of the moon passes across the earth. My brother, Tim, is making preparation to go three miles from his house in Nashville to the darkest sector of moon's shadow. He will take pictures with a special camera lens and use eclipse glasses. Warning! Don't try to look at the sun with unprotected eyes. You will regret it. One is reminded of the disproportionate size of the moon to the sun. If the sun were hollow, one could put one million earths inside it. The moon in contrast at 252, 711 miles from earth has a diameter of 2160 miles (about a fourth of the earth's diameter). The moon would sit comfortably over the continental United States.

Praise God for the moon. It serves many useful purposes. One of those is useful night light. This "lesser light" to rule the night has guided evening travelers on land and sea and is useful to agriculture (the harvest moon provides extra light for farmers at the fall harvest time). We live on "The Privileged Planet" where "Earth's unique location and vantage point for eclipses and other astronomical phenomena is evidence of intelligent design" (Julie Borg, [World Magazine](#)). The solar eclipse will last 2 minutes at its edges and 2 ½ minutes in its 70-mile shadow. For a better view of the moon, we must wait for September 6 when a full moon will reflect its magical night-light.

My favorite "moon song" is "Fairest Lord Jesus." I especially love the third verse, "Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moon light, and all the twinkling starry host; Jesus is brighter, Jesus shines purer than all the angels can boast." My heart soars toward God when I sing those words. A total eclipse is part of a divine design to create a special moment of wonder and worship.

God's Red-Lights, Part 1 - Warnings to Unbelievers (September 1, 2017)

How many red-lights have you encountered in your lifetime? You would agree, there are too many to calculate. They may be annoying but they serve a valuable purpose. I had an unfortunate episode with a stop sign in Decatur once upon a time. I was distracted by a conversation with my mother in the backseat and failed to observe the stop sign. The damage was negligible, but I had to make an appearance in traffic court.

God has posted red-lights and stop signs in the Bible. They are there for good reason. Some are for Christians. Some are for non-Christians, and some are for entire nations. We will address these three groups of warnings in the weeks to come, beginning with warnings to non-Christians. The ultimate horror in the universe is to die and spend eternity under the judgment of God in hell. In our feel-good, non-judgmental age, no one goes to hell. The average funeral is a witness to the belief in justification by death. If you die you go to heaven. Pulpits are by and large silent on the subject of the ultimate doom of those who die without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. No other biblical doctrine flies in the face of human opinion like the Bible's teaching on hell. Liberal Christianity denies its existence and many evangelical Christians seem to be embarrassed by it.

The Bible reveals four fundamental facts about eternal punishment. (1) *Hell is a definite place and not a mere state of the soul.* It is spoken of as eternal damnation (Mk. 3:29), outer darkness (Matt. 8:12), everlasting punishment (2 Thess. 1:9), blackness of darkness (Jude 13), the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20; 20:15), and a place of unending torments (Rev. 14:11). (2) *Hell is a place of*

punishment. Fire (Matt. 5:22), outer darkness (Matt. 25:30), the undying worm (Mk. 9:47-48), and degrees of severity (Rom. 2:5-6; Matt. 11:20-24) leave no doubt about the awfulness of eternal endurance of unimaginable pain and suffering. (3) *Hell is a place of punishment which is eternal*. We are told that it is everlasting (Matt. 18:8) and eternal (Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:6-9). The mere contemplation of such a horrible fate is emotionally and psychologically overwhelming. There are those who attempt to deny the eternal nature of hell by redefining the word “eternal.” However, they are confronted with the challenge of explaining the use of the word eternal with “eternal life” (Jn. 3:15) and the “eternal” God (1 Tim.1:17). (4) *Hell is a place to be occupied by the devil, his angels, the antichrist, the false prophet, and all who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ* (Rev. 20:11-15).

No theological red light or stop sign could be more important. The warning is clear. Every human being is faced with God’s STOP! You are driving along and come upon a red light at a major thorough fare. Cars and trucks are going through the intersection at up to 65 mph. If you don’t stop, you will probably be killed. You are approaching a sign that says “stop, bridge out.” You ignore this warning to your own peril. Unbelief ends in tragedy. Consider several of God’s gracious warnings.

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn. 3:18). There is only one solution for the guilt incurred by sin and that is to trust in Jesus Christ. Placing one’s confidence in anything or anyone other than God’s Son is a false hope. Sincerity, good works, or religion of any kind cannot remove the condemnation of God. You say, “Jesus is merciful. He will overlook my sins.” Who is it that is speaking in John 3:18? Jesus Himself. He has installed the red light. There is no hope apart from coming to Him for the forgiveness of sin.

“. . . When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:7-9). Jesus the judge will be an awesome sight and a sure sign of impending doom to every unbeliever. The consequences for refusing God’s offer of eternal life are incalculable. In this particular warning there is pay-back. God will pay back (“inflicting vengeance”) proportionately for the suffering which unbelievers have caused God’s people. God keeps records. There will be a pay-day someday.

Jesus used a terrifying story to describe the most horrible thought imaginable. It is found in Luke 16:19-31. It is a disturbing portrayal of a rich man who came face to face with the spiritual reality of eternal judgment. This man had lived a life of luxury and ease. Material things were more important to him than his eternal soul. Through death God “reverses the categories and values of human society.” Hell is a reality for those who die without having put their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life (Lk.16:23-26). The torment in hell is excruciating and unending. It is not just sensory pain. It is also the full weight of memory and self-awareness that life was wasted. There is no hope for a second chance.

To any who are reading this and are not prepared to meet God as judge, there is hope while your heart is still beating. There is heaven awaiting those who know they have sinned against a holy God and that He sent His Son to pay the price for our sins. With the hand of faith, we can receive the gift of eternal life. There is a hell waiting with open jaws those who die without God’s

pardon. It is not surprising that Jesus had so much to say about hell. Our only hope is found in His cross and resurrection. The most horrible thought imaginable is to die and experience eternal, conscious, physical and spiritual torment in hell. Don't run through God's red light.

The Rains Came (September 1, 2017)

"For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,' likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour."
Job 37:6

"Houston, we have a problem." Though this quote was never actually spoken by the Apollo 13 astronauts, it has worked its way into our cultural legend. It is a fitting summary of what has happened in Houston, Texas, during the past week. Never has so much rain fallen at one time on the continental United States. The city and people of the Houston area will never be the same. The destruction is so widespread one hardly knows where to begin. The following are a few observations through a biblical lens.

Creation reveals God's existence, but only in a limited way. Nature is not what it is supposed to be. The fall of Adam and Eve and the ensuing curse on creation has left us with what-might-have-been. Floods, earthquakes, draughts, tornadoes, and hurricanes are woven into nature, "red in tooth and claw." The Creator's power and divine nature are revealed in the natural world but that is not enough to bring lost sinners to salvation. Special revelation in the Scriptures is necessary if God's justice, mercy, love, and forgiveness are to be known. What then is Hurricane Harvey communicating? We can be thankful that Hurricane Harvey is a 1-in-1,000- year event. But more than this, that the world will not be judged by a universal flood again (Gen. 6-9). The rainbow is a witness to God's mercy. Natural and man-made disasters are a call to repentance (Lk. 13:1-5). When a tragedy takes place, we should ask "What lesson is there in this for me?" Seek the Lord while He may be found. One day the opportunity to be saved will be withdrawn.

The image of God in man, even though marred by sin, is remarkable to witness. We are captivated by the endless kindnesses and rescue efforts made by first-responders, family, neighbors, and strangers. Identity politics has been eclipsed by mercies given and received. It has been beautiful to see blacks, whites, and Hispanics looking out for one another. Yes, there are bad people. Looters, scammers, and other kinds of thieves are taking advantage of helpless people. They are a minority.

This is an opportune time for generosity and mercy. All of us should express in some tangible way our love for those in distress. So many who are suffering pain and loss are in need of comfort and help. Death, grieving families, sickness, the need for medicines, and basic necessities stalk them. Homes have been lost, automobiles ruined (estimates of over 500,000), incomes interrupted. There are churches that we can partner with and links that have been found that offer ways of giving to those in need. Information on disaster relief is being made available through Berachah.

In our Sunday evening study of Psalm 147, we will be given pause for praising God. It is always a time for that.

Drilling for Oil (September 29, 2017)

Beneath the earth's surface is a gold mine, a wealth of resources. It is coal, oil, and natural gas. Fossil fuels drive the engine of modern industrial life. Fossil fuel is a gift from God.

God calls His children to live in obedience to Him. On the heels of that grand hymn of praise for Christ's humility and obedience on the cross, the apostle Paul commands the Philippian believers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12-13). As Christ gave Himself in obedience to the Father for our salvation, so we are to obey the Father and show for all to see what wealth God has given us in Christ. A very emphatic verb is used to drive this truth home. The idea of "work out" is to accomplish something, to bring about by effort. We are not to depend on others for our growth in Christ. We have great wealth underneath the surface. Our wealth is the power of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling presence of Christ, and a new nature. The Philippian believers were to stand on their own two feet, not depending on Paul's personal presence to motivate them.

I am to mine what is already mine. The power to live a life pleasing to God is found in Spirit-energized doing. Think of the "energizer bunny." Being anxious to do what is right ("fear and trembling") is made possible "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13). God works in us both the wanting to do and the doing of His moral will. As one has said, "He wiggles our willer."

We must acknowledge our need for God's enablement, show complacency to the door, hunger for more Christlikeness, and rejoice in the available power we have in Christ to do the right thing. What action items do you need to pursue today? We could seek to do everything we have to do today without complaining and arguing. God can make this happen. Drill more deeply, brothers and sisters, drill more deeply.

God's Red-Lights, Part 2 - Warnings to Christians (October 6, 2017)

Recently while walking toward the entrance of a restaurant, to my right I heard a "beep, beep, beep" sound. A huge garbage truck was backing out and I was in its path. Warnings are valuable if they are heeded. There are dire warnings in Scripture for those who reject the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:17, 18). But Christians are also given numerous warnings of a different kind. "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up, and they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (Jn. 15:6). "Keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you... You who are seeking to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:1-4).

There are five popular views on the warnings and admonitions of the New Testament. There is some variation within these views but overall, they serve as accurate categories of interpretation. There is the *loss of salvation view* which says that believers who ignore the warnings (e.g., Hebrews 6:1-11) will lose their salvation and perish in hell. *The second view teaches that warnings are addressed to those who have professed Christ but do not possess eternal life.* They insist that genuine faith in Christ perseveres as it produces good works (Eph. 2:10). The appeal made to "examine yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5) is invoked to urge those who are self-deceived to

see their true condition and repent. *A third view focuses mainly on the warnings in the book of Hebrews* and says that if a Christian could apostatize, it would be impossible for that person to become a Christian again (This hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view was taught by one of my professors in seminary). *A fourth view takes the warnings to be God's means of saving Christians.* For example, the warning in 2 Peter 1:5-11 ("will never stumble," v.10) is interpreted to mean that "the qualities in verses 5-7 are necessary for eschatological salvation." In other words, godly living will keep one from failing to enter the kingdom and going to hell. This view is especially slippery to assess because its advocates affirm belief in the security of the Christian and teach justification alone. It also brings up critical issues such as the nature of faith and the role of works in salvation.

A fifth view, my personal view, interprets the warnings and admonitions as being addressed to genuine believers, warning them of the danger of the loss of rewards. Biblical road signs or "red lights" are designed to keep believers from falling into disobedience and thereby miss the blessings of God, being disciplined by God, and loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 12:5-8). The goal for the believer in Jesus Christ is to persevere in good works to the end of life. Faithfulness will be rewarded by enjoyment in rulership opportunities in the coming messianic kingdom.

Consider 2 Peter 1:1-11. The warning is that the God-pleasing life may be compromised by failure to grow spiritually (v. 9). Chronic sinful disobedience results in loss of spiritual perspective, regression in Christian maturity, failure in fruit-bearing and affliction with spiritual amnesia, i.e. loss of assurance. If you do not want to stumble and bring dishonor to the Lord and fail to obtain an abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom, then "do these things" (1:5-8, 10). Peter is *not* saying that abandoning such virtues as enumerated in verses 6-7 results in failure to obtain final salvation. Assigning any work with meritorious or "non-meritorious" value is in conflict with justification by faith alone (Rom. 3:28). Peter wants his readers to finish well. As one of my pastor friends has put it, "only faithful ones will enter it (the kingdom) richly as they receive the rewards of God for faithful conduct. God has given us the power to obey Him. The degree to which we do so will determine how abundant our eternal experience will be."

Years ago, Beth and I were driving my mother and father to a food market. As we were moving down a quiet residential street, I became distracted by a conversation with my mother (no excuse) and failed to notice a stop sign. A lady in a van was approaching the intersection from my left. The rest is history. I did minor damage to our cars and was cited to appear in traffic court. I found myself there with some people dressed in orange suits. I had to explain the circumstances and was ordered to pay a fine. The judgment seat of Christ will be no church picnic. There will be an assessment of the believer's works which will have nothing to do with earning or losing salvation (1 Cor. 3:10-15). The basis of this judgment will be the quality, not quantity, of the believer's works. Sadly, some will suffer loss. There will even be shame (1 Jn. 2:28). Others will be rewarded. All glory will go to the Savior. Now is the time to prepare for the coming encounter with the Lord of the church. Pay attention to the stop signs.

Soli Deo Gloria

The Bible Verse that Rocked the World (October 15, 2017)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'
Romans 1:16-17

Anniversaries can be wonderful events. A wedding anniversary makes us pause and think back over the years of a promise made and kept. The perfume of shared love through the ups and downs of life is exquisite. It is a fragrance that cannot be purchased. There is thankfulness that God, in the smile of His divine design, brought the couple together.

But there is an anniversary that transcends even the sweetness of human romance. It is the celebration of the recovery of the gospel and the Great Commission. This will be the theme of our annual mission's conference. The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is a time to rejoice in the rediscovery of the gospel in the sixteenth century. We will cut the cake with a look at Romans 1:17.

It was Martin Luther who, in describing his breakthrough into the splendor of justification by faith alone, revealed in the opening of his eyes to the meaning of the righteousness of God. Luther had thought of righteousness as something of a club in the hand of God. It kept beating him down. How could it ever be good news? The justice of God continued to condemn him. Let's examine the Bible verse that rocked the world.

The lead-in to Romans 1:17 is found in a shout-out by Paul that he was not ashamed of the gospel. He was more than eager to preach the gospel in the capital of the civilized world, the imperial city, teeming with human bondage, lust, greed, monuments to its heroes, and temples to the gods. But the apostle marched under the flag of the gospel of Jesus Christ with courage running through his spiritual veins. What was this gospel? It was good news. Not just any good news, but the incomparable message that in Jesus Christ is "the power of God for salvation." The really bad news is that man is a sinner. The biggest problem facing humanity is God's justice. Therefore, nothing matters more than mankind's need for getting right with a holy and just God who will see that justice is done. Extraordinary, supernatural power is needed, not the fictional may-the-force-be-with-you stuff of the movies. The gospel is effective to produce the results that God wants. It is a "force" not to be found anywhere in the universe, except in God.

How does man the sinner access this power that delivers from the bondage of sin and the wrath of God upon him? It is accepted by the empty hand of faith. This was a vital part of what changed Luther's world of thought. The declared righteousness that God gives to the powerless and enslaved comes by faith alone. It is not faith plus anything but is "personal trust or reliance." In Luther's own words, "God proves that it is his justice alone, which he gives through faith, that helps us, the justice" God requires. The *sola fide* of the Reformation requires reaffirmation in every generation. The Roman Catholic Church has not moved away from its pronouncements of "anathema." The Council of Trent (1545-1563) has never been retracted. It says:

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which forgives sins for Christ's sake; or that we are justified by this confidence alone; let him be anathema (Sess. 6, Canon 12).

There is a movement afoot today, in the words of my professor, now with the Lord (Dr. Earl Radmacher), “among some evangelical scholars who merge works into faith and claim they are a condition for final arrival into heaven which (introduces) a convergence with Catholic theology, into historical evangelicalism.”

The monastery theology which had haunted the young Luther was seen for what it was, a cruel fiction. The righteousness which God required was discovered, or should we say rediscovered, to be a gift. It was not a sword hanging over his head threatening only judgment. It was a righteousness revealed in the gospel. It was outside himself, an alien righteousness. It was Jesus Christ! Here is the reason the gospel is God’s saving power. We can put it this way, this righteousness is “the righteousness which God’s righteousness requires Him to require.” Luther was ecstatic. Hear him.

I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e., that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith... All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates.

The quote in Romans 1:17 is from Habakkuk 2:4, found three times in the New Testament. Paul’s doctrine was not new. Habakkuk was living in a time of the imminent wrath of the Babylonian army. Yet he was living by faith. This is the key to one’s relationship to God. Trust in Him no matter what. God’s wrath is coming upon this world. If you have not already, flee to Him for the deliverance He has provided in Jesus Christ. Has the truth of Romans 1:17 rocked your world?

Soli Deo Gloria

A Bolt of Lightning and the Protestant Reformation (October 20, 2017)

“On a sultry day in July of the year 1505 a lonely traveler was trudging over a parched road on the outskirts of the Saxon village of Stotternheim. He was a young man, short but sturdy, and wore the dress of a university student. As he approached the village, the sky became overcast. Suddenly there was a shower, then a crashing storm. A bolt of lightning rived the gloom and knocked the man to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried in terror, ‘St. Anne help me! I will become a monk.’”

These famous lines from Roland Bainton’s classic, “Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther,” set up the story of a man’s spiritual struggle that changed the world. Luther kept his vow and at the age of twenty-three entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. He threw himself into the rigors of the world of rules. To gain the favor of God Luther forged ahead with unceasing energy. He prayed, fasted frequently, wore chafing underclothes, slept on the floor, and did whatever it took to somehow overcome the dreaded thought of Christ as judge. How could a sinner be right with God?

The world of Martin Luther was shared with thousands of others in the Europe of that day. Medieval Roman Catholicism had suppressed the gospel of the free grace God and replaced it with a spiritually suffocating sacramental system. There could be no salvation without the

Mother Church. By virtue of the performance of an act (*ex opere operato*, “from the work worked”) prescribed by the church, God poured his love and grace into the hearts of the individual. The Mass was the centerpiece of the quest for God’s acceptance. The Catholic system required nothing but the doing of the sacraments.

They believed that the sacraments worked by themselves. Irrespective of the faith of those participating... Being baptized conveyed regenerating power so that you were born again as a Christian. Receiving the bread was like popping another can of Red Bull – spiritual energy to keep you going in your efforts to lead a virtuous life. (Why the Reformation Still Matters, Reeves and Chester).

The more Luther tried, the more disillusioned he became. Then a Dominican friar name Johann Tetzel came to town. He had been authorized by Pope Leo X to sell indulgences. The Roman Catholic Church was financially in dire straits needing money to complete the new St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Indulgences were purchased documents which removed the temporal penalty for an individual’s sin. The unbiblical reasoning did not stand in the way of an apparent bargain. Indulgences were a convenient way to buy time out of the punishments of purgatory. Tetzel went about announcing, “When the coin the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Luther was livid. He marched off and posted his now famous Ninety-Five Theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. The intent was to spark a public debate over the matter of indulgences. It was October 31, 1517.

Two great shafts of biblical light broke into Luther’s soul. Firstly, the matter of differences with the teaching of the church could be settled by Scripture alone, not by the pope’s authority or any church council. Secondly, through a series of lectures on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians in 1516-1517, Luther encountered “that frightening verse about the righteousness of God, Romans 1:17.” Listen to Luther’s own words.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. There I began to understand the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, passive righteousness with which a merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Everything changed when Luther saw that a kind and generous God provides the righteousness He demands in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. God wants not our goodness but our trust. The gospel rediscovered by Luther is bound up in the five solas. *Sola Scriptura*: “Scripture Alone.” *Solus Christus*: “Christ Alone.” *Sola Gratia*: “Grace Alone.” *Sola Fide*: “Faith Alone.” *Soli Deo Gloria*: “For the Glory of God Alone.” These truths are central to the Bible. They are not made-up slogans in an attempt to justify the Reformation. Each sola addresses challenges to the gospel at any time in church history, especially in our day. There is only one way for sinners to be in a right relationship to a holy God. God has provided the perfection we need in the perfect Lord Jesus Christ. We are to come to Him with the empty hand of faith to receive the gift of eternal life. Heirs of the Reformation can best celebrate its 500th anniversary by spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Soli Deo Gloria

Is the Reformation Over? (October 27, 2017)

Many Protestants and Catholics are increasingly moving toward the assumption that the Reformation is over. They are locking arms as co-belligerents in the fight against the moral collapse of our civilization. We also find some evangelicals following the path into the Roman Catholic Church, where it is viewed as a safe harbor in a time of moral and doctrinal anarchy. Old differences between Protestants and Catholics are being laid aside, and if not resolved they are considered as no real consequence. The Reformation we are told did certainly identify problems in the Medieval Catholic Church that needed correction. But these, we are assured, have been attended to. Unity is called for. Polls have been taken that show general agreement among professing “evangelical” Catholics and Protestants on such statements as “the Bible is the inspired word of God”; that “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.”

After all the high-sounding pious language about unity, compromise, and shared mission, there is a great theological divide that still exists. The gospel that was rediscovered by Martin Luther and the other Reformers exposed the false gospel of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has been perfectly willing to move around its theological furniture on the deck of the mother ship (RC C), but the core issue of the doctrine of justification is only peripheral for Catholics (Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel*, 191). Even though more attention may be given to the Bible, Masses may be conducted in English, and evangelical gospel choruses are sung. These comparatively minor changes only serve to hide the most critical doctrine issues at stake.

Justification by faith alone is anathema to the Catholic Church. In the year 1545 the pope convened the Council of Trent as part of a Counter Reformation. Rome’s stance on justification was restated once and for all.

Canon 9: If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone let him be anathema (eternally condemned).

Cannon 11: If anyone says that men are justified solely by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness or solely by the remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and charity which is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and stays with them or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.

The Reformers (Luther and Calvin) were clear and immovable that works were the consequences, not the cause, of justification. Contemporary Catholicism is different from its medieval version in many ways but not on the essentials of the gospel (A review of the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church only confirms this). Transubstantiation, indulgences, superstitions, and sainthood are but a few of Catholic doctrines and practices that are still believed and taught. But justification by faith alone stands as the sentinel doctrinal issue. It is the blood line to the heart of the gospel. In the words of Luther, on it “the church stands or falls.” According to the Scriptures (Rom. 1:17, 3:21-28; Gal. 3:2-17; Tit. 3:4-7) justification is the work of God whereby the sinner is declared righteous. It is not a process by which a person is made righteous. It is by faith alone. We can contribute nothing. It is based on the finished work of Christ and because of this we can have assurance of our right standing before God. The Catholic view claims that justification begins with faith and continues through the sacraments

and good works. Martin Luther was adamant that our standing before God is not dependent on our growth in personal holiness or in some subjective outlook on one's sin.

A compromised gospel is a false gospel. The Holy Spirit's anathema is pronounced against any who would add works to faith as the condition of justification before God. Is the Reformation over?

- It is not over as long as any human authority seeks to usurp the final authority of the Scriptures through a pope, church councils, tradition, feelings, or human reason untethered to the Word of God.
- It is not over as long as Christ's all-sufficient atonement is denied by the Mass, which is believed to be the same sacrifice as offered by Christ.
- It is not over as long as grace is believed to be something that can be earned.
- It is not over as long as faith is made into anything other than the empty hand of the sinner receiving the gift of Christ. In the words of Luther, "If faith is not without all, even the smallest works, it does not justify; indeed, it is not even faith."

"The closer one looks, the clearer it becomes, the Reformation was not, principally, a negative movement, about moving away from Rome; it was a positive movement, about moving towards the gospel" (Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 190). Sadly, the twenty-first century church seems to be cold toward theology and doctrinal precision. This is our loss and a great danger. God forbid that the hard-won victories of the Reformation would disappear in our day. To lose the gospel is to lose everything.

The church of Jesus Christ must always be reforming itself according to the Scriptures. The blood of the martyrs and the courage of the Reformers must be honored and God supremely glorified by our commitment to taking the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Soli Deo Gloria

Thoughts & Prayers (November 10, 2017)

With each new massacre of innocent people, whether by a home-grown merchant of evil or an Islamic terrorist, comes a theological firestorm. Theological? By this I mean that belief systems about human nature ("mental health problems"), the purpose of government ("more gun laws"), and now, most recently, prayer ("our thoughts and prayers are with you"). Each of these ideas represents the need for rational, true-to-the-Bible discussion among Christians and serious soul-searching throughout our land.

A chorus of angry citizens, politicians, entertainers, and the media shamelessly expose their ignorance of prayer and, more reprehensible, mockery of prayer. The Huffington Post bannered a headline article, "People Fed Up With 'Thoughts and Prayers' Demand Action after Texas Church Massacre." There is a place for mockery, but not mockery of the God of the Bible and the Christian faith. Elijah ridiculed the prophets of Baal and their fictional devotion to a false god (1 Kgs. 18:27).

Mockery of Christians and their beliefs is not a new item. The Jesus of the Bible was a prime target of ridicule throughout His earthly ministry (Matt. 27:31; Mk. 15:20; Lk. 18:32; 23:36; 27:40). Those who do not want their sins exposed go for the kill of those who are gospel truth driven. Mockery is an easy weapon of choice because it requires no serious thought. Christians should not be surprised when non-Christians are faced with acts of evil and do not have the necessary moral categories or courage to deal with it. Those who mock prayer as a form of “do-nothingness” display an embarrassing contrast to Jesus Christ. Jesus was the supreme example of prayer as powerful action, talking to His heavenly Father constantly (Lk. 5:16). In the shadows of the most intense battle with evil in the history of the universe, Jesus prayed to the point of physical depletion (Lk. 22:43-44). The Savior of the world even now prays for His church (Heb. 4:15).

Students of the Bible understand that prayer is not a placebo or a good-luck charm to ward off evil. Many saints have been martyred while crying out to their heavenly Father. Stephen’s last words when being stoned to death for the sake of the gospel were “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Prayer is a means of communicating with God and pleading for His moral will to be done on earth.

What many of the mockers of prayer appear to want is government action not prayers. Translate that into more gun laws. Never mind the fact that present gun control laws are of little consequence to bad people set on doing harm to others. Those who offer their “thoughts and prayers” for the bereaved are doing a good thing. We trust that it is a gesture of genuine sympathy and concern. When we say we will pray for someone, then we ought to keep our word. Nor is prayer to be a substitute for good deeds (1 Jn. 3:17; Jas. 2:15-16). Prayer and fulfilling one’s biblical responsibilities are not competitors. Snide remarks such as “what America needs now is less prayer and more action from her elected officials” are unhelpful. Is our only option more laws and bigger government?

I offer the following action items. First, pray for those who are grieving deeply over the loss of loved ones and friends. Ask God to grant mercies and comfort. Pray with Bible-saturated petitions. Death stalks us all. Are we prepared to meet God? When a tragedy strikes, what am I to learn from it? Seek the Lord while He may be found. One day the opportunity to find peace with God through salvation in Christ will be withdrawn (Lk. 13:1-9). Beseech God for the reformation and revival needed in the church. A Christianity that has turned away from the trustworthiness of the Bible and the gospel of Jesus Christ is no longer true Christianity. Revival is a sovereign work of God moving in a powerful way to move Christians to “catch up with their theology.” It demands humility, necessitates the healing of personal relationships, taking the Scriptures seriously, and renewed urgency to spread the good news of the gospel. If the church of Jesus Christ is to impact the conscience of our nation, truth and love must lock arms in bold ways.

Second, gun violence in our land must be addressed. This can be done without belittling prayer. Government at all levels, working closely with local citizenry, must find the constitutional and moral means to diminish crime. Gun control laws already on the books must be enforced. The breakdown of the family is creating a horrific toll on community stability. There are thousands of churches filled with praying Christians who are making a difference in their communities. Addressing the moral grievances that exist in America is overwhelming. The downward spiral

into social disintegration will increase as long as leadership and the electorate defy God's moral standards.

Our thoughts and prayers are indeed with the grieving in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Until the day when murderers are forever banished from the eternal kingdom, let us find ways for the good to overcome the evil.

Sexual Bullies – Beware! (December 1, 2017)

The lid has been blown off the entertainment, media, and political world. But let's quickly add, partially blown off. Women have come forward to charge men in positions of power with sexual harassment. The list keeps growing; Bill O'Reilly, Roy Moore, Harvey Weinstein, Sen. Al Franken, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, Rep. John Conyers, Garrison Keillor. There are more and, in my opinion, if the lid were fully removed to view the sexual bullying that is taking place in our culture we would be devastated. Imagine what God knows. But that is actually the occasion for encouragement. God knows what He knows, and He has written a book that is sufficient for knowing how to live in this world and in the world to come.

Watching charges of sexual harassment and sexual assault against celebrities and politicians should bring us no satisfaction. Yes, there have been truckloads of hypocrisy. Some justice has been done. Bound up in this moral is a reminder that one day we will all give account to a holy God. No one will escape notice in that day (Luke 8:17). But there is also a warning to the evangelical Christians. We have had our casualties and we are not above falling into immorality and sexual bullying ourselves. So, how then should we think and live in a morally dirty world? I offer some clarifying Scriptural wisdom. These points of truth are by necessity limited in their scope of discussion.

Sex is a gift from God for the divine institution of marriage (Gen. 2:22-24). Sex is for a man and a woman bound together by marriage. It is not for men with men or women with women (Rom. 1:18-32). God in His infinite wisdom designed sex and marriage for the procreation of the human race and loving pleasure between a husband and wife.

Human sexuality became disordered by original sin (Gen. 2:17; 3:7). Sin transformed everything, but not for good. Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness (Gen. 2:25). The innocent delight of sex between a man and a woman was lost. It became turned in upon a sinful disposition with all of its destructive inclinations. Sexuality became plagued by self-eroticism, lust, promiscuity, perversions, and idolatrous practices.

Human sexuality being sinfully disordered can become ordered to fulfill its original purpose through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (Song of Solomon, Eph. 5:22-32). As love rejoices with the truth, sex in marriage is to reach its sublime moments.

The male sexual nature is powerful by divine design. The Christian man must submit his sexual impulses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The enabling power of the Holy Spirit makes self-control possible (Gal. 5:23). There are those who foolishly claim that more women should be in places of power and that men are ruining our society. This is nonsense. Sin is not a respecter of gender. Women contribute their fair share of trouble by their own sinful cravings. Female

versions of jealousy, the desire for attention, and sexual promiscuity are no friends to God's moral will.

Men are to treat all women with respect and courtesy. Sexual advances, flirtation, off-color jokes, sexual innuendos, sexual groping, and the use of power to control women is abusive and beyond the boundaries of the sanctity of sex. Men who resort to the imposition of sexual contact with any woman other than their own wives invite their own punishment from God. Christian men have a special sexual code of honor they must adopt in order to bring glory of God. A man's wife is to be his sexual soul mate and not any other woman. Sexual thoughts must be harnessed. Don't let lustful eyes go wherever they want. Man-up and fight for sexual purity. It's a life-long battle, but worthy of every victory. Quit mentally stalking that shapely waitress. Keep your hands off the females at work.

Church leaders are to treat young women as sisters, in all purity (1 Tim. 5:2). There is a "soft" kind of sexual bullying that can take place in Christian circles. Men, be on guard. Don't lead a woman on emotionally by trying to fill a void left by a cold and distant husband. Watch those compliments given with all good intentions. Intimate conversations can end up taking you places you don't want to go. If your wife gives you a caution, don't ignore it. I know of a pastor who enjoyed calling the women in his congregation "honey." His ministry was ruined by multiple affairs with females whom he had charmed. Satan delights in destroying the credibility of works of God by moral failures.

Most of this counsel has been directed to men. However, ladies, you have responsibilities. Are you disappointed in your marriage? This must be handled God's way. Why do you want male attention? Do you dress for your husband's eyes? If you think a man is flirting with you, are you making it an indoor sport? These questions are not meant to imply that sexual bullying by men is the fault of women. Women who have come forward to report sexual harassment and assault are to be commended. Sadly, the sexual abuse endured went on far too long and with cultural and organizational approval. Men of strong moral character are needed. Power and authority are to be exercised for the good of others.

Christ's church is made up of free people. We are free to love and enjoy our fellowship with one another. Truth and purity of life make that possible. Our hope in Christ is also a powerful force to keep us morally pure. "We know that when He appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 Jn. 3:3).

A Silver Lining (December 10, 2017)

Storm clouds gather. The sky turns ominously dark. The wind picks up. Trees sway. Thunder, lightning, and rain conspire to create a threat to personal safety. We know this unsettling experience. But the storm moves on. Calm comes over what had been nature's fury. The sun's rays break out behind lingering clouds. A brilliant silver lining tells us that all is better now.

Human history and our personal history write a darkened story. The human race is at war with the Creator and creation is one grand symphony of sighs longing for its better self. Our stories are all different but yet the same. We are not what we were meant to be. Yes, we laugh and enjoy life. However, in the words of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes there is a "time to weep, a time to

laugh,” “a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccles. 3:4). Life is filled with personal storms and with a fair share of “laughter and dancing” for some more than others.

Our darkened stories and mourning have a way of surfacing in the Christmas season. My home, as a youth, at Christmas was a contrasting mix of “dancing” and “mourning.” Our father doubled down on his sadness as the holidays approached. He withdrew from the merry making, stayed to himself, and consumed more alcohol. I say this not to denigrate my dad. I loved him and respected his bravery in war and providing for his family. Yet there was something about the shared expectations of Christmas that sent our father off in the opposite direction. It seemed that what he saw missing in his life accentuated his sadness. What was he missing? I have never fully figured that out. Sadness kept company with my father far too often. My mother pursued a compensating approach to Santa Clause, gifts, bubble lights, “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,” and Christmas celebration in general. The Dial boys made the best of it all.

May I ask you a personal question? How much sadness is a part of your life? To be clear, I am not suggesting that being down in the dumps, grief, and distress are useless. There is a normal sadness which can be profitable and a useful part of our being. Dr. Charles D. Hodges discusses this at length in his book “Good Mood Bad Mood.” Hodges calls attention to “normal sadness” which is “what happens to most of us when we lose something very important to us” (62). The truth is, though, God has redeemed sadness by placing our grief, sorrows, and sins upon the innocent Son of God in a cruel death on a cross (Isa. 53:4, 5). The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ have cut the roots of all disordered sadness. Through faith in Christ, we can live with hopeful, peaceful, and joyful grief (Jn. 16:22; 2 Cor. 6:10). God gives grace in order that our sadness may be gain and not loss.

I have mentioned disordered sadness. The word that comes to mind is depression. In normal sadness, “the intensity and duration of our sadness corresponds to the size and duration of the loss” and “it goes away when the problem goes away” (63). Many tend to use the word depression to describe all sadness. This is a mistake. It has been said that depression is when one looks at tomorrow and there is nothing there. Hodges distinguishes the “difference between sadness that came with adversity and sadness that appeared without any cause” (63). The personal question asked above deserves a thoughtful and biblically ordered discussion.

At this point I only wish to address what may be called seasonal sadness. The storm clouds of my own darkness of outlook can be infused with hope. We do not have to live fixing our eyes on the clouds. Look upon the light breaking out behind the clouds. Gaze at the silver lining. It is amazing how many times Scripture directs the believer’s attention to how God is moved by our sadness and struggles with loss. Jesus broke down and wept when He came upon the grief of Mary, Martha, and their friends at the tomb of Lazarus (Jn. 11:32-38). This is solace for us all. Jesus sympathizes with us in our losses and weaknesses as our high priest in heaven (Heb. 4:15). Bathe your mind in that.

The letters of the apostles are rich with promises of “an inheritance which is imperishable,” “a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time,” and “we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” The frown of divine province, our disappointments, our failures, our grief must not be allowed to steal the joy of our hope in Christ. Take a walk and tell nature that one day it too will be set free. Listen to Handel’s “Messiah,” and submerge your sorrows in tears of joy. Look at the silver lining of the promise of seeing Christ one day.

I am grieving as I write these final lines. I received word this week from Switzerland that my dear friend Rod Miller is now in the presence of the resurrected Christ. Rod attended our church years ago, traveled to L' Abri Fellowship for time under the ministry of Francis Schaeffer. While there he became smitten with Dr. Schaeffer's granddaughter and married her. The once strong and energetic Marine, lover of Jesus Christ, lived his last years suffering with brain cancer. The promise of the silver lining of hope is now fulfilled.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem” (December 15, 2017)

The city of Jerusalem is ever with us. The entire world offers no match. The old walled city of Jerusalem is approximately five thousand meters in circumference. I know this because of the time it took me to run around it. The larger city of modern Jerusalem (including East and West Jerusalem) is 48 square miles compared to the 134 square miles of the city of Atlanta. Jerusalem has recently reentered the news cycle as a result of President Trump's declaration that the U.S. Embassy will be relocated from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The move is more than geographical in significance. It is politically charged. Jerusalem is to be no longer considered Israel's capital merely on paper. It will be where the Islamic world does not want it.

What does this mean in terms of a biblical perspective? Christians are not all agreed upon this. Amillennialists (no 1000-year reign of Christ on earth) believe that modern, earthly Jerusalem has no real significance in Bible prophecy other than foreshadowing the “Jerusalem that is above” (heaven); “The earthly Jerusalem of Zechariah's day was a type of the church, the heavenly Jerusalem in which we now live by faith (Heb. 12:22-24)” (The New Geneva Study Bible, p. 1481). Premillennialists (Berachah Bible Church's doctrinal position) understand Old Testament prophecies in a literal sense (allowing for metaphors, idioms, and figures of speech) and believe that Christ will return before (Pre-) His 1000-year reign (Millennium) on earth. There is a future for the early Jerusalem in the Great Tribulation and the kingdom to come. The difference between these two interpretations is significant. If you wish to pursue this study further, I recommend Future Israel by Barry E. Horner. Also, a good study Bible (The Nelson Study Bible) can be of help.

Jerusalem, disappointingly, has a history of unbelief. On the Wednesday before Christ's crucifixion, Jesus, speaking to the city as representative of the nation of Israel, cried out with deep feeling, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (Matt. 23:33). It would be only two days later that Israel would reject God's offer of hope in her Messiah. The Prophet above all the prophets was violently slain. That sweet baby born only six miles away in Bethlehem, who lived a perfect life, became the propitiation (“a sacrifice that bears God's wrath and turns it to favor”) for our sins (1 Jn. 4:11). God turned the city with a reputation for unbelief into a city remembered for “the founder” of the sinner's salvation (Heb. 2:10). No city can boast of such a moment in the history of nations.

There is more. Jerusalem will one day be the city to which Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world will return to establish His kingdom on earth (Zech. 14:4). It will be there that Ezekiel's temple will be built and the nations will swarm to visit the Holy City “to worship the King, the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 14:16; Isa. 2:2-3). What a grand time that will be. And beyond that the earthly Jerusalem will join the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven for the inauguration of the eternal kingdom, the final destiny for all of God's children.

Emblazoned on my memory is an early morning run I made around the walled city of Jerusalem in 1982. The air was still, and the sky to the east of Jerusalem as if brushed a bluish gray caught my attention. I was looking at the Mount of Olives and suddenly there was a streak of lightening and a roll of thunder. It was the moment of a lifetime. In a split second the thought came to me. Is this like that time when the feet of Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives? Then Jerusalem will become the reckoning day as the Lord will go out and fight against those nations who have insolently sought to eradicate His people. The Warrior-King will have arrived (Zech. 14:1-9). There is a magnificent day in store for Jerusalem. I am reminded that Life in Messiah ministry has asked us to use the Christmas season to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Soli Deo Gloria

A Grief Revisited - What to Do When Your Favorite Team Loses (January 14, 2018)

Yes, it was only a game. For those who are not interested in football and sports in general, the advice is probably, “get over it.” Just in case you were doing something else, a lot of UGA fans are attempting to come to terms with a heartbreaking loss to Alabama for the national championship. On Tuesday the red and black was exchanged for black only. I heard that one man was out driving the streets of Atlanta until 2:00 in the morning trying to deal with his disappointment. Sports talk show hosts have been doing their best to console a sad fandom by rehearsing the scene of the loss, going over plays that didn’t work, opportunities missed, and the more optimistic thinking about next season. Sports fans know what I am talking about. Hopes dashed? Emotional whiplash? It happens. This blip on the radar screen of life is, however, a teaching moment.

Having lived through my fair share of disappointments in the world of competitive and spectator sports, I offer a few thoughts on recovering from unmet expectations. My own dashed hope in sports started at an early age. Baseball, track, and football consumed a great deal of my attention. With it came the realization that there were many who were bigger, stronger, and faster. It also does not take me long to pick a favorite team to support. A major turning point came, however, when at the age of fourteen I became a Christian. The reality of newfound identity in Christ began to gradually dawn upon me. Success in life did not depend on winning and being identified with a winner. True, most of this was “school-boy” sports but the fact remains that every believer receives his or her identity in Christ. It is found in Him not in whether one wins a race, plays on a winning team, or if one’s college or professional team wins a championship. The believer in Jesus Christ is “in Christ” (Eph. 1:4). A psychologized culture likes to talk about “self-esteem” being important in identifying with a victorious team. But this moves us away from what can really happen. It’s not wrong to wear sports-related apparel, fly your team’s flags on your car, or shout-out your cheers. But be careful. Sadly, it is possible to stroke one’s ego by association with someone else’s success. We are not defined by whether our team wins or loses. If you are Christ’s, then your view of everything is to be shaped by who Christ is and what He has said.

This is the place for some biblical “values clarification” for participating in the sport’s world. First, as already stated, who you are is not determined by living in a city that is known for its winning sports teams. Second, if you participate in sports activities don’t lose sight of the fact that “bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for

the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). Reading your Bible, praying, and doing all things for the glory of God excels all the temporary achievements of this life with its trophies, success, and fame. Third, sadness, depending on its degree, which is produced by the loss of our favorite team, can be an indication of disordered priorities. Grieving over a disappointment is normal. Yet letting it dominate one’s moods, use of time and energy is not the stuff of living Christlike in thought and deed. Fourth, wisdom dictates that we examine our emotional output over sports and entertainment in comparison to what it means to love Christ. Do I allow Sunday ball games to preempt worshiping with God’s people? Can I find the right words to tell others about Christ as well as I can discuss sports statistics, high school recruits for my favorite college team, and what players to draft for fantasy football?

Fifth, learn to turn losses into gain. A loss can remind us of our need for Christ. Sorrow is a favorable time to draw near to God, to talk to God, to learn from God. More can be learned from adversity than pleasure (Eccles. 7:2). Sadness should remind us that we live in a fallen world plagued by sin’s endless limitations for meaning and true happiness (Rom. 8:22-23). We make mistakes. Our bodies fail us. We get hurt. We are not ultimately in control. Therefore, we must never forget that God is sovereign over all wins and losses (Rom. 11:33-36). Sadness should not be allowed to control the Christian and distort reality.

At this point some may be thinking, is this not a bit much about football games and sports? Perhaps we can use it as an example of deeper grief issues. The truth is that we all have to work through grief about someone or something. We live in a world of losses. It’s broken and so are we. Mourning over disappointments can distort the lens of the future. A widow is grieving over the recent loss of her husband. He died of a stroke. She is looking at life through her tears. There are decisions to be made, finances to be reckoned with, and trusted friends who can be of comfort. Her hope in Christ is there to embrace. There is a time coming when there shall be no more mourning. But for now, a grief must be revisited.

Soli Deo Gloria

Man Up! (January 28, 2018)

The Marines are looking for a few good men. They know what it takes to qualify as courageous, combat-ready warriors. God is looking for godly men. He knows what is necessary if a marriage, church, or any other God-ordained institution is to fulfill its purpose. Consider this a call to every man reading these words to “man up” God’s way in the coming year.

God-designed manhood has fallen on hard times. Fake masculinity is everywhere. It is found among those men who think women exist only for their pleasure. Hugh Hefner’s celebrated playboy philosophy cheapened femininity by reducing women to bodies only, poster-babes to be lusted after, and accumulated in harems for hedonistic fantasies. Suddenly, many seem surprised at the growing list of sexual bullies who have harassed and assaulted women. Early in human history Lamech’s breathtaking arrogance reveals manhood in defiance of God’s standard of monogamy (Gen. 5:23, 24). Male rebellion against his Creator spells trouble, especially for women. Many men in our day are being drawn into spiritual killing fields of fake war and fake love. Watch out, brides-to-be, for courtiers who have indulged themselves in the love-diminishing hobby of pornography.

Thank God there are men who love God and hate evil. We need more of them. In the book, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, a moral compass-setting of masculinity is proposed: “At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships.” The word “mature” means “that a man’s sense of responsibility is in the process of growing out of its sinful distortions and limitations and finding its true nature as a form of love, not a form of self-assertion.” Men, if it is your desire to fulfill God’s design and enjoy Him forevermore, there is grace-enabled work to do. Follow me closely here. I am not saying that true masculinity means becoming a warrior, wearing camo, being an athlete, cutting wood, or grooming a beard.

There is a distinction between morally defined and culturally defined masculinity. The masculine role includes “financially supporting one’s children, abstaining from sexual relations with males, abstaining from sexual relations outside the protective confines of marriage, and providing moral and spiritual leadership in the home” (George Alan Rekers, University of South Carolina School of Medicine). But there is more. There is the “gentleman” dimension to genuine masculinity. Christian men are to advertise the gospel by their respectful treatment of women. This begins with men practicing self-mastery. The male sex drive is a powerful thing. When a man’s sex-drive is out of control, it can be scary and harmful to women and children. Mix that with alcohol or drugs and you have a public menace. Men, females do not exist as merely sexual objects. The character qualities of self-sacrifice and self-control are protective of women. There is the “gentleman” aspect of genuine masculinity.

A Christian gentleman should bear some identifiable marks. In pointing this out I am especially interested in Peggy Noonan’s article in the Wall Street Journal on January 20-21, “America Needs More Gentlemen.” To quote from this article: “A gentleman is good to women because he has his own dignity and sees theirs. He takes opportunities to show them respect. He is not pushy, manipulative, belittling. He stands with them not because they deserve friendship.” The truth is, if a man is in hard pursuit of God, he will be cultivating love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. These are evidences that the Holy Spirit is at work. This kind of masculinity is the real thing. “Meekness, often mocked by the world, is a man taming his strengths and harnessing his energies. Self-control is a man disciplining his instincts and mastering his passions.” I have lifted these last two lines from a wonderful meditation by John Stott entitled, “The Forbidden Fruit.”

If I still have your attention, I want to speak to the younger men starting out on their challenges with a culture that is anything but friendly to Christians. Spirit produced self-mastery fights the battle of lust within and an entertainment industry that profits monetarily by keeping men enslaved to sexual visual enticements. The irony of it all is seen in females in Hollywood and on television lecturing males for being sexual predators while showing more of their bodies than we need to be seeing. Combine that with girls who have been convinced that equality with men means knowing how to have sex without meaning and dressing to make it happen. Resolve now to be an encourager of women. Treat the opposite sex with politeness, keep your physical distance. Train your eyes to obey pure thoughts. And do I need to say it again? Run away from that alluring but deadly sexual candy-land of pornography. It can make men brutish, not gentlemen.

So men, let's man-up. "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:13, 14). Show the world what the gospel looks like wrapped in masculinity.

Let's Hear It for Leviticus (February 2, 2018)

Let's take a poll. What is your favorite book of the Bible? The book of Romans is probably high on everyone's list. After all, it is a thorough explanation of the gospel. It doesn't get any better than that. I recently heard a highly respected Christian worker talk about how he took great pleasure in coming to the book of Luke in his Bible reading. There is the book of Genesis which probably received many votes. The book of beginnings explains how the universe came into existence. It doesn't get any bigger than that. The book of Psalms undoubtedly gets high ratings. Who has not gone to the sweet songs of King David in their times of sadness? The Gospel of John is the go-to book for bringing the unsaved face to face with how to become a Christian. Do I hear a shout-out for the book of Revelation?

Has anyone mentioned the third book of the Bible? Do I see a tear rolling down the cheeks of Leviticus? If you are reading through the Bible, after all the action of Genesis and Exodus, things slow down. Before you know it you are up to your elbows in animal blood, kidneys, livers, and offerings of various kinds. I confess that as a new Christian at the age of 15 I avoided taking a class in Leviticus which our pastor taught in our weekly Bible Institute. I opted for 1 Peter and Apologetics. Little did I realize that everything in the Bible actually rested on the message of Leviticus. We will come back to that.

For all who take the Bible seriously, 2 Timothy 3:16 makes a stunning assertion; "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, . . . However, we have all those details about sacrifices (for different kinds of sins), priests (how they were to dress), clean and unclean animals, Israel's diet, leprosy (different kinds of baldness), bodily discharges, feasts, and punishment for blasphemy. Why does God think this is so important?

The twenty-seven chapters of Leviticus have some unique features which provide keys to understanding the story of the whole Bible. There are critics who say that Leviticus is not fit to be in the Bible. However, some Bible scholars call it the "greatest book" in the Bible. It should be noted that no other book of the Bible contains so many direct messages from the Lord as Leviticus; "The Lord spoke . . . and said . . . commanded" (about 56 times), "holy . . . holiness" (about 150 times in the original Hebrew). The title of Leviticus means, "about Levites." They were the tribe from which the priests in Israel were drawn. It was their responsibility to maintain Israel's worship system. Also, there was and is only one way to approach God, and that is by sacrifice. An innocent animal had to be killed and burned on the altar. The word "atonement" occurs 45 times. This is at the heart of why God chose Israel, namely, to show the world how to get right with God. Sin is unlikeness to God, distance from God and wrong done to God. Redemption is founded upon righteousness; it is only made possible by blood (which is life poured out); it is in order to be holy as God is holy.

Are you beginning to feel the weight of Leviticus? Leviticus may not be a book of action, but it is a book of acclamation. It deserves a standing prolonged applause. The only way to God is by

sacrifice and one without blemish (notice all the stipulations in Leviticus). Without God's forgiveness we would all be doomed to eternal damnation, the worst thought imaginable. But God not only offers pardon for the guilt of sin, He also calls the forgiven sinner to walk with Him in holiness of life. The spotlight in Leviticus shines upon the way in which God's presence can be a reality among His people. The Holy Place in the tabernacle and the spectacular events of the Day of Atonement were the occasion for the manifestation of God's glory. Like a brilliant star in the night sky the words, "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (11:45) were to draw Israel's eyes to see God's purpose for them, to be like God.

God wonderfully provided for Israel's failures to live up to her holy calling. The sacrifices, the priests, the ritual cleansings, the feasts were all designed to make fellowship with God possible. Yet the book of Leviticus leaves Jew and Gentile yearning for a sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The writer of Hebrews says that "in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year" (Heb. 10:4). But the writer goes on to exclaim that "Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:12). Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice. He is the Great High Priest. Holiness and cleansing before a Holy God are found in Christ. The book of Leviticus does shed tears, not because it lacks appreciation, but because of its longing for fulfillment in Israel's Messiah.

Love Stories in the World of Redemption (February 8, 2018)

Valentine's Day is begging for some redemption. My thoughts run to love stories in the Bible. That's the way preachers think. When I stand in the check-out line at the grocery store, I admit that I cast my eyes on the latest sensational, scandalous, sordid (take your pick) "love story." One week a romance is aflame. The next week the same romance has crashed and burned. The tabloids never let up. And neither do the failed romances.

Let's begin with the first love story in human history, the father and mother of us all, Adam and Eve. No romance and marriage has ever had the advantages this one did. God personally brought the couple together. I mean, "Adam, here is your wife and sweetheart." Adam's response, "Wow!" (my paraphrase). Happy Valentine's, Adam and Eve. There were no sinful natures. There was God with whom they enjoyed daily fellowship, and a perfect environment. It was love at first sight. But then it all fell apart. The wrecking ball of disobedience to God changed everything. Adam and Eve began that favorite indoor sport of blame-shifting. They hid from God which was the dead give-away that something was drastically wrong. The only good in the early days of the first romance was God's provision of a sacrifice, the death of an innocent animal to atone for sin and clothe them. This love story was redeemed by God's love and grace. The first couple was reconciled to one another and God. Hope was given in the promise of a descendent through whom all the nations will be blessed. The first gospel pronouncement was made (Gen. 3:15).

Abraham and Sarah's love story was also a theological and redemptive bombshell. Their marriage was to produce an offspring who would bring salvation to all the nations (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8). Sadly, their relationship was tarnished by Abraham lying about Sarah. She was apparently a "ten" and to save his skin, Abraham claimed she was his sister (half-truth, whole lie). He did this twice. This kind of behavior became an intergenerational pattern. Another major blemish on Abraham and Sarah's romance was their unbelief regarding a promised child. Sarah

counseled her husband to make her servant, Hagar, his wife. It was a case of the theological “hurry-ups.” Multiple wives are not sanctioned in the Bible, and it brought complications and difficulties to the entire human race. Husbands and wives can make incredible blunders regarding their children.

Who has not been riveted by the romance between Ruth and Boaz? It is a love story written large in the drama of redemption. Boaz, a man of character, wealth, and position, is smitten by a young Moabite widow, Ruth. Her presence in gleaning ears of grain in his field led to a beautiful romance. God’s fingerprints were all over the eventual marriage of Ruth and Boaz. It came about when Boaz, as the nearest kinsman to Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi, redeemed her family property, married Ruth, and fathered Obed who became heir to the property of Naomi’s deceased husband. I know. It sounds complicated, but God was in the whole process ensuring that Eve’s and Abraham’s descendent would come through the Davidic line. Obed was King David’s grandfather (Ruth 4:9-17). Do you see why the story of Ruth has been called the romance of redemption?

Things became messy in the love story of David and Bathsheba. Tracing the messianic line through the Old Testament is filled with surprises. The biblical text reads like a line from a Harlequin Romance; “It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch...” (2 Sam. 11:2, ESV). David saw Bathsheba bathing and began a series of breaking God’s commandments: coveting, adultery, and murder. Sin’s consequences became a visitor in David’s eventual marriage to Bathsheba, and the birth of their son, Solomon (2 Sam. 12:24; Matt. 1:6). We can only say that God’s grace triumphed over David’s terrible sins. David and Bathsheba’s romance and marriage resulted in a lifetime of family conflict and grief over their children (2 Sam. 12:10). David’s family was plagued by violence.

It was a conflicted love story. But one which nevertheless portrays God’s pursuing love in Hosea’s broken heart over an unfaithful wife, Gomer. This romance is a parable for the relationship between God and Israel. Hosea loved and married Gomer who became an adulteress. Their second and third children were fathered by his wife’s lovers. The marriage started out well but soon went bad. Gomer abandoned Hosea, sleeps around with other men, returns to Hosea, and he takes her back (Hos. 3:1). (This grief-stricken story has been the occasion for a book entitled, “Saving Your Marriage Alone” by Dr. Ed Wheat). Hosea did not give up on his unfaithful wife. Neither did God give up on Israel. It is possible to save a marriage by the supernatural effort of one spouse.

A teenage girl gets pregnant. Her betrothed partner, though not the father of her child, does not break off the engagement but instead protects her and shows compassion toward her. This love story was the loving, kind, moral environment in which Jesus was conceived and born. We know little of Joseph, but we do know he was a righteous man who carefully obeyed God’s law (Matt. 1:19). Mary was an extraordinary wife and mother whose song of praise is a magnificent display of biblical insight, humility, and confidence in God’s plan for her son.

Love stories in the Bible, with the exception of Joseph and Mary, all bear the residue of sin and disappointment. Oh! But wait! There is one more. There is the greatest romance of all. The bridegroom, impeccable in His character, loves His bride so much that He gives His life for her. He not only dies for her, He comes back to life and guarantees her glorious future (Eph. 5:25-

33). He has chosen His beloved to live with Him forever (Rev. 19:7,8). This is the greatest Valentine of all.

A Polluted Land (February 16, 2018)

We are again stunned by a mass shooting in a school. On Valentine's Day, at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, students at the Marjory Stoneman High School heard a fire alarm and immediately moved out of their classrooms into a confrontation with a waiting gunman. A nineteen-year-old former student, armed with an AR-15 rifle, with grievances and anger committed his dastardly crime and coolly walked away. A short time later, after seventeen students and teachers were slain, he was hand-cuffed and placed under arrest. Our land has once again been polluted by murdering our young. This is not to say that one kind of murder is more heinous or polluting than another. But massacres in our schools are a special kind of evil.

I woke the morning after the shooting to read Numbers 35:3, "for blood pollutes the land." God's unique presence in Israel in the theocracy was to be intolerant of premeditated murder. Human life is sacred. God is holy. Humans are made in the image of God. "To kill a person was tantamount to killing God in effigy." The movement of our nation away from a Bible based morality has brought with it a devaluing of human life. This is one element conspicuously missing in post-mass-shooting discussions. The first culprit singled out is not the shooter but guns. Next in line is "mental illness." One danger in these responses is the failure to focus on the choices that the shooter made that led to the killings. Rarely do you hear the words "sin" or "evil" in assessments of the horrific killings of the innocent. The secular worldview that has captivated the thinking of the media, entertainment, and academic world has created moral anarchy and confusion. The moral degradation of our society must be brought into the conversation.

Comfort and hope. This is what is needed for those families impacted by the deaths of their sons and daughters. "Thoughts and prayers," though in many instances merely a cliché, is not without substance. Thoughts? Yes, our thoughts are set upon those who are grieving. How are they handling the incalculable agony of a life cut short by a bullet? What changes will take place, altering the rest of their lives? Will justice be done? Is there any hope for life after death? Prayers? Our prayers are occupied with those within the circle of violence and death. Those in the community of the 3,000 students at the high school need comfort, counsel, and the settling effect of truth. We must be praying that those who know the gospel of Jesus Christ in Broward County will be available to the shocked and grieving.

The perpetrator of this evil deed is not a victim. Too often conversations wander off into the culture of victimhood. Who and what made the killer do this dominate analysis? Let's be clear. The murderer made choices. No individual or circumstance made him do what he did. One psychiatrist said on a cable network that the shooter had a personality dysfunction. We just can't seem to face the fact of human depravity and the capabilities of a sinful heart. It is undeniable that individuals have challenges due to nature and nurture. We all do. The human mind can pursue deceptions and perverted moral inclinations. The divine institution of the family is under assault. Divorce and unhappy relationships are overwhelming many homes. God is absent from thoughts, plans, and motivations. Modern social media offers opportunities to be influenced by untruth and to spread morally corrupting ideas. Too many young people find themselves in a

wasteland where right and wrong are determined by personal feelings. God's wisdom is in short supply.

What can we do? Sympathy is good but not enough. Here are some suggestions. Pray for the students who are struggling with anxiety and grief. Pray for the mental strength and wisdom needed for the bereaved families and all the students in the high school as they attempt to manage the post-traumatic stress experience. Pray for the first responders who are left to deal with the things they saw that will never go away. Think through biblically the various claims regarding "mental illness." What does it mean? Does such a claim help or hurt in getting to the root issues in human behavior? Schools across America are going to have to upgrade their security measures. Local governments have decisions to make. What can we do as a church to assist the schools in our area in matters of security, counsel, and encouragement? Think, read, and avoid extremes on the issue of gun control. Children need compassionate and wise adult help in understanding what is happening in our nation. Reassure your children with God's promises of His sovereignty over all circumstances in life. Be alert to signs of fear and worry in younger children. Are our homes gospel centered? Do we read the Scriptures together as a family? Have meaningful talks about God, sin, redemption, suffering, life and death. We live in a fallen world and, ultimately, there are no safe places on this planet. There are children who face dangers and death every waking moment. Are we praying for them and the persecuted church?

I am impressed with some of the mature responses of the seventeen-year-olds at Stoneman High School. There were heroes in the classrooms and halls on Valentine's Day. May our own young people develop the mental and spiritual strength to respond to the hardships of life. Fear must not rule us. We are to be people of hope, the hope of the gospel at home, at work, and at school.

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need." Hebrews 4:16

Billy Graham - Some Personal Reflections (February 23, 2018)

It was in 1950 in the old Ponce de Leon Ball Park, home of the Atlanta Crackers. I was nine years old. Billy Graham brought his evangelistic crusade to Atlanta. The meetings lasted for six weeks, from October to December. The tent was pitched on the baseball field, packed with 25,000 in attendance. Because my grandfather was a pastor, the children of pastors were given special seats on the platform. Cliff Barrows preceded Billy Graham's message with a dramatized account of a Bible story that included Jehu's chariot. I remember it vividly. Graham learned a lesson from the Atlanta Crusade that changed a ministry policy. A picture of him standing by bags of money collected in the offering appeared in the newspaper. He was mortified. Graham said, "That'll never happen again." From that time on he would never accept a "love offering." A board of businessmen was appointed to oversee the ministry and salaries of his staff and crusade team.

One of my heroes as a young Christian was Billy Graham. In addition to his integrity with regard to money, the handsome evangelist took special measures to avoid women who wanted to trap him. His staff checked his hotel rooms before he entered. Billy Graham was impeccable in his loyal love to his wife throughout his married life. He exemplified what it meant to be above reproach in marital fidelity.

My journey to Christ as a teenager and the early years of my spiritual formation were significantly influenced by the gospel preaching of Billy Graham. His clarity, energy, and zeal for God inspired me. Hearing him made me want the same boldness to declare the greatest story ever told. Every Sunday afternoon at 5:00 I listened to “The Hour of Decision.” That powerful voice and his unashamed declaration of the gospel helped to motivate me to witness for Christ in my high school. My younger brother, Jeff, remembers the Billy Graham television broadcast on Sundays echoing up and down the street on which we lived. My freshman year in college at the Christmas break (1959) I rode the train to Washington, D.C. to the Capital Teen Convention. Billy Graham was the featured speaker. Thousands of teenagers were challenged by a powerful gospel message and the urgency of being faithful witnesses. I did not know that my future brother-in-law, Cliff, had been converted to Christ in the Nashville Crusade in 1954. Nor did I know that my future wife and her mother would ride the train to the Billy Graham Crusade in Louisville in 1956. If I may reminisce for a moment, the post-war years (1940’s and 1950’s) were a time of evangelism. Billy Graham was one of many lesser-known evangelists who drew crowds into tents, ball parks, auditoriums and even churches. Sunday evenings were considered by many pastors as an opportune time for a gospel message. David O. Beale (“In Pursuit of Purity”) summarizes this time period; “The 1940s witnessed a tremendous upsurge in Fundamentalist youth evangelism, spurred by such aggressive ministries as Child Evangelism Fellowship, Word of Life, Youth for Christ, and the Navigators.” Billy Graham launched his preaching in the Youth for Christ movement.

The advent of television and the rise of Billy Graham as an effective communicator became the smile of God’s providence. My parents did not attend church. However, there were times when I came home and found my parents watching a televised Billy Graham Crusade. Solos by Ethel Waters and George Beverly Shea and a choir singing “How Great Thou Art” were preparatory for Graham’s sermon. I thanked God that though many things were not right in my family, the good news about Jesus Christ was in our living room.

The 1950’s were a time for white fundamentalist Christians to face the social ill of racial segregation. Graham’s first integrated crusade was in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1953. One source describes the moment; “After the ropes cordoning off the black section of the auditorium were removed, Graham told the ushers who threatened to put them back up, ‘Either these ropes stay down, or you can go on and have the revival without me.’ From then on, Graham permanently adopted the policy of holding only integrated revivals.”

There are those who fault Billy Graham for being too cozy with various Presidents of the United States. He came to realize over time that he made some mistakes in his political involvement and the danger of being used by politicians. But Graham was never swayed by invitations into the political arena. Every president held him in high regard for his authenticity and wisdom. As one commentator said, “Billy Graham spent nearly a century on earth without disgracing himself. That is a life well-lived.”

Billy Graham’s focus on the gospel made an important difference in my early Christian life. That difference became a life-long commitment to clarity and boldness in preaching the gospel. The message that man is justified before God simply by placing his personal trust in Christ, and that he is eternally secure in grace from that moment on has been a vital part of my ministry. There is no way of salvation other than through Christ (Jn. 1:12; 3:17-18; Rom. 1:16-17). After all these years we can hear that clear, strong North Carolinian voice ringing out the gospel.

“Just as I Am” (March 4, 2018)

It is perhaps one of America’s best-known Christian hymns. It is certainly one of a kind. Five short stanzas with each ending in “O Lamb of God, I come! I come!” “Just As I Am” has been sung enumerable times as a song of Christian invitation. The Billy Graham crusades have written it into church history in an extraordinary way. How many reading these words can easily hum the melody without hesitation? Charlotte Elliott penned the now famous words, “Just as I am, without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me,” in 1835. When Billy Graham responded to the invitation to be saved in a revival meeting conducted by Mordecai Ham in Charlotte, N.C. in 1934, the words “O Lamb of God, I come! I come!” wooed him to the altar.

As the body of Billy Graham lay in state in the Rotunda of the US Capitol and various dignitaries paid tribute to his life and work, Michael W. Smith sang the signature invitation song “Just As I Am.” It was personally very moving. A song precious to Christians for generations was being heard by millions around the world.

I seek not controversy for its own sake at such a time, but the public invitation method of Billy Graham did not meet with the approval of some Christian pastors and theologians. One of the reasons that the greatly respected pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, could not cooperate in the London Crusade was the nature of the “altar call.” It was objected that “conversion does not take place through a physical response to an ‘appeal.’ It was not the walk to the front that made anyone a true convert.” (Ian Murray, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 339) This criticism was also joined with the impression that no emotion seemed to accompany professions of faith. In the words of Lloyd-Jones, “Can a man see himself as a damned sinner without emotion?” Assurance of salvation related to “making a decision” was also troubling to Lloyd-Jones.

My purpose is not to defend the invitation methods of the Graham crusades. Nor is it to argue against Lloyd-Jones’ theology. However, biblical perspective is needed on matters of what constitutes conviction of sin, what is involved in an invitation to trust Christ, the relationship of repentance and faith, and salvation assurance. The Holy Spirit as the “Hound of Heaven” pursues the sinner to make him face the truth about Christ, sin, and judgment (Jn. 16:8-11). In the words of B.F. Wescott, “Truth seen as truth carries with it condemnation to all who refuse to welcome it.” In a court of law conviction offers proof (e.g., “You are guilty and here is why.”). The truth may not be accepted but it nevertheless is still the truth. Because one is convicted about the truth of the gospel is no guarantee of conversion. Conviction exposes the sinner’s violation of God’s law and condemns the guilty sinner because of unbelief. The righteousness that God requires to enter His heaven is found in Christ. The refusal to receive Christ as Savior results in eternal condemnation. The force of conviction brought by the Holy Spirit is powerful, but sadly the condemned sinner may choose to remain in his unsaved condition.

God’s work of conviction may take place in different ways over an extended period of time. And, it should be added, there will be emotion associated with a sense of one’s lostness; varying as it will according to the individual’s emotional personality and sensitivity of conscience.

The convicted sinner who wants the free gift of God’s forgiveness and the righteousness God requires is enabled by the Holy Spirit to believe. At the critical moment of conversion there is a turning from unbelief (repentance) to receiving Christ. The turning is in the believing and the

believing is in the turning. A change of behavior is not required to be saved. That would be a works requirement. A change of behavior is the result of being saved (Eph. 2:8-10). How does assurance of salvation take place? God alone can give it and He does so at the outset of salvation by His infallible word. The realization that the forgiven sinner has eternal life is because God said so (1 Jn. 5:13). This assurance is not based on feelings. It is not because at a point in time one goes forward in an invitation at the close of a church service or because he prayed a proper prayer. Assurance belongs to the believer through the three witnesses of the Word, the Spirit, and a changed life, with the Word being foundational. We receive assurance as a gift, through believing in Jesus (Jn. 1:12; 3:16; 5:24).

The night I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior in March of 1956, I raised my hand and asked for prayer that I might do so. The invitation was given. The congregation began singing, "Just As I Am." It has only five verses, but it seemed like ten as I was dug in. I finally stepped into the aisle. I was seated on the next to the last row. At the front of the auditorium I was directed into the pastor's study where one of the deacons walked me through the gospel. Outside the room the congregation was singing, "Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; Because Thy promise I believe. O Lamb of God, I come! I come!" I came! I knew that I could not save myself. I turned from my stubborn unbelief and fell into the forgiving arms of the Savior. Jesus extended to me the invitation I could not refuse. "Just As I Am" is a precious song to me. Hearing it sung in the Capitol Rotunda, brought tears to my eyes.

What Difference Does It Make? (March 29, 2018)

The disciples of Jesus had been with Him for almost three years. They heard Him teach and saw Him perform thousands of miracles. When the hour came for Jesus' death, they deserted Him and left Him to handle the mockery, anger, and crucifixion by Himself. One of the disciples, Peter, cowered when asked if he knew Jesus. He denied Jesus in no uncertain terms. Thankfully, the death of Jesus was divinely appointed. No one took His life from Him. He gave it up voluntarily because He was dying for the very disciples who ran away. He was dying for all sinners everywhere (John 10:17,18; Mark 10:33,34; Luke 19:10).

Jesus died and they put Him in a tomb. But that's not the end of the story. On the third day He came out of His grave. A resurrected Christ walked, talked, breathed the air, ate, met with His disciples, and then forty days later ascended back to heaven from which He had come. How did this impact the thinking of the first Christians and propel them into a pagan world with a counter-culture message of a resurrected Savior? What difference did the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ make? We have the book of Acts in the New Testament to tell us.

The resurrection made a difference in apostolic qualifications. The first fact that we encounter is that it was absolutely necessary for an apostle to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22). The apostles were a unique band of brothers. The gift of apostleship established thirteen men (the apostle Paul is included) who became the foundation of the church in its teaching (Ephesians 2:20). They were accredited by special signs, and it was required of each one to have seen the resurrected Jesus. They were qualified and invested with the authority to teach the truth of the gospel "once for all delivered to the saints" (Acts 2:42; Jude 1:3). The authority of God's Word was mediated through qualified apostles. We have an ongoing Bible conference in the presence of the apostles.

The resurrection made a difference in the preaching of the gospel. The next truth about the resurrection flows through the book of Acts like a cascading water fall. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the subject of apostolic preaching (Acts 2:24, 31; 3:26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30-37; 26:23). It dominated every message that was preached. This had a twofold punch. The reality of the resurrection of Christ from the dead meant that there was no other way to be saved and spend eternity with God (Acts 4:12). And, secondly, the reality of the resurrection of Christ guaranteed the authenticity of all that Jesus said and did. The powerful truth could not be contained. Jesus was Israel's long-awaited Messiah and the Savior of the world. Our lives are to be consumed with the message of the bloody cross and the empty tomb. Millions are standing on the edge of eternity without Christ.

The resurrection made a difference in why the church was persecuted. There was a price for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This fact figures prominently in the persecution, opposition, and ridicule experienced by the early church (Acts 4:2; 17:18, 32; 24:15, 21). The preaching of the truth of the resurrected Messiah did not please the religious leaders in Jerusalem. As strange as it sounds, religious people could not fit the resurrection of Christ into their theology. But this kind of twisted thinking was not limited to the first century. Deniers of the reality of the resurrection are everywhere to be found in our own day. There are false teachers who throw the literal, physical resurrection of Christ into the trashcan of legendary fiction. This is done to comply with a secular scientific worldview, which sees a universe that is run by mere cause and effect with no room for miracles. Take heart, dear Christian, the power of the gospel can overcome the sneers of an unbelieving world.

The resurrection made a difference in material values. The early church was extravagant in its generosity and hospitality. What was the motivation behind this? The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead created servant hearts (Acts 4:32-33). Resurrection living has feet and hands that serve one another. The grace of generosity among believers finds its source in the springs of new life in Christ. The doctrine of the resurrection is not merely a statement of truth. It is a way life. "We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Because of the resurrection of Christ unselfish living and giving is to flow toward the needy (Acts 4:34-37). Delighting in investing in the lives of people for Christ's sake is a sign of resurrection living.

The resurrection made a difference in living with hope. Is there hope for these aging, time-worn, dying bodies? The resurrection of Jesus Christ infused the thinking of the first church with the hope of the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6,8; 24:5, 15, 21). A culture of resurrection was created by the assurance that there awaits a perfect resurrection body for every believer in Jesus Christ. We live in a day where death is antiseptically removed from daily life. We live longer and expect to work through our next illness due to developing medical advances. Funerals and older people can be uncomfortable reminders that we have an appointment with death. As Christians the resurrection of Christ is the promise that "God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by His power" (1 Corinthians 6:14). It was Saint Isaac the Syrian who said, "Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour." The resurrection of Christ is a witness to believers that there is hope. Pain and suffering are endowed with a silver lining because of Christ's resurrection.

At the same time His resurrection is also a witness against all unbelievers. There is no other way to escape the wrath of God than through Christ. Dear friend, if you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ, He says this to you, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25)

The Fruit-Bearing Life (April 8, 2018)

Many years ago, when we moved into our first house, one of my immediate projects was to plant fruit trees. I was a novice, but I went at it with gusto. Soon I had apple trees, plum trees, and peach trees. I anticipated beautiful, delicious fruit. It did not happen. It dawned on me that more time had to be put into pruning, fertilizing, spraying, thinning the fruit, and adequate water. Cultivating fruit is not easy.

The Bible uses fruit as a description of the kind of good works that should characterize a Christian. The words “fruit,” “fruitless,” and “fruitful” occur over seventy times in the New Testament. Let’s visit the theological fruit section of the Bible.

Non-Christians cannot bear good fruit. Good works are of no avail to the unbeliever for they are not “good” in God’s sight. They actually become the basis of the eternal sentences in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:12). Good works have never saved anyone, never can, and never will (Eph. 2:8, 9). False teachers can be known by their fruit, namely, false doctrine (Matt. 7:16-20).

Faith in Jesus Christ will result in fruit-bearing (Matt. 3:8; Eph. 2:1; Gal. 5:22-23). “Every Christian will bear spiritual fruit. Somewhere, sometime, somehow” (Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 45). At the new birth the Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believer. Regeneration creates new desires and sets the Christian out on a trajectory of walking in the Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is able to produce incredible change in motives, thoughts, works, and deeds. It’s a beautiful thing to see a new creature in Christ going on to maturity.

Fruit-bearing contributes to the Christian’s assurance of salvation, but is not the foundation of assurance (Rom 5:6). That comes from the promises of Christ (Jn. 5:24). It’s a tricky thing to trust in one’s good works. There can never be enough good works to “prove” one is saved. John Calvin, the Reformer, said, “If men begin to judge whether they are regenerate by good works nothing will ever be more uncertain or more evil” (quoted in R.T. Kendall, “The Ground of Assurance,” 29). God does not need my help in order to save me. The promises of Christ that He paid the full penalty for my sin are more than enough.

The lack of fruit-bearing in one’s life may be indicative of a misplaced trust. It is possible that faith has been placed in something or someone other than Jesus Christ. Self-deception is the worst of lies. My dear friend, are you counting on your church membership, baptism, a prayer someone gave you to repeat, or a sacrifice you have made to be a better person? This may be the time and place for you to stop reading and talk to God. Are you persuaded that Jesus did all that was necessary for you to spend eternity with God? He died for your sins and was raised from the dead so that you may have eternal life. Christ took the punishment that you and I deserve. You can be forgiven because of who Jesus is and what He has done for you. It is a GIFT. Receive Him now.

Christians may not always be fruitful (Titus 3:14). This is not the way it's supposed to be, but it happens. The fact that Christians are told to be fruitful implies they may not be (Jn. 15:16). Seasons of unfruitfulness can occur (2 Pet. 1:8). Paul wrote to the Galatian believers and admonished them to turn from their reversion into pre-conversion behavior, as he did the Corinthians (Gal. 5:1-12; 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:1-3). Fruit-bearing is hindered by retreat into legalism and carnal living. A fruitless believer may be disciplined by God with death (1 Cor. 11:30; Jn. 15:6). There will also be a loss of rewards (1 Cor. 3:15; 2 Jn. 8). But a caution is needed here. Fruitlessness is not necessarily a sign that one is unsaved. We must not be too hasty in passing judgment on those we think are not bearing fruit. Another Christian's fruit, as our own, may not always be outwardly evident. Joy, peace, and self-control, for example, may be developing in someone and we miss it because they are not measuring up to what is on our list of expectations.

God uses discipline in order to enable the Christian to bear fruit. This was taught by Jesus the night before His crucifixion in the metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn. 15:1-17). A believer's failure to abide (obeying Christ) can lead to divine discipline. God may bring loss into life (health, job, financial) to do a pruning work (Heb. 12:11). But it is always by his loving hand. He wants those who are connected to Him ("in Me") to bear more fruit.

Fruitful living can be experienced in abundant ways. Giving to God's work (Phil. 4:17), offering praise to Him (Heb. 13:15), living by wisdom (Jas. 3:17,18), being a faithful witness (Rom. 1:13), and growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithful, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22, 23) is the best life. God wants His children to flourish and produce fruit. However, the condition of the soil of the heart determines the potential for growth of the seed of the Word (Mk. 4:1-20). Failing faith and disobedience, even after having received the Word with joy, can create a crop failure (Lk. 8:13). Fruitful growth in the faith will abound when the God-pleasing traits of 2 Peter 1:5-7 are cultivated.

It was forty-two years ago that I planted those fruit trees. I wonder if they are producing fruit. I do not know. But I know this. When I walk into a supermarket, I am instantly pulled toward the fruit section. Apples, plump peaches, clusters of grapes, plums, lemons, limes, watermelon, pineapples, strawberries, blueberries, and bananas draw me in. The variety of colors, textures, and different kinds of sweetness never cease to amaze me. I am made to remember a sublime truth. The fruit-bearing life draws people to Christ.

Wise Words for a Confused World - Proverbs 16, Part 1 (April 15, 2018)

God has made the world and has determined the best way for humans to live in it. One of the means chosen by God to communicate His instructions is through proverbs. We have an entire book devoted to truth "sound bites." The book of Proverbs is all about wisdom, where to find it and what it looks like in daily living. In short, biblical wisdom is living life God's way. Let's set our GPS according to directions from Proverbs 16.

Wisdom tells us that we do not determine the outcome of our plans, God does (Proverbs 16:1, 9 "The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord." "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."). Perhaps you have heard the saying, "Man proposes. God disposes." Tomorrow you are leaving on a vacation. The family has been

looking forward to the beach for months. You receive a phone call from your mother. Your dad has been rushed to the hospital. It appears to be a heart attack. We make our plans, but all circumstances are absolutely controlled and fixed by God. Divine wisdom says we are to trust God as we write out our to-do list for the day. Don't fret over a turn of events, pout, complain, or get angry. God is bigger than the attempt to encourage a despondent friend who did not welcome your words.

Wisdom tells us that God has declared war on human pride (Proverbs 16:5 “Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished.”). If you want to be in conflict with the Lord, then refuse to respect authority and choose man's way over God's way. Human pride takes a heavy beating in Proverbs. God hates it (8:13). It is self-destructive (11:2; 15:25). The classmate who is always disturbing the peace in third period history probably has a rough road in front of her. Those who insist on always being the center of attention will not be the most likely to succeed in God's school.

Wisdom tells us that it is more important to be a God-pleaser than a people-pleaser (Proverbs 16:7 “When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”). A worthwhile aspiration is to make this a better world by the time you leave it. That's not all there is to life, but it counts for something. Resolve to be a light in a dark world. As a general rule this will “disarm social hostility.” Truthfulness, honesty, loyalty, self-discipline, love, joy and peace will be appreciated even in a fallen world. However, this does not rule out the possibility of persecution and rejection when you do the right thing (2 Tim. 3:12). Daniel excelled in his job description in a pagan environment but still spent a night with hungry lions. To some degree we are all inclined to be people-pleasers. I am not talking about the legitimate desire to be kind to others. In order to receive the praise and acceptance of others, there are those who are willing to do what is morally destructive (lying, failure to honor one's parents, and greed). Do you have a price? When people become bigger than God, we have made a disastrous swap.

Wisdom tells us that a stable government derives its strength from the moral rectitude of its leaders and citizens (Proverbs 16:12-15, “It is an abomination to kings to do evil; for the throne is established by righteousness... In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.”). These four proverbs focus our attention on the stuff of good government. We have to keep in mind that Proverbs was written within the historical context of Israel's monarchy. We live in a constitutional republic, not a theocracy. However, in any form of government justice, moral and ethical integrity, mercy, and freedom are good for everyone. We tend to get the kind of government we deserve in a democracy. Too many of our elected officials betray the trust invested in them. But what is it about voters who have a knack for electing those who place self-interest above the Constitution, who think bigger government is the solution to our problems, and do not believe that government is to safeguard human liberty? We are divided over two irreconcilable visions for America. To the degree that the church ceases to be a purifying and conscience-informing citizenry, we will experience a continuing crumbling of our foundations.

Wisdom is skillful living made possible by the redemptive work of Christ in our lives. Knowing Christ and taking the Word of God seriously will enable us to navigate through a confused world for the glory of God.

Wise Words for a Confused World – Proverbs 16, Part 2 (April 22, 2018)

Imagine living in a world where all human beings are morally and spiritually as bad off as they can be, where no one by nature seeks God, where all people are self-centered, where God is blasphemed incessantly, where any idol is considered better than the Creator God, where wars are the norm, not the exception, where conflict and quarrels break out with the frequency of breathing, and where the fear of evil-doers exceeds the fear of God. You don't have to imagine it. This is the way it is in our world every day. How does one live on a planet such as this? Let's narrow it down. The nation of Israel was created by God to be His witness in a neighborhood that was idol worshipping, demon-infested, and God-hating. For this reason, the youth of Israel were given Proverbs in order to set their moral compass for God-pleasing living. Let's revisit Proverbs 16.

Wisdom tells us that sometimes less is better than more (Proverbs 16:8 “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.”). Our culture worships material prosperity. It is viewed as a sign of success. This thinking has its roots in the “European Enlightenment” of the late 1700's. Steven Picker, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, has written in the Wall Street Journal (February 10-11, 2018) that, “Don't listen to the gloom-sayers. The world has improved by every measure of human flourishing over the past two centuries, and the progress continues.” According to Pinker in the Enlightenment people reasoned for the first time and came to the truth about religion and politics. Material prosperity in the minds of many is the measure of genuine progress. God's wisdom says that material prosperity must never be at the expense of truth and honesty. The Bible has helped to keep our nation between the lines of freedom and responsibility. As Christians we should not be willing to dishonor God and damage a truth-informed conscience for the sake of gain (power, position, recognition, sex, money, any desire). Wisdom sounds the alarm on three dangers that can accompany prosperity: gain without God (Prov. 15:16), gain without love (Prov. 15:17), and gain without righteousness (Prov. 16:8). Do you have a price? What are you and I willing to pay to acquire something God does not want us to have? The acquisition of material wealth by unethical means is a betrayal of moral sanity. The question remains, are you trying to achieve material success at the expense of family, people, honesty, or moral courage?

Wisdom tells us that old age can be the best of times (Proverbs 16:31 “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”). Israel was elected by God to be a light to the world. In doing so He created what we know as the Mosaic Covenant. This covenant provided a protective moral wall between God's people and the pagan nations. This proverb states the ideal under the Old Covenant in its connection of righteousness and a long life. Compliance with the standards of the law yielded a much better life expectancy. Therefore, the hair of old age was like a bright diadem when worn by one who has lived for God (“She –wisdom – will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown,” Prov. 4:9). This does not guarantee an exact parallel to today. Gray hair is not necessarily synonymous with having lived a holy life. However, old age can have its rewards when accompanied with the memory of a long walk with the Lord (“The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair.” Prov. 20:29). Will your graying hair (or what might have been if your hair had stayed home) be a reminder of a life lived in faithfulness to God, or will it be a testimony to wasted years and too many regrets? Old age can be a time of great effectiveness for the Lord if in the aging process you are occupied with Christ.

Wisdom tells us that the one who can conquer himself is the real hero (Proverbs 16:32 “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”). This is one of nineteen “better... than” proverbs. Valor on the battlefield is admirable. The medic in the movie “Hacksaw Ridge” received the Medal of Honor without ever having to fire a shot. But victory over self is the hardest of all victories (1 Cor. 9:27). A basketball player remains calm when called for a foul with three seconds to go in the game. He may be the hero of the game in God’s sight. A mother responds with patience and kindness when all three children simultaneously demand attention. God delights in her strength. The book of Proverbs says much about the importance of controlling one’s emotions. It is a mark of spiritual discernment (14:29), the way to avoid strife (15:18), and makes it possible to overcome great obstacles (25:15). May God count us worthy of being placed in His hall of fame.

Wise is the person who loves God more than money, who endures patiently through the trials of life, and who wins the battle over self-rule.

Jesus’s Mother Ancestry.com (May 13, 2018)

The story of the Bible is not about mothers. It is about the Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom. However, it took mothers to bring Israel’s Messiah into this world. The role of mothers in the story of redemption is a spectacular account of the grace of God.

Eve is the mother of us all. What Eve knew and when she knew it has always intrigued me. Being created instantaneously and with the appearance of age, Eve had immediate cognitive abilities. Self-awareness, conscience (informed later by God’s revelation), emotions, a sense of meaning, God-awareness, and memory were all suddenly there in a perfect body. She was biologically prepared to have babies and given all the hormonal requirements for sexual attraction to Adam. Sadly, disobedience to God changed everything. The curse of sin and death turned Eve into a dying woman. The reality of the dawn of evil in the human race must have stunned Eve when “the mother of all the living” was told that she would suffer pain in childbearing as all women. But it would be the “seed of the woman,” a future descendant of Eve, who would have no human father. Jesus Christ would inflict a mortal wound on the Serpent, crushing his head. Theologians have referred to this promise as the “Protoevangelium,” the first announcement of the gospel. And thus, it was. Proclaim it among the nations, “as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:21). What Eve lost in her willful rebellion against God was exceeded by the gain of the gift of a Savior for the world.

The pages turn and we encounter another woman in the drama of redemption. The seed of the woman promised to Eve is to come through the son of Abraham and Sarah. We meet another mother in the genealogy of the Messiah. She knew that God promised an heir to her husband (Gen. 15:4), but she panicked. Her unbelief ruled out the possibility of giving birth to a child by Abraham. Their faith wavered. They did have a son, Ishmael, but Sarah was not the mother. The seed of the woman was to be Isaac, born to Sarah after her reproductive years had ended. The writer of Hebrews informs us that it was “by faith that Sarah received power to conceive” (Heb. 11:11). On the surface of it this seems at odds with her laughter when told she would have a baby in her nineties. Actually, Abram and Sarah both laughed skeptically about the possibility of a child of their own (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). This whole episode offers a helpful window into faith’s

struggle with circumstances. Faith can break through in spite of personal failings and doubts. Mothers can draw encouragement from Sarah. Our immediate reaction to a problem, though met with doubt and discouragement, can be overcome and in the end receive placement in God's Hall of Faith. By the way, Isaac's name means "smiley" (literally "laughter"), a life-long reminder that God gets the last laugh.

Over nine-hundred years later another mother steps onto the stage of redemptive history. Oh, the wonders of how God guided the seed of the woman. The invisible hand of Israel's covenant-keeping Lord set up a romantic match between a Moabite maiden and an Israelite landowner. It happened one spring during the barley harvest. Ruth had left her home in Moab to live with her mother-in-law Naomi in Bethlehem (hmm, who would be born there a thousand years later?). It was April love and... a marriage came about. Maiden Ruth became the mother of Obed, the grandfather of King David. The book of Ruth reveals the beautiful touch of God in working through the loyalty and devotion of a heart changed by God's Spirit. Ruth walked away from the gods of her people and made a confession of faith, joining herself with God's covenant people. In so doing she found her place in God's Hall of Faith. Through Eve, Sarah, and Ruth, the seed of the woman promised by God would come.

It is not every day that a teenage girl receives a greeting from an angel. This greeting was the most important message any future mother has ever received. Mary was a virgin, and she was about to become pregnant, but not by her fiancée, or any man. The Holy Spirit would perform a miracle in Mary's uterus. For nine months Mary carried Jesus in her womb. All the genetic information necessary was there, Mary's DNA and God in human form within her. Did she have morning sickness? Did she have to sleep in a certain position? Did Joseph put his hand on her stomach to feel the baby kicking? Imagine that donkey ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was an eighty-mile trip. At an average pace of 2.5 mph, 20 miles a day, indicates a trip of four 8-hour days. Mary was a strong and determined woman. But what is really stupendous is this young Jewish mother's grasp of the Old Testament. Her song of praise for what was happening in her womb is drenched with the truths of God's greatness, her need for a Savior, the holiness of God, His mighty performances in Israel's history, and God's grace and mercy to her.

Mothers, this is a call to unleash your minds on the Scriptures and think through all of life's circumstances from the high ground of the Bible's story of redemption. Are you hope-filled, as Eve, in the midst of sorrows? Are you overcoming the tug of unbelief, as Sarah, by joyful confidence in God? Are you finding delight in God's grace, as Ruth, that delivered you from the gods of this age and made you a daughter of the New Covenant? Are you, like Mary, experiencing submission to the Savior who humbled Himself to die for our sins?

A Bloody Beach (May 27, 2018)

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

The beach has been one of our favorite vacation destinations through the years. I experience a unique moment when standing at the edge of the surf, watching the water recede around my feet, and hearing the succession of waves roll on to the shoreline. My imagination becomes filled with young Marines coming off landing craft under the withering fire of an enemy intent on killing as many of them as possible. The water becomes red with blood. In an instant a nineteen-year-old is

shot through the head. Others are able to move closer inland. Bodies are everywhere. They will never get married, have a family, have cook-outs with friends, enjoy vacations, watch their children's ball games, and grow old with their wives. They will have given their lives to vanquish an enemy and defend their homeland. They died on the beach so that others can live in freedom. Our nation rightfully stops what it is doing and remembers those brave men and women whose lives were cut short, so we can live in a free country.

The word "friend" calls up touching memories for all of us. Our awakening years to meaningful relationships were shared with grade-school friends. High school became the occasion for friendships that took us on special adventures and emotional disappointments. It is a gift from God when we can forge a friendship that lasts for a lifetime. To live without friends is one of the greatest losses in life. When Jesus told His disciples they were His friends we are taken into relational depths unique to the Christian faith. To have Jesus as our friend is stunning in its significance. To become His friend is made possible by His death for us. Jesus was only hours away from offering up his life on a Roman cross. The reality of this was not on the minds of His men. He tells them to love one another. But the disciples need to know the connection between the command to love one another and death. A light shines on the meaning of love through the ultimate sacrifice of giving one's life for another. They will be given the perfect example of friendship-love when He cries out from His place of execution, "It is finished." It has been made possible through faith in Christ for man to be justified before a holy God and become the friend of Jesus.

Jesus, the friend of sinners-- what an overwhelming thought. Without His death on the cross we would have remained God's enemies forever. We twenty-first century people are horrified to think that anyone could be the enemy of God. After all, we are told, doesn't God love us all with unconditional love? How silly and wrong we are when we attempt to build our thinking, values, and hopes about life after death on foundations of sand. Come to Christ with the empty hand of faith. Receive His pardon and the treasure of eternal life. That is where a great friendship begins. But Jesus said, "You are my friends, if you do what I command you." Christ's disciples will most enjoy their partnership with Him when they are obedient. Sin does not sever our relationship to Christ, but it does hinder the intimacy of the friendship. Growing in our knowledge of Christ, learning to trust Him in all situations, and experiencing humble boldness in telling others about Him is the joyful way of an obedient life.

Memorial Day is a day to honor American service men and women who gave their lives for their country. At the same time, it should draw Christians to rejoice in the sacrifice the Lord Jesus Christ made for His enemies so that we could become His friends. It was through His shed blood that our freedom from sin was bought.

*"Nor silver or gold hath obtained my redemption,
The way into heaven could not thus be bought.
The blood of the cross is my only foundation,
The death of my Savior redemption hath wrought."
James M. Gray*

Reaping Eternal Life (June 10, 2018)

Everyone should have a vegetable garden at some time in their life. It offers a harvest of food for the table and lessons in life. My fifth-grade experience in the soil of central Florida gave me the opportunity to see what happens when seeds are put in the ground. As members of the 4-H club we were each given a small plot of ground. After working the soil and lining it off, we dug our furrows. I planted cabbage, radishes, and I can't remember what else. But it happened. Sprouts came up and a vegetable garden was born. The reward was worth the work.

Sowing and reaping is a law of nature ("While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." Gen. 8:22). The apostle Paul incorporated the law of cause and effect as found in agriculture into his appeal to the Galatian believers. Let us not waste our lives by sowing to the flesh. There is a moral component to sowing and reaping ("The wicked earns deceptive wages, but the one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward." Prov. 11:18). Don't be deceived. God has created a world where reality always conforms to His Word. Arrogant humans can sneer at God's moral law, but His laws are unalterable ("... for whatever one sows, for that he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Gal. 6:7-8).

Hundreds of believers throughout the province of Galatia (modern central Turkey) were being influenced by Jewish legalists that in addition to belief in Christ it was necessary to submit to the Law of Moses. Paul would have none of this. He takes off his gloves and warns the churches not to be fooled by these false teachers. Our interest at this time is the contrast between reaping "corruption" and reaping "eternal life." There are serious outcomes to the moral choices a Christian makes. Paul is addressing believers (v. 6 and v. 10). Though some interpret this passage (vv. 7-8) to mean that bad deeds prove that a person is going to hell, but good deeds prove eternal salvation, this cannot be the case. Christians who ignore their sinful nature will experience the loss of blessing in this life and rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. It's a sad story to consider a child of God watching his life go up in the smoke of wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Finally saved? Yes, but loss of rewards and shame (1 Jn. 2:28).

There is something much better, and that is reaping eternal life. Sowing to the Spirit brings a harvest of moral and spiritual growth and rewards that bring maximum glory to God. But is Paul saying that obedience leads to eternal life, namely, final salvation? One well known evangelical writer plainly says so; "Those who do good works will receive eternal life, but those who practice evil will face God's wrath." The flaw in this assertion is found in the failure to understand the meaning of "eternal life." It is a multi-dimensional term. Eternal life is a free gift (Jn. 3:16; Eph. 2:8, 9). It is also a present experience (Jn. 10:10; Eph. 1:3, 18), "the highest quality of living one can experience." This is why Paul told Timothy to "lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12). God wants His children to flourish and be productive. Think of a garden in rich soil, with the ample nourishment of sun and rain yielding an abundant harvest. The Christ-centered life is one of sowing right thoughts, kind, truthful, and helpful words. It delights in doing sacrificial deeds for those in need. Eternal life will be the incomparable reward to those who have rendered faithful service to Christ. This does not mean that we earn our salvation by our works. Investment in eternal life (sowing and reaping) will result in the grace-generated positions of high honor in the kingdom to come (Mk. 10:29-30; Lk. 18:29-30; 19:17). What then

is eternal life? It is life given by God's grace, life lived more abundantly (Jn. 10:10), and life lived enjoying God forevermore (2 Cor. 4:17).

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Sow the seeds of generous giving to the church that feeds you spiritually (support those who are teaching the truth, Gal. 6:6). Defeat discouragement by “doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). God's children must not be quitters. How is your garden growing?

The Call of the Master to Men of Faith (June 17, 2018)

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Matthew 16:24-27

I grew up under the tutelage of a generation of men who had lived through hard times. My father was born in 1919, lived through the Great Depression of the 1930's and fought the Japanese in World War II. All of this was by the time he was 25 years old. He had wanted to be a missionary at one time but spent his life working for Delta Airlines in the hydraulics department. He taught me what it meant to provide for family and the importance of fulfilling responsibilities. My uncle worked hard on farms in rural Georgia, joined the Navy in World War II, battled Japanese submarines, came home and worked hard the rest of his life. He had a great sense of humor, stayed happy, went to church regularly, and was faithful to his wife for 65 years. My coaches, teachers, neighbors, pastor, and employers had their share of flaws but there were many good men among them. Mr. Jennings down the street was a brick layer and played semi-professional baseball on the side. He sang in the choir at church and introduced me to baseball equipment I had never seen before: a catcher's mitt and mask, shin guards, and a chest protector. Wow! I felt like a warrior! Mr. Jennings played pitch with me. On to the big leagues!

But the greatest man I have ever known, I never met. He lived in Palestine, grew up alongside his father working in the construction business. At the age of thirty he went into full time “Christian-work.” He never married, gathered some men to follow him, and preached continually. Crowds followed him everywhere. He miraculously fed thousands, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He loved people, was courageous, treated women with dignity and purity, knew the Scriptures perfectly and lived a perfect life. He committed not one sin either, in thought, word, or deed. For all this he was executed by corrupt politicians and self-righteous, hypocritical religious leaders. But the grand finale was His resurrection. He actually came back to life after being dead for three days. Sixty-two years ago, I became overwhelmed with who he was and what he had done. I was knocked off my prideful high horse. He had died for me. He took the punishment I deserved so I could be forgiven and have eternal life. Though I did not know it at the time, it was the Holy Spirit of God who brought great conviction to my heart. I was guilty of unbelief. But Christ pardoned me and made me a new creature.

The call that Jesus gave to his disciples is a challenge to all Christian men. Men let's consider it. First of all, the call to follow the Lord Jesus Christ is for all believers. Jesus was not telling the crowds or his disciples how to be saved. For that message read John 3:14-21. The gospel call is to faith in Christ. The call to discipleship is a call to obedience and submission to the demands of Christ. Sadly, there are some Bible teachers and preachers who get the cart before the horse. Unsaved people can't make Jesus the Lord of their lives. God does not declare one righteous (justification) by moral change. Warning! Don't confuse justification with sanctification (living the Christian life). "Our determination of the will to obey truth, our repentance, our surrender, and our commitment – none of this has anything whatsoever to do with our justification" (Michael Horton, Christ the Lord, p. 43).

As my friend Tony Evans likes to say, "A kingdom man (one who lives out the demands of Jesus) is the kind of man that when his feet hit the floor each morning the devil says, 'Oh crap, he's up!'" Men who follow Jesus must be of the same mind as He was toward death and life. Israel's Messiah was to suffer many things and be rejected by Israel. The call to follow Jesus Christ is a call to death ("deny himself"). The denial of oneself and taking up one's cross is making choices that are in the best interest of becoming wise in the ways of God. Self-centeredness must be given a bloody nose every day of our lives. This means refusing to believe that my desires are more important than what God desires for me. Taking up one's cross is saying a loud "yes" to God's will. It is the sober intoxication of delight in doing what pleases God. It is a daily death march. By God's grace the man who is following Jesus refuses to let video games eat up his time and keep him from his family. He rises before daylight to read his Bible and pray. He makes ESPN take a back seat to doing some wife-pleasing things like cleaning out the closets and getting rid of hoarded junk in the garage. Cross-bearing men leave a trail of blood behind them as they serve others. They communicate humbly with their wives before making life-altering decisions. Cross-bearing fathers harness their masculinity to protect their family from the foolish values taught in movies, school, and on television. Cross-bearing dads determine ways to rear masculine boys and feminine girls.

One day all men of faith will stand before the Son of Man when he comes "with His angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." With this prophecy Jesus gives reassurance to cross-bearers that the promise of his triumphal coming is the bugle call to future glory.

Don't Quit (June 29, 2018)

I recently received some helpful tips from a retired Army ranger with parachuting experience. I wanted to pass it along to my grandson, Connor, who is in jump school at Fort Benning. His advice was "Don't anticipate the ground, feet and knees together and *don't quit*." This wisdom was gladly received. When you are jumping out of an airplane at 1200 feet you want to be prepared.

In a different kind of word picture the writer of Hebrews tells his readers, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). Believers in Galatia in Asia Minor were told to "not lose heart in doing good" (Gal. 6:9). These kinds of challenges are repeated throughout epistles of the New Testament. The contexts of the aforementioned Scriptures provide important clues about the importance of "not quitting." "The book of Hebrews," to quote Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, "was written to the Hebrews to teach the Hebrews that they should

no longer be only Hebrews.” Hebrew Christians (they were true Christians, Heb. 6:1-3) must not go back to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Doubting the full sufficiency of Christ is a heart-hardening path of disobedience. The spiritual ancestors of the Hebrew believers had endured great affliction and yet remained strong in their faith. With so great a cloud of witnesses, “don’t quit.” The Christian life is like a racecourse. Finishing well is the goal of redeemed runners. Daily endurance in faithfulness to Christ leads to the sweet welcome of the Savior (2 Tim. 2:5; Gal. 2:2; 5:7). Rewards and ruling and reigning with Christ are at the finish line. Don’t be a weak finisher. Run strong and endure. How can we avoid growing weary in the discipleship race? Run it as a marathon, not a sprint (26 miles and 385 yards compared to 100 meters). Rid yourself of obstacles to finishing well. Bad habits, unhelpful friendships, and pleasure-seeking can be like twenty-five-pound weights on the feet of a runner. Sins that have been made close friends (pride, jealousy, anger, hatred) are like stepping into uncovered strong drains. Above all, remain focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. He has set the pace. Keep Him in your sights. How did He live?

Legalists, in the name of obedient Christian living, were adding demands to the gospel. In so doing they had created another gospel, one that was man-made and spiritually suffocating. The Galatian believers were to give their full attention to sowing truth-rich thinking, grace-seasoned communication, and love-driven service to others. God’s children must not be quitters. The Scriptures admonish us to not quit because our prayers are not answered (Lk. 18:1), because of suffering (Eph. 3:13), because others quit (2 Thess. 3:13), or because we don’t see immediate results (Gal. 6:9). There is an old saying, “winners never quit, and quitters never win.” The biblical truth bound up in this is that winning is sowing to the Spirit in joyful service for Christ. Losing means earthly chastisement, loss of temporal blessings, and forfeiture of rewards.

It might help to pause and consider why some believers quit by falling back into the old life, becoming useless and fruitless (2 Pet. 1:8). Neither wrong motives nor self-glorification can provide the spiritual energy needed. Depending on others rather than the Lord contributes to disillusionment (if they quit, I quit). The wrong kind of seed is sown by unwise expectations and misplaced values. Some well-intentioned believers can overload emotional and physical circuits by trying to do too much and not being good stewards of their bodies. We can add the lack of spiritual discipline. The lack of biblical nourishment and little time for prayer can significantly cut into the rich spiritual harvest available to believers (Matt. 4:4).

I have a friend who is retired army. He recently sent me a picture of an old military-days tee-shirt. It reads in bold black letters on the front, “NEVER QUIT.” We are not all called to jump out of airplanes, but never forget, “for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.”

The Pleasure of Running (July 8, 2018)

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Hebrews 12:1

You may have already stumbled over the above title. But stay with me. This past Wednesday 120,000 feet ran (actually many walked but we count that) from Lenox Square to Piedmont Park. Peachtree Street was for pedestrians only. The prize was a tee-shirt and the satisfaction of having traversed 6.2 miles battling heat, humidity, and hills. Our own Bill Thorn finished his 49th

Peachtree Road Race, the only person who has run every one of them. That's quite an accomplishment for a man who will soon celebrate his 88th birthday.

The first time we encounter the word "ran" in the Bible is Genesis 18:2. Abraham was sitting at his tent door when he saw three men approaching in the shimmering heat of the day. The text says, "he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth. One of the men was "the angel of the Lord." One of his three guests was the Lord Himself. Imagine the scene. Though Abraham probably did not know right away that it was the God of the universe who was about to have a meal with him, his haste to meet the Lord is poignant. Running to God to worship Him is the best run of all. As I write this there flashed before my mind's eye a picture of God running to the prodigal son (Lk. 15:20). In the parable of the Prodigal Son the father sees his wayward son in the distance. He is coming home. We are told that "his father saw him, felt compassion, ran, embraced him and kissed him." The moment is exquisite; God welcoming the prodigal, to accept the sinner who turns to Him. God's grace runs in readiness to forgive those who come acknowledging their need for Him.

Peter and John ran a foot race to see the empty tomb. Actually, it's almost like a three-runner relay. Mary Magdalene found the tomb of Jesus empty and immediately "she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple" (Jn. 20:2). Peter and John took the "baton," as it were, "both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first." Peter catches up to the younger, swifter John and barges into the empty tomb. We love the way John relives the story. The miracle that changed human history was worth a hard run. Belief that Jesus was raised from the dead was the prize.

Speaking of prizes for running, the psalmist said, "I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart" (Psa. 119:32). David knew something about running. He spent his younger years either running to a battle or from one. Saul was always hot on his trail. Running fitly describes the urgency of pursuing godliness. To those who are fleet of foot comes freedom to live life God's way. Does enthusiasm describe the way we want to know God's Word? What are those things we let slow us down? We are exhorted to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). Running means concerted effort.

The Christian life is not a stroll in the park. It requires self-discipline, the willingness to endure discomfort, and awareness of the rewards for having run well. The apostle Paul knew what it took to be a champion in the Isthmian games in Corinth. He did not hesitate to draw a comparison between the Christian life and athletic competition (1 Cor. 9:24). The victor's crown, no mere tee-shirt, awaits the believer who endures to the end by fighting through difficulties, rejoicing in suffering, being obedient no matter the cost, and fixing one's eyes on Jesus. The tension felt over the possibility of being "disqualified" (v. 27) is not the fear of losing one's salvation, nor is it that Christians have to continue to believe until the end to "obtain eschatological salvation." To the contrary, genuine believers are kept by the power of God but may forfeit the prize of rewards.

Runners can mess up. If the race is on a track the runner can get out of his lane and be disqualified. In a distance run inadequate training can result in disappointing times. Paul said to the Galatian Christians, "you were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (Gal. 5:7). The Christian life begins the grace-faith way, but someone, some teaching, can knock

us into the lane of legalism (the thinking that doing things for God gains His acceptance). “Believing and behaving” the truth of the gospel is to run well. Like Paul the believer should want it said of him or her, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Not everyone is cut out to be a runner. There is no shame in that. But everyone who has placed his faith in Jesus Christ alone is a runner. The question is, what kind of runner am I? Am I taking the race seriously enough? Am I disciplining myself for the sake of Christ and the gospel? Are there habits I am holding onto that are keeping me from running my best? As many runners know there is a unique satisfaction from having trained properly and experiencing the pleasure of running-released endorphins. To all my fellow runners in the faith, let us enjoy the pleasure of running.

“What’s Up with the Jews?” (July 15, 2018)

These words came out of the mouth of one of my grandchildren. Now mind you, there was very little knowledge about the historical significance of the Jews and their place in world affairs. It was the innocent reaction of a young person to the discovery of a people group who may enjoy God’s favor over other ethnicities. Indeed, they do.

I have also called you by your name, Israel my chosen one...When Israel was a youth, I loved him... I led you with bonds of love... It is I who taught you to walk... I bent down and fed you... You saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as a man carries his son... Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

What is “up with the Jews?” The Jewish people are an apologetic, a proof if you will, for belief in the Bible. How does one explain their survival as a distinct people? What are their origins? One writer has astutely observed, “Considering that the Jewish people constitute a mere one-half of one percent of the world’s population, Jewish contributions to religion, science, literature, music, medicine, finance, philosophy, entertainment, etc., is staggering.” Also consider the stunning reality of pervasive anti-Semitism and attempts throughout history to destroy them. There is only one reliable source to explain all this and that is the Bible.

God called the Jewish people into existence over three thousand years ago in His call of Abraham (“Abraham the Hebrew,” Gen. 14:13). It was through Abraham’s son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob, that the Jews became an identifiable people. Jacob, who was called Israel, had twelve sons (Gen. 35:23-26). It was these twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel (“the Children of Israel”). Their story flows through the Old Testament with the inheritance of the “Promised Land” as a major development. The Abrahamic covenant is the key to understanding these historical facts. God made promises to Abraham on several occasions (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 22:15-18). Three areas of promise emerge when we consider these together. (1) *Abraham’s future generations will grow to the size of a nation and be God’s special people.* (2) *The country to which God had brought Abraham would be this nation’s homeland.* (3) *Abraham’s descendants would be a blessing to the world, to the extent that all nations would be blessed.* (*A Survey of Israel’s History*, Leon Wood, 57).

As these truths guide our thinking, a massive drama unfolds in the Bible. The hand of God moves human history toward the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, a Jew, and His rule over the millennial kingdom. Paradise lost will become Paradise regained, and more. Many believe that God's prophetic program includes His plan for the church, His plan for the Gentile nations, and His plan for the nation of Israel (Deut.32:8, 9). We believe there is a future for ethnic Israel. Others believe that neither ethnic Israel nor national Israel has a future. Jews will be saved here and there in the present age, but ethnic Israel as a whole will not turn to the Lord. In other words, they propose that God is finished with the Jew. According to this interpretation of Scripture, the land promises are fulfilled in this present age in the spiritual blessings given to the church. The church has become the new Israel. There is no future kingdom on earth (the millennial kingdom) because the kingdom of God is present in the church age. Christ will return at the consummation of the present age, and the eternal state will be inaugurated. This is the view of Reformed eschatology, defined as amillennialism (no millennium).

Exactly how does amillennialism view the future of ethnic Israel and what impact does this have on Israel's promise of the land (Ezek. 37:21-28)? If the church has inherited the promises to Israel, this has far reaching implications for Israel's future. (1) Because amillennialism confuses Israel and the church replacement theology governs Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel. For example, God promised to Israel that there would be specific land areas they would possess in the kingdom. The Negev, the coastal plain, territory across the Jordan River, and land as far north as Tyre and Sidon (Obadiah 19-20) are turned into "an image for the new and greater Promise Land, the new creation" (ESV Study Bible). In other words, Israel fails to get what God promised. Instead, the church receives a spiritualized version of it. (2) It denies that the present state of Israel has any place in God's future prophetic plan. (3) The result of the forgoing interpretations is, in the words of Barry Horner, "the harsh reality of theological anti-Judaism... the present State of Israel is not of God; rather it is spiritually illegitimate if not fraudulent" (*Future Israel*, 81). It is troubling that many of our spiritual siblings hold to Reformational eschatology. It is not necessary to the rediscovery of the gospel in the Reformation (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*). As we will see, God has not rejected the Jews, nor has He taken away His promises from them (Rom. 9:4; 11:1). There is a future for ethnic Israel. That is what is up for the Jews.

To be continued

What's Up with the Jews - Part 2 (July 20, 2018)

The question that is foremost at this point is, do the Jews possess distinctive covenantal identity in the sight of God? Should Christians be cheering for Israel? In "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel" those committed to Reformed eschatology register their disapproval of evangelicalism's support of Israel;

Recently a number of leaders in the Protestant community of the United States have urged the endorsement of far-reaching and unilateral political commitments to the people and land of Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, citing Holy Scripture as the basis for those commitments.

This “Open Letter” was published in 2002 on the web site of Knox Theological Seminary. In a concluding paragraph there is an assertion that is sufficient for our purpose which says, in part, “. . . because they (unbelieving Israel) were broken off in unbelief, the Gospel has gone to the Gentiles, who now, through faith, partake of the blessings of the fathers and join with believing Jews to constitute the true Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ (Rom. 11:11-18).” What are the implications of such a viewpoint? (1) No covenantal Judaism exists today. (2) The curses for unbelief permanently remain on the Jew. (3) The church is the heir to the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament. Interestingly, Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul was caused to stop in his theological tracks as he pondered Romans 11:26, “And in this way all Israel will be saved.” The television account of The Six Day War of 1967 and Israel’s conquest of the Old City of Jerusalem on June 7, 1967 gave him pause. He telephoned a friend and professor of Old Testament theology “who does not believe that modern Israel has any significance whatsoever.” The professor replied, “I am going to have to rethink this situation.” (R.C. Sproul, The Gospel of God: Romans, 191-92n. as cited in Future Israel, Barry Horner, 133-134). Biblical rethinking was certainly in order.

Reformed eschatology, namely amillennialism, is due for some further evaluation. The term means “no millennium.” They assert that there will not be a thousand-year period of time upon the earth in which the saints reign with our Lord. The “millennium” is this present age, the church age. The hermeneutical basis for this view is traced to Augustine, three centuries after the apostles. Amillennialists do not deny the literal return of Christ, but they see it as one event with no distinction between the rapture of the church and the Second Coming. The church is viewed as the new Israel with no distinction between Israel and the church.

Amillennialism has weaknesses that should be noted. (1) Amillennialism rests upon a seriously flawed interpretive system. It abandons a literal hermeneutic of the historical, grammatical, and contextual approach and relies on spiritualization (allegorization). For example, “the tabernacle of David” in Amos 9:11-12 (Acts 15) is interpreted to mean the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They turn the language of geography into “theological geography” (Zech. 14:10, Reformed Study Bible). (2) Amillennialism relies on theological presuppositions rather than a careful explanation of a specific passage to affirm their view. (3) It eliminates the place of ethnic Israel in God’s redemptive-kingdom plan. (4) It is contradicted by the sequence of Second Coming events in Revelation 19 and 20. (5) Nowhere does the New Testament teach that the kingdom of God came into existence at Christ’s first coming (The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy, 20). (6) Amillennialism is erroneous in its teaching that the spiritual nature of the kingdom precludes political and earthly realities (Rom. 14:17). Augustine’s fingerprints are all over such thinking. Greek philosophy believed in the inherent evil of the material. Some believe this influenced Augustine’s post-conversion thinking. Augustine changed his belief from premillennialism to amillennialism.

Is God finished with the Jew? Paul explains this in Romans 9-11. In no uncertain terms, the answer is no. Jewish unbelief did not knock ethnic Israel out of the Abrahamic covenant. God will keep His promises. The character of God is at stake. The line of thought moves in this way. God has not failed (the failure of unbelief is because of the failure to believe, 9:6-13). God is just because all His acts are for His glory (9:14). God has yet unfulfilled promises for the Jewish people. The rejection of the Jew was neither total (a godly remnant remains) nor final. There will be an Israelite recovery in the future which will itself lead to blessing for the whole world. The future salvation of Israel is the grand hope for the Jew (11:25-27). Israel’s future restoration is

assured by her conversion. In Daniel's seventieth week of years (Dan. 9:24-27) a majority of national Israel will be converted (Zech. 12:10). Wonder of wonders, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth, ethnic Israel will look on Him whom they pierced and believe.

We must beware of thinking that the church has permanently replaced Israel. A redeemed Israel will inherit the land promised to Abraham. Let us bring forth a voice from the past; John Charles Ryle (1816-1900), a theologian and bishop in the Church of England, a man that C. H. Spurgeon considered to be at that time, "the best man in the Church of England." Ryle was known for his singular devotion to the "evangelical reformed faith." Hear the words of a biblically astute and prescient man taken from a collection of sermons published in 1879 (As cited in Future Israel, Appendix B, 339-340).

I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ, after going through the great tribulation (Jer. 30:10-11; 31:10; Rom. 11:25-26; Dan. 12:1; Zech. 13:8-9). I believe that the literal sense of the Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches, and is far too much neglected at the present day, and that under the mistaken system of spiritualizing and accommodating Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning (Lk. 24:25-26).

Soli Deo Gloria

The Big Picture (July 27, 2018)

In the 1950's when television was in its infancy two Sunday afternoon programs became some of my favorites. One was Victory at Sea, the story of Naval War in the Pacific (I often listen to the sound-track on CD). The other was the Big Picture. In half-hour weekly programs covering the action of the US Army in the Korean War the viewer could better understand how the Army functioned in a variety of combat situations.

When I was converted to Christ in 1956, I needed the big picture. As my spiritual eyes were opened, I wanted to know what the Bible was all about. I understood the gospel part, but was there more? My grandmother's Scofield Reference Bible was available to me and I became fascinated with its notes and marginal verse references. Thankfully, there was a Bible teaching church two blocks from my house. It was by the grace of God that I began to understand what God was doing in this world. I discovered an explanation of God's plan of the ages based on His sovereign rule. C.I. Scofield presented the unfolding of this truth through various dispensations. I learned that a dispensation was a period of time in which God administered His rule in a particular way and revealed a particular responsibility for man. In that dispensation (the way God "dispensed" or carried out His purposes) divine truth was revealed that had not been given before. The Scofield Reference Bible set forth seven distinct dispensations or epochs in the larger story of God's kingdom-redemptive program.

Though I did not grasp all this at the outset of my Christian walk, the big picture began to develop as I was taught by my pastor and other gifted teachers. God's kingdom program broke into the light in the early chapters of Genesis when God said to a disobedient Adam and Eve there would be two "crushings." A conflict of kingdoms and the first gospel pronouncement

were revealed in the following words, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). God’s kingdom-rule had been challenged by Satan’s counterfeit kingdom. In Christ’s death on the cross the devil would be rendered a fatal blow and the foundation for God’s redemptive program established. In his book, The Greatness of the Kingdom, p. 5, Dr. Alva J. McClain pulls together the kingdom story of the Bible. He quotes John Bright, author of the book The Kingdom of God, and goes on to add his own thoughts on the kingdom.

The Bible is one book. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it “The Book of the Coming Kingdom of God.” That indeed is its central theme everywhere. (McClain says) In approving this affirmation we are not forgetting the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. For He is the King eternal, and there could be no final Kingdom apart from Him and His work as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Surely the primary object of our faith must always be the One who is both Lord and Saviour; but as we contemplate Him and His manifold glories as revealed in the Word of God we shall inescapably come sooner or later to the Kingdom of which He is the divine center. For it is in this Kingdom that the Father’s eternal purpose in the incarnate Son shall be certainly and completely fulfilled. This reign of God arises out of His own sovereign nature, was reflected in the “dominion” bestowed by God upon the first Adam, was forfeited quickly by reason of the sin of man, has been restored judicially in the Last Adam, will be realized on earth in the final age of human history, and reaches out endlessly beyond history where we behold a throne which, as John explains, is ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (Rev. 22:3).

In seminary and fifty-three years of expository teaching through most of the books of the Bible my understanding of dispensationalism was refined and came into sharper focus. There need not be only seven dispensations. The Noahic covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Mosaic covenant, Palestinian covenant, Davidic covenant, and the New covenant all play a significant role in advancing the kingdom program of God. All these covenants are unconditional with the exception of the Mosaic Law. Dispensationalism is not without its critics. No, dispensationalism does not teach that there are multiple ways of salvation. Salvation is by grace through faith in every dispensation.

Dispensationalism is not antinomian. The church lives under the law of Christ not the Mosaic Law. There is the charge that dispensationalism is suspect because it emerged in the nineteenth-century. Since when is biblical truth based on how old it is. Covenant theology was not developed until the seventeenth-century. As Charles Ryrie has pointed out, “Doctrinal development is a perfectly normal process that has occurred in the course of church history” (Dispensationalism, p. 62).

Some closing questions are in order. Do you believe the Bible ought to be interpreted by a literal consistent hermeneutic? This means that words are to be taken in their normal or plain sense, and not spiritualized or allegorized. Do you believe that Israel and the Church are distinct? That God has a single plan with distinct plans for Israel and the Church? Do you believe that we trust in the blood of Christ rather than an animal sacrifice? Do you believe that the ultimate goal of history is for God to glorify Himself by demonstrating the fact that He alone is the sovereign God (There Really is a Difference, Renald Showers, p. 5)? If your answer is “yes” to each of these questions, you just might be a dispensationalist.

This discussion will proceed into another article. After sixty-two years of examining the Bible's story I remain persuaded that dispensationalism provides the most coherent biblical philosophy of history and the best understanding of Bible prophecy. One does not have to wear a name tag that says "Dispensationalist," but only that their Big Picture of the Bible is true to what it teaches. If I am wrong in my conclusions, I will stand corrected at my appearance before Israel's Messiah and the Lord of the Church.

Soli Deo Gloria

Things to Come (August 3, 2018)

When I think of the future and what it will mean when Christ returns for His church, I remember a story told by Richard DeHaan, a Bible teacher of some decades ago. He was speaking at a church and each night after the service he noticed an elderly gentleman who walked out from the church and stood in the shadows. Richard DeHaan asked why he did this. His answer was, "I buried my wife here after many years of life together and I want to be near when the rapture and resurrection occur." It is easy to poke holes in this man's expectations. But one thing is for sure. This dear man was being encouraged by the apostle Paul's words, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18). The context of these words is Paul's instruction to the church in Thessalonica regarding the rapture of the church. Grieving believers needed the comfort that Jesus would rapture the church and reunite those who have died with those still alive at that time.

It is not my intention to survey the various interpretations among Christians as to when this "rapture" will take place. It is not a matter of orthodoxy to differ on the time this will occur. Some think it will be before the Great Tribulation of Matthew 24 and Revelation 6-19. Others view it as after the Great Tribulation. To go further with this would take us into differences not only about timing but also the nature of the millennial kingdom itself. In looking over our shoulder at the last article on "The Big Picture" I simply stated our church's view on the sequence of future events related to the Second Coming of Christ. After the rapture of the church, the wrath of God will be poured out on the earth (Zeph. 1:15), then Christ will come in all His glory to earth to rule over His earthly millennial kingdom (Rev. 19-20). This will be followed by the formation of the new heavens and the new earth and the onset of the eternal kingdom (Rev. 21-22).

One matter of special significance is the promise of the coming kingdom. Berachah Bible Church does not believe amillennialism offers the best understanding of the historical covenants and the land promises to Israel. The reason for this is the kind of interpretation in studying Bible prophecy. The Abrahamic covenant is understood to be conditional. This means that because of Israel's disobedience its blessings were transferred to the church through Jesus Christ (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:16). The land promises of the Abrahamic covenant were withdrawn from Israel and made to apply to the church, namely, in the new earth. Instead of taking words in their normal sense, for example, the word "Israel" is made to mean the church. However, in doing this the interpreter resorts to a subjective handling of the biblical text. The New Testament is unwarrantedly read back into the Old Testament. Another factor of special concern is amillennialism's belief about the kingdom. They believe that there is no literal, earthly kingdom

to come. It exists in this present age as experienced in Christ ruling in the hearts of believers as well as over the souls of the saints in heaven.

A fly-over of the characteristics of the coming kingdom according to premillennialism honors the literal, historical, grammatical interpretation of Scripture. It is an exhilarating experience to anticipate the sweet prospects of that for which the church has prayed for two thousand years, “Thy kingdom come.” Wayne House and Randal Price have given twenty-eight features of the millennium. The following is a sample of some of these (Charts of Bible Prophecy, p. 138).

- Geographical
 - Increase in territory for Israel (Gen 15:18; Ob 1:17-21)
 - Jerusalem as the center of world’s worship (Isa 2:2-3).
 - Reversal of the Land’s desolate condition (Eze 36:33-36)
- Social
 - Universal knowledge of the Lord (Isa 11:9)
 - Universal language (Zeph 3:9)
 - Peaceful society (Zech 9:10)
- Spiritual
 - Universal worship (Isa 19:21)
 - Rebuilt temple (Eze 37:26-28)
 - Satan/demons bound, no spiritual deception (Rev 20:1-3)
- Environmental
 - Restoration of Edenic conditions (Isa 11:6-9)
 - Restoration of longevity (Isa 65:20)
 - Economic prosperity (Isa 30:23-25; Jer 3:14-15)

All this and heaven too! There will be the eventual merger of the Davidic kingdom into the eternal kingdom over which the Messiah King will rule forever (1 Cor. 15:27-28). The New Jerusalem will descend to the new earth in resplendent beauty (Rev. 21:9-27). It will be a place of eternal delight in God. God’s eternal presence will ensure an unending life for the redeemed. The earth will be one great land mass with no oceans. God’s eternal presence will ensure unending fellowship with Him. At this point it’s worth closing one’s eyes and let the words of Scripture soak into the imagination. There will be no curse on the earth or in the heavenly city. We will have perfect harmony with one another and God’s personal presence in Christ to see and enjoy. Our best day on earth with God is but one fleeting second in comparison to the millions of years with God in the new heaven and the new earth. There is only one thing left to be said about these wonderful things to come, “Amen, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

The Supremacy of Jesus Christ in a World of Deception (August 10, 2018)

*While evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse,
deceiving and being deceived.*

2 Timothy 3:13

Deception can be a useful thing if it is used in a morally acceptable way. A good magician can make you think he is actually pulling a rabbit out of a hat, or sawing a woman in two. A clever quarterback can fake a handoff and run in the opposite direction leaving the defensive backs tied in knots. A military maneuver can convince the enemy that they are facing the main attack when it is actually occurring in an unsuspected location. But deception takes a darker turn when deployed by those with evil intent. Innocent civilians are blown to pieces by terrorists who disguise their diabolical intentions as suicide bombers. The greatest and most consequential deception occurs when men and women make others believe they are speaking in the name of God and they are not. Instead they lead the gullible away from the truth of the gospel. They plunder the minds of the needy and offer a spiritually poisonous mix of doctrinal error, false promises, and emotional fixes.

Defining Deception by Costi W. Hinn and Anthony G. Wood unmask the false teachers, false doctrines, and deceptive methods of the Word of Faith movement. This “mystical-miracle” fraud perpetrated by fine-sounding words and claims of God-sent prosperity has hooked millions around the globe. Costi and Wood are particularly concerned about the Bethel Church movement out of Redding, California. Their stated goal “is to give readers the information needed to discern whether Bethel’s teaching falls within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy or harms the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Definitions, the history of the “Third Wave and New Apostolic Reformation,” and “the Benny Hinn Connection” enlighten the reader to the extent to which some Christians have been led astray. The manipulation factor is especially sobering. There are bait and switch tactics employed to deceive; the Bethel Supernatural School of Ministry, WorshipU, Bethel Conservatory of the Arts, Bethel Christian School, and Global Leadership Training. The conclusion to all of this is “manipulative methodology . . . based, ultimately, in heretical theology.”

Some of the doctrinal errors are “You and I are the same as Jesus” (a clear rejection of Jesus’ divine nature), “sick people just need more faith,” and “my experience proves my truth.” One can see how shrewdly all this plays into cultural and personal values. Emotion as the criteria for what is true and the ever popular “If ‘it’ happened to me then, ‘it’ must be from God” are barriers to clear biblical thinking. The Appendices in the book provide surveys of what it means to be rescued from deception and the myth of being slain in the Spirit. The question is presented, “can you be healed by a false teacher?” Four potential responses are given and useful in helping to scripturally diagnose healing experiences. It should be noted that one of the authors broke free from the “Hinn” theological connection.

The senior pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, is Bill Johnson. Alarming, he asserts that Jesus, in the incarnation, “laid His divinity aside” (p. 62, note 6). Why not invite the apostle Paul to say a few words about the identity of the person of Jesus Christ; “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Jesus is the Lord of all creation, the exact copy of God. Yes, He is man, but God also. He is “the firstborn of all creation,” first in time and first in rank. The very word “firstborn” distances Jesus from creation rather than placing Him under it. The evidence is clear. This marvelous description of Jesus Christ is the incarnate Christ. He did not relinquish his deity at any point in time. Paul says in Philippians 2:7 that Jesus “emptied Himself.” He did so not by subtraction but by addition. He took the form of a servant. Jesus Christ willingly subordinated Himself to become a servant. He added humanity to deity. But listen to Pastor Johnson when he says, “Jesus so emptied Himself that He was incapable of doing what was required of Him by the Father - without the Father’s help” (p. 93, note 12). The gospel

of Jesus Christ suffers from this flawed theology. Christians, beware of false teachers. They are dangerous (2 Cor. 11:13; Phil. 3:2).

Deception is a cruel tyrant. When the deceiver is parading about as a representative of Jesus Christ, nothing could be more harmful. How are we to recognize those who pretend to be what they are not? They may be sincere and even think they are doing God's work. Self-deception is the worst deception of all. Defining Deception shines the light of biblical truth on dark alleys in popular Christianity.

And one more thing. The Bethel Church has bought one hundred acres about thirteen miles from where our church campus is located. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Reaping the Whirlwind (August 17, 2018)

*For they sow the wind,
And they shall reap the whirlwind.*
Hosea 8:7

A grand jury reports that more than 300 priests over a period of 70 years covered up child sexual abuse. A prominent pastor of a large church in Chicago is caught in a major sex scandal. These stories share an underlying moment of truth. Decisions made in opposition to the moral law of God will experience the judgment of God. Bishops and other leaders in the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania are being held accountable for sexual sins against more than 1,000 identifiable victims. Evangelical church leaders acknowledged that they failed to appropriately handle allegations of sexual misconduct against their founding pastor. When we refuse to do things God's way there is a price to pay. There is a judgment day coming, one for believers and one for unbelievers. However, the judgment of God, in some measure, is experienced on this earth. God turns sinners over to the results of their chosen path of disobedience (Rom. 1:18-32). Sin carries the seeds of self-destruction.

The prophet Hosea charged Israel with a foreign policy that was a slap in the face of God. Instead of trusting in the Lord of the covenant they rebelled by placing confidence in political alliances with pagan nations. The wind of moral bankruptcy would reap the ravages of the Assyrian captivity. Israel had been given adequate warning about the consequences of breaking her covenant with God (Lev. 26:14-46). Covenant chastening was poured out in five cycles (Lev. 26:14-46). God is longsuffering and merciful but when His gracious offering of opportunity to repent is spurned, Israel would face the whirlwind of removal from the Promised Land.

The nations of the world are accountable to God for their moral behavior (Amos 1:3-2:3; Ezek. 25:1 -32:32). Look at the ash heap of history and see the smoldering ruins of once great civilizations. We are living to see our nation's own rendezvous with judgment. One way God demonstrates His wrath against sin is by making the culprits sit down to a banquet of consequences. We kill babies in the womb and wonder why there is such a low view of human life. Child abuse and sex trafficking tell us a story about our chosen destiny. The well-known saying that explains the "great law of returns" says this: "sow a thought, and reap a deed; sow a deed, and reap another deed; sow some deeds, and reap a habit; sow some habits, and reap a character; sow a character, and reap two thoughts" (Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, Cornelius

Plantinga, Jr., p.70). This is also a recipe for how a culture is formed, namely, a consensus of beliefs, social forms, and values which drive a people's collective life (Plantinga, p. 70). For example, masculinity is said to be toxic. So, some think men need to be made more feminine. Pornography is considered to be harmless entertainment. As a result, women are treated as mere objects for sexual gratification. Self-esteem development is touted as good mental health. What are the returns on this folly? The supreme importance of how one feels about oneself, a growing population who are self-absorbed. The corruption of a society is progressive, fed by the sins of men unfettered from God's moral law. This is not the occasion for dancing on the grave of societal suicide. Rather, we are to intercede for a sin-blinded and confused generation.

The words of a spiritual sage of days gone by, Vance Havner, speak truth to our day and time. "In this day of anarchy, apostasy, and apathy, we face three possibilities. The return of our Lord is a certainty and His coming again may be imminent. If He tarry, the Judgment of God may fall upon our unrepentant land. The third possibility is a spiritual awakening, a heavenly visitation in revival among God's people."

"He Does Not Bear the Sword in Vain" (August 24, 2018)

Mollie Tibbetts went out for a run. She never came home. Nor will she finish her degree program at the University of Iowa. Her aspiration to help others, marry, and have children was brutally snuffed out by her murderer. A husband and father is charged with killing his pregnant wife and two daughters and hiding their bodies in an oil field. The District Judge formally advised him of the murder charges that he could face life in prison or the death penalty if convicted. The words "life in prison" is a shock to moral sensibilities; first degree murder could result in room and board, TV, books, exercise rooms, and maybe even visits. Is this justice? Murder pollutes our land. If that were not enough, the broken moral compass of opposition to the death penalty is added.

What reasoning feeds the persuasion that capital punishment is "cruel and unusual punishment?" It is claimed that the death penalty does not restrain crime. To which we respond in the words of sociologist Ernest van den Haag, "advocates of the abolition of the death penalty think the lives of convicted murderers are more worth preserving than the lives of an indefinite number of innocent victims." The fact is that restraint isn't really the first or fundamental purpose of capital punishment. Justice is. One thing is sure. The criminal who is executed will not commit further crimes. And lest we forget, punishment for crimes is a warning to all other potential law-breakers. Pope Francis has declared the death penalty "inadmissible." We may surmise that he does not think the death penalty saves lives. We are left wondering if Pope Francis really understands the principle of justice. In the words of Joseph Bennett, professor of government and ethics at Claremont McKenna College, "If we abolish the death penalty for even the most heinous and coldblooded murderers, we fatally undermine the idea of justice as the cornerstone of our criminal-justice system" ([The Pope Makes a Fatal Error](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2018). The Bible holds that capital punishment is a deterrent (Deut. 17:12-13). Though even in Israel, the threat of the death penalty did not keep the nation from an increasing murder rate (Jer. 7:9; Hos. 4:2). Corrupted consciences walk all over God's warnings. Other objections to the death penalty are offered, but they all wither in the face of the sanctity of human life, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen.9:5, 6).

Violence in the form of murder is an outrage against God. It has been wisely noted that “murder is wrong because it is killing God in effigy.” God ordained capital punishment for the nation of Israel for a number of offenses, among which was capital murder (Deut. 17:12; Lev. 20:15-16; Ex. 22:19). While Israel’s law is not necessarily to be the law for non-theocratic nations, certainly it can be said that the death penalty is not inherently morally wrong as some would claim.

Human government is given the right to take human life for a justifiable reason (Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 25:11). When human laws are broken (first degree murder), government has the right to use force as punishment. That is the significance of the symbol of the sword in Romans 13:4. The abiding truths of justice and personal responsibility are foundational to the case for the morality of the death penalty. Retribution and the right of government, not individuals, to exact vengeance for crimes committed is not only right, but necessary for the protection of law-abiding citizens. In a recent article by Dennis Prager, Pope Francis Rewrites Catholicism . . . and the Bible, he says, “Because the penalty is a statement about the seriousness of a crime, and the God of the Bible deems the wrongful, deliberate taking of a human life the pinnacle of injustice. Allowing all murderers to keep their own lives diminishes the evil of murder and thereby cheapens the worth of the human being.”

Opposition to the death penalty will not abate. There will always be those who see themselves as holding the moral high ground on this matter. Pleas for the rehabilitation of murders will increase. As Joseph Bessette has observed regarding the crusade to abolish the death penalty, “Over time justice will be replaced by a therapeutic or technocratic model that treats human beings as cases to be managed and socially engineered rather than as morally responsible persons.” The further our nation moves away from its Judeo-Christian heritage, the greater will be the influence of the ruling secular intellectuals. Moral certainty eludes many in the ruling class and the media, except when it comes to expectations for those who handle their money.

Is justice lost in all of this? What about murderers who are never caught? If you are a secularist, justice is denied. What if the murderer is convicted but does not have to face the death penalty? Was true justice unfulfilled? All roads of injustice lead to the cross of Jesus Christ. Every human being stands condemned before a holy God; murderers, liars, thieves, adulterers, slanderers, everyone who is imperfect. This leaves all of us in deep trouble. The death penalty exacted upon Jesus Christ by the Roman government was much more than this. Justice was done in a human act of injustice. Jesus did not deserve to die. In the pouring out of God’s wrath upon Him for our sin, God’s justice was satisfied. Oh, how sweet the love and mercy of God for condemned sinners. All who die without God’s forgiveness are doomed to an eternal hell. We have been warned (2 Thess. 1:7-9). The only hope for terminal unbelief and the infinite chasm of eternal punishment is the empty hand of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For all who insist on rejecting Christ the sword of God’s everlasting wrath awaits them (Jn. 3:18).

Starving for God (September 7, 2018)

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.*

Matthew 5:6

Hunger and thirst are powerful motivations. Physically there is nothing more basic than food and fluids. From nursing to the nursing home, they make life possible. Deprivation of food can contribute to strange behavior. Once a starvation cycle begins humans are willing to eat almost anything; shoe leather as a substitute for steak and gasoline polluted water if that is all that is available.

Jesus knew hunger and thirst. He fed thousands of people when no food was available. Bread and fish. That was enough. I wonder if He ate with the crowd. It was the middle of the day. Jesus had walked for miles. On another occasion He asked a woman who had come to draw water from a well, if she would give Him a drink. Cool, clear water for a parched throat. When Jesus spoke to His disciples on a hill by the Sea of Galilee, He found the words to express a desperate desire for God, hunger and thirst. A vast fresh water lake and fields of grain were the perfect setting to stimulate the imagination. In His fourth “royal riddle” Jesus turned bodily appetite and thirst upside down. There is something far more important. The kind of people He was looking for are those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The truly happy are kingdom citizens who desperately want to please God by the way they live. These are the kind of people who ought to be envied. Hunger and thirst have a way of hanging around, reminding us that they are always there. They clamor to be satisfied. Someone has said that “what you long for and do not have may be the most important thing about you.”

A holy dissatisfaction with ourselves is to give way to a longing for right living before God. This is the kind of disciple who is truly satisfied. When we have hunger pains and insatiable thirst for God, we will admit our complete dependence on Him. This involves avoiding the things that will spoil our appetites. Being full of oneself will result in spiritual anorexia. The hunger for self-fulfillment without God is a diet of death. Are there any indicators to help us know if we are hungering and thirsting after righteousness? There are. We can know it when we do what is necessary to find a truth-rich church environment. Hearing and feeding on God’s Word requires finding the right locations for a biblical food source. The lack of discernment among churchgoers is appalling. If we are seeking to think and live in the pursuit of pleasing God, why would we be satisfied with a church experience which does not require a Bible in our lap? We are also personally responsible for searching and studying the Scriptures on our own (Matt. 4:4). Seekers after righteousness are not chasing after experiences only. What we feel does not prove truth. We live in a day when emotion has absolutely taken over as the measure for what we should and should not do. Following your heart is the road to chaos. Beware! Emotions are not the vehicle of truth. That comes from God’s holy, infallible Word. Pastors who love Jesus and love their flocks will feed their sheep (Jn. 21:17).

Spiritual anorexia is taking its toll on the church. Far too many professing Christians don’t really seem desperate for righteousness. Some have confused emotional excitement and pulsating sounds with hunger for God. A valet deity who exists for our convenience is served up in much popular preaching. Preacher alert! Prancing around on a stage, telling stories, and staying with popular topics is not even the stuff of a good short-order cook. It is the task of the diligent pastor to prepare good meals for his congregation. This takes loyalty to the Scriptures, study-time, attention to details, and mastery of the biblical story.

All of which brings us to the reward of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Our part is to seek. God’s part is to satisfy. “They shall be filled.” The idea bound up in this word is to feed so

as to eat one's fill. But is a spiritually full stomach the outcome? One day the longing for righteousness will be satisfied. That will be the day when hunger pains will no longer exist either in spirit or in body: *"but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies"* (Rom. 8:33). Are you hungry for God and a life filled with God-pleasing behavior?

Untying the Tangled Necklace (September 30, 2018)

I recently asked my wife to name some of the patient people she had known. She immediately spoke of her father. Her fine gold necklaces were easily tangled. Her father carefully, patiently freed the knots. Even into her adult life Mr. McClendon showed no annoyance nor offered lectures on how it happened, but cheerfully restored one more chain. He was a patient man.

Patience is not only a virtue. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Christopher Wright says of patience that it is "the ability to endure for a long time whatever opposition and suffering may come our way, and to show perseverance without wanting retaliation or revenge" (*Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit,* p.69). You can understand why some translations use the word "longsuffering." "Forbearance" is a close relative of patience which conveys the idea of staying with people. I like the ideas of "stretching ability" and "staying with people" as a way summing this part of Paul's fruit basket. Patience is no easy thing. It is demanding and takes extraordinary spiritual muscle to exercise it. Wright puts it this way, "patience is a tough sort of word. It demands strength and stamina, and it depends on being able to exercise control over our reactions to others" (p.70).

I would like to shift the focus to the back door of patience, namely, overcoming impatience. We are all impatient people to greater and lesser degrees. Each of us has our own story to tell. Unwillingness to wait on a desired outcome plagues us all. It takes a supernatural work of the Spirit to make us consistently patient people. Impatience expresses itself in degrees and with increasing sinful complications. With patience being the gold standard, not annoyed, agitated, or hurt, impatience can move toward being annoyed but seeking to handle the situation God's way. But one can be annoyed and refuse to admit it, or be annoyed and become bitter and seethe inside. To a further degree it is possible to be annoyed and want to return evil for evil, or to go so far as to return evil for evil. When I am working against a deadline and don't see how I can get my work done on time, how do I handle interruptions and disappointments?

Impatience will not win a character beauty contest. It is selfish, limits our ability to minister to others, and refuses to give to others what God has given us (2 Pet. 3:9; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Pet. 3:20). Impatience creates relational brush fires which require additional time and attention making us difficult to live with. Impatience is a worship failure. At its core it is an unwillingness to believe in the sovereignty of God and trust Him. Let's go to a remedy according to the Scriptures.

Impatience is a spiritual disease that can be cured by the grace of God. In the first place, we must accept responsibility for our impatience. It is a choice we make. We choose to be impatient. We cannot blame someone or something else. The command to be patient is not conditional ("be patient, bearing with one another in love," Eph. 4:2). Secondly, impatience can be overcome by

the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Something can be done about it. Am I grieving and limiting the work of the Holy Spirit by my stubbornness to admit my need?

Thirdly, impatience must be replaced with the sweet fruit of patience (Col. 3:8-14). It helps to know what we would be like when patience is beginning to flourish in our lives. It is waiting with thoughts, words, and deeds under control. It is giving others room and time to grow while being kind, encouraging, and forgiving. Patience is staying supportive of people even though they disappoint us. It is accepting delays and inconveniences with trust in the sovereignty, wisdom, and love of God. In order to bear the fruit of patience we need pressure. Difficult and irritating people and circumstances must enter our lives. It may be a personality trait in one's spouse, children, or a friend. A husband may not like the way his wife arranges things in the refrigerator. A wife wishes her husband would not talk with food in his mouth. We don't like the way our spouses drive. What happens when we can't fix something? The list of possibilities is long.

Fourthly, we must change our way of thinking. A renewed mind can be a reality (Rom. 12:2). Well-known counselor and author, Wayne Mack, advises stopping and starting. "Stop thinking the worst. Start thinking the best. Stop thinking about what others can do for you. Start thinking about what you can do for others." And finally, the temptation to impatience must be met with biblical resistance (Rom. 6:11-13). Memorize and meditate on relevant Scriptures passages. Pray regularly for God's enablement to overcome impatience. Remind yourself often of God's patience with you. Remember the times and ways others have been patient with you. Let God change people. Let God be God. Marinate your mind with the supreme example of patience, Jesus Christ. It was He who "endured the violence, cruelty, and injustice of the cross. And he did that precisely in order to 'bear/carry' our sins—without retaliation, but trusting in His Father God" (Wright, p.75). The presence of Christ can be seen when we patiently untangle the tangled.

The Poison of Bitterness (October 6, 2018)

Benedict Arnold's name has gone down in infamy as a traitor to his country. How did it happen? Having been one of George Washington's more effective generals on the field of battle, he was passed over for a promotion. In Ron Chernow's *A Life of Washington* (p. 379) it is explained; "Arnold still chafed over having lost seniority to these five men (five brigadier generals junior to him), and his bitterness curdled into settled malice." Bitterness can lead to ever-darkening and dangerous consequences.

"Bitterness is the long-term reaction to real or perceived wrong which the initial anger has not dealt with" (Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, po. 130). It is the refusal to deal with anger God's way. It has been said that bitterness is turning away from God to find satisfaction in retaliation. The poison of bitterness is bound up in the deceptive satisfaction that comes from holding on to anger. But why do we drink the poison? The roots of bitterness can be traced to our sinful hearts. We want things that we can't have and God had better not get in the way. When we don't get what we want we get angry (Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:31). Sinful anger, if not handled biblically, leads to resentment and bitterness (Mk. 6:19-29). For our instruction, the Bible records episodes of struggles with bitterness. Esau bore a grudge against his brother, Jacob (Gen. 27:41). Asaph confessed that the prosperity of the wicked embittered him. A lapse of faith infected his soul

(Psa. 73:21). Job in his struggle with pain and suffering said, “The Almighty who has embittered my soul” (Job 27:2). He blamed God for it.

Bitterness toward God may arise because of a disappointment. Jonah thought God was being unfair to him when his “air-conditioner” went on the blink. Unbridled selfishness is the Petri dish of bitterness. Husbands can get a case of the “bitters” when their wives fail to meet their expectations (Col. 3:19). A son can become bitter when he never seems to be able to please his father. I knew a man once who harbored bitterness toward his daughter because she reminded him of her mother, his former wife. People can wear their bitterness through sullenness, withdrawal, constant conflict, dreams of rage, profanity, sexual difficulties in marriage, complaining, inability to develop friendships, over-reaction to relatively minor offenses, alcoholism, drugs, hostility, and even suicide. One sad feature of bitterness is that bitter people can sit in church Sunday after Sunday soaking in their sin of bitterness, enjoying it.

Bitterness bears bitter fruit. It grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), suppressing His work in the life of the believer. Disunity in the home, church, and one’s social life can often be traced to a contagious bitter person. A sober warning appears in Matthew 18:35 where Jesus says that God will inflict “torture” on the believer who refuses to forgive. Untreated bitterness can also result in a multitude of physical problems; ulcers, colitis, headaches, eating disorders, and even cancer. One would think that such warnings would stop bitterness in its tracks. However, like antifreeze, it’s looks good and tastes sweet, but it will kill you if you drink it.

If you will allow a turn in metaphors, the swamp of bitterness must be drained. At its very core bitterness, in the words of John Piper, “is a battle against unbelief.” Therefore, our required weapons are spiritual in nature (Eph. 6:10-13). The weeds of anger such as resentment, bitterness, strife, enmity, grudges, and hostility have to be attacked at their roots. I offer the following six biblical principles to serve as antitoxins for the poison of bitterness.

First, the glory of God’s perfections must become thought-dominating. He is perfect in all His ways with grace to forgive us and power to make the impossible possible. Jesus Christ tasted the bitterness of the cup of suffering, experiencing God’s wrath for our sin (2 Cor. 5:21). He, therefore, is generous to the poor in spirit and those who mourn.

Secondly, the cause of bitterness must be identified and confessed to God as sin (1 Jn. 1:9). Christians can become bitter. It should not be, but it happens. Why else would Paul say to “not grieve the Holy Spirit. . . Let all bitterness. . . be put away from you” (Eph., 4:30, 31). Each of us as believers should pray as David did, “Search me, O God, and know my heart...” (Psa. 139:23-24). He did not want to be guilty of self-deception and longed for a clear conscience and moral certainty.

Thirdly, the one toward whom the bitterness is directed must be forgiven. Repentance is a spiritual antibiotic. We are to ask for forgiveness. In those matters where we become offended and angry over something that has not been a sin against us, we are to overlook it in love (1 Pet. 4:8).

Fourthly, don’t let the sun go down on your anger (Eph. 4:26). Nip the grievance in the bud. Nurturing, playing it over in your mind, will only stoke the embers of anger over a wrong suffered. There is a wrong way and a right way to handle the past. A vital truth is that God

allows trials (wrongs suffered) in our lives that could make us very angry. But the reason He does is to refine our faith. We are to trust that God's justice will prevail.

Fifthly, renew your mind daily with the Word of God (Rom. 12:1-2 Jas. 1:19-21; 1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus is our supreme example. He endured incredible, undeserved accusations. And yet He had "committed no sin," nor was any "deceit found in His mouth." It would be most profitable when wrestling with anger over wrongs suffered to meditate on the truth that Jesus "did not revile in return." He did not lose control of His thoughts, tongue, or emotions.

Sixthly, learn how to get along with people. Patience and kindness deserve battlefield decorations in the war against temptations and sin. Patience seeks to handle offenses, annoyances, wrongs suffered, God's way. How much sweeter is the life of the church when God is in control of our reactions to others (Gal. 5:22; Col. 3:8-14). Bitterness must be replaced with kindness (Eph 4:31). I am kind when I visit someone in the hospital who has been unkind to me. I am kind when I change my plans in order to keep the children on a weekend, when my ex-spouse wants to go the lake with her boyfriend. I am kind when I smile and express words of appreciation rather than seek revenge. Forgive now, before the poison of bitterness does further damage.

Kiss the Son (October 12, 2018)

Hurricane Michael was a massive and fierce storm. It roared in from the Gulf of Mexico and left historic devastation in its wake. But there is another storm which threatens the stability of our nation and its political moral sanity. Conflicts, hostility, and incivility are tearing America apart. The appointment of a Supreme Court Justice revealed what appears to be an insurmountable political divide. War cries of "you cannot be civil" can be heard from high profile politicians. The Georgia governor campaign is filled with charges and counter-charges of socialism and voter suppression. The coming midterm elections are filled with hotly contested races between Democrats and Republicans. The political stakes are indeed high. I have lived through seven decades of political campaigns. The only one that can rival the present tempest was 1968. It was wild and looked like America was coming apart at the seams. But in my estimation the present political climate exceeds all the others in the last sixty years.

There are so many ill-founded thoughts and intentions flying around it's hard to know where to begin. If government is allowed to determine one's meaning in life, this is spiritual poison. When government is viewed as the hope of mankind, beware. Great civilizations have crumbled when built on this premise. Change promised on the assumption of the goodness of mankind is the alchemy of totalitarianism. When victimhood becomes the basis for moral power, say good-bye to truth. The use of anger, intimidation, and mockery is the alchemy of self-destruction. The presumption of guilt based on the identity of the accuser banishes justice from the law. A secular kingdom built on the foundation of godless intentions is the enemy of a constitutional republic. My intention is not to provide arguments for saving America. The Christian faith is the call of God to declare Jesus Christ as the only hope of mankind. Our nation needs the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I might add, the Savior of the world has a government policy, both domestic and foreign. It is found in Psalm 2. Some background is in order. The Psalms are concerned with the establishment of God's kingdom. The theological theme is "the God who rules." The witness nation, Israel, was locked in mortal combat with the powers of evil. They are on the battlefield.

David was one of those warriors fighting for the Warrior King. What does he do? He reaches for and grasps the exquisite perfections of God. Take note, dear reader. We have the needed truth for living in a nation which in many ways is at war with God. God's "warriors" march under the banner of the Messianic hope. The messianic psalms famously reveal this splendid truth.

Now we enter into Psalm 2. In the words of Derek Kidner, "It is unsurpassed for its buoyant, fierce delight in God's dominion and His promise to His King." Four grand movements of thought converge in a "celebration at the coronation despite opposition by rebellious people in surrounding territories" (Allen P. Ross, The Bible Knowledge Commentary). At the outset it is asserted that the vaunted arrogance of the nations is doomed to futility (2:1-3). The nations have no chance against God. It is not a fair fight. But in their self-deception, they rise up in anger against the Lord of the universe. Presidents, senators, congressmen, governors, candidates for political office, and all citizens, listen carefully. Emotional temper tantrums against God's rule will get you nowhere. God has installed His Son, His Anointed, as King by means of His crucifixion and resurrection. One day His earthly kingdom will become a reality.

God has chosen to exalt His Son over the nations (2:4-6). At this point the psalmist tells us that "He who sits in the heavens laughs." This is not a laugh of amusement or delight. That human beings think they can defy God and escape the consequences is laughable. God is intolerant of disloyalty to Himself. The puny attempts of human rebels in worshiping at their self-made shrines receive God's reply. It is the installation of His Son as the Anointed King (v. 6). Now comes God's declaration. God the Son has the right to rule over the nations because of His resurrection (2:7-9). The world relegates the empty tomb of Christ to a sentimental dress-up day in the spring of the year. As a category five hurricane makes men shutter in its approach, God thunders that all rebellion will be put down by the Lord's Anointed, "You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (2:9). These words are quoted three times in the last book of the Bible with good reason (Rev. 2:7; 12:5; 19:15). The final overthrow of clinched fists in the face of God will occur at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

In climactic fashion the nations are called to worship God the Son (2:10-12). The power brokers of this world are summoned. A decision is to be made, "throw down your weapons and come out with your hands up." To refuse to surrender and persist in rebellion is to experience God's eternal wrath. The alternative is much better. Embrace God's Son. Place your faith in Him alone. Do it now. Live by His wisdom, then join Him in His coming reign (Rev. 11:15).

We need this mountain-top view of Psalm 2 to keep us clear minded about the world we live in and its future. The hysteria associated with politics and elections can disorient us. The nations of this world have been put on notice. Where are you placing your hope, my friend? Jesus Christ will turn your world upside down. Kiss the Son.

The Click of a Mouse (October 19, 2018)

It's easy, way too easy. All it takes is a click of a mouse or the touch of a screen and eyes can see what they will want to see again and again. That's the way a pattern of sin can begin to take over one's life. But sexual lust does not stand alone as a potential taskmaster. Alcohol, anger, lying, fear, food, drugs, exercise, money, jealousy, gambling, video games, going to the movies, discontentment, and just about anything can become a marriage of sin and addiction. The Bible

is not silent about the ruling power of things that offer us relief, pleasure, escape, satisfaction, excitement, power, happiness, solutions, recognition, and success.

In order to grasp the life-dominating capabilities of sin there are a few thought markers we need to keep in mind. Clarity in vocabulary is essential. Ed Welch is correct in saying “We are living in a culture where the theory and language of addictions are presently controlled by secular categories.” Words like disease, treatment, and addiction can confuse the meaning of human freedom and responsibility. One can easily absorb the idea that the problems of chronic sinful patterns have their ultimate cause in the body rather than the soul. Welch further adds, “the treatment world of AA and recovery methods, many of which have been adopted by the church, present us with a whole range of problems in addressing addictions” (Addictions, A Banquet in the Grave, Edward T. Welch, p. xvi). Though the word “addiction” needs explanation it can serve us in thinking through the nature of persistent habitual practice of a sin pattern. Addiction as defined biblically is ultimately a worship disorder. God will have no other gods before Him. And finally, sinful habits are an invitation to a “banquet in the grave” (Prov. 9:13-18). Sin is no mere Halloween character. It serves meals that will kill you. It knows no shame, disguising itself to seduce the unwary, and promising what it cannot provide.

Overcoming a life-dominating sin starts with facing the possibilities in one’s own life. What are the ruling desires you struggle with? Are the pleasurable sensations of a drug competing with Jesus for your affections? Is the desire for sexual pleasure resulting in the pursuit of pornography? Is the desire for food or drink more important than what that food or drink does to your body? Is the desire for excitement and entertainment pulling you into more TV, gaming, and movies? Is your desire for relational security creating life-altering behavior? The problem is not so much what we want but how much we want it. We are all cut from the same cloth. We all share the same struggles and must deal with the same desires. It is true that some desires may be stronger in one than in another, but we have similar battles.

Overcoming a life-dominating sin starts with the recognition of the steps into the slavery of addiction. Addiction is said to be a habit that takes time to nurture. We must be spiritually prepared to fight the battle of a life-dominating sin. God’s warning to ancient Israel is true for us, “Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods” (Deut. 11:16). The development of a good conscience and the resolve to please God contribute to a robust spiritual immune system. A friend of mine years ago who fought a battle with alcohol would cry when he saw a billboard ad of an ice-cold beer. Sin deceives by small steps of disobedience. That gaming experience that has taken over a life can be energized by sweet feelings of escape and being in control. From being unprepared, to a rationalized first step, to emotional craving, and finally to slavery, we find ourselves in a life of self-deception, a ruined conscience, total allegiance to a false god.

Overcoming a life-dominating sin is a confrontation with oneself. The creeping slavery to a sinful pattern of living is created by theological confusion. Do I really possess the biblical beliefs needed to dispel the fog of false counsel about addictions? When truth goes in one ear and out the other, I will be left with a spiritual headache. How do I live when my wife is away for several days? What am I like when in another city? When we tell a lie, we listen to a lie. We need people in our lives who will tell us the truth. Have I convinced myself that I am never thin enough? Hear the words of James who tells the truth, “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and

enticed by his own lust” (Jas. 1:14). Failure to take the Bible seriously is a ride on a bridge without guard rails. Can you spot your self-deceptions?

Overcoming a life-dominating sin is a fight with a ruthless, deceptive, unmerciful, attractive enemy, sin. The hiss of the serpent in the garden can be heard in the deceptions that lure the naïve. Deception is making someone believe that something is true which is actually false. Ed Welch maintains that there are three really big deceptions; “Deception # 1: ‘God is not good.’ Deep in our hearts we think God is holding out on us. Deception #2: ‘I am good, but occasionally do bad things.’ Deception #3: ‘My idol is really harmless’” (Ed Welch, pp. 191-197). Deception curls around the imagination with words like, “You don’t understand. I have to do this so I can have peace of mind.” Or “If I do it only once it will prove that I have self-control.” Truth says I am responsible. Deception says I have a need that must be met. Truth says that sin is a path to death (Prov. 2:18). Deception says what I do in private will not be found out. What is the theological bottom line?

Overcoming a life-dominating sin is a journey of following Christ to the high ground of self-denial and cross-bearing. The call of Christ to the believer to do battle with entrenched sin is not a call to a higher power. The power for change does not come through a subjective connection with one’s “better self.” Obedience to Jesus Christ is foundational to biblical change, one step at a time with consistency (Gal. 5:16-18). The steps we take are governed by the truth that God is holy, we are not (1 Pet. 1:15). The idolatry factor is of critical importance. The human heart is an idol factory. Breaking free from a life-dominating sin is a movement away from self-constructed idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). There will be choices we have to make under the power of the Holy Spirit. “Self-control is a strategic countermeasure to the insatiable cravings of sin” (Welch, p. 213). Freedom from the captivating power of sin comes by knowing Christ’s forgiveness and embracing His demands with joy. As we follow the Shepherd, the click of the mouse and the touch of a screen come alive as instruments of righteousness.

Proud as a Peacock (October 26, 2018)

Included in my earliest memories of walking through a zoo or animal park is the male peacock. I don’t know if he knows how showy he looks, but we are told that it’s the female he’s attempting to impress. The male peacock can be dazzling. About as large as a turkey, he has a metallic greenish blue neck and breast, purplish-blue underparts, and long train of greenish feathers brilliantly marked with bold spots that look like eyes. He spreads out this gorgeous fan when he parades slowly and majestically in front of the female. My thanks to the World Book Encyclopedia for this vivid word picture.

We are all male peacocks in one way or another. This is a bit unsettling. We do not picture ourselves as consciously trying to impress others with our own looks so ostentatiously. However, sinful pride enjoys self-promotion at the expense of bringing glory to God. The word for this is vainglory. The term has cobwebs on it. We rarely hear it. The truth is, vainglory was used hundreds of years ago in the original list of the seven “deadly sins.” If you wish to pursue this line of thought further see Rebecca DeYoung’s [Vainglory, The Forgotten Vice](#). It ignited my thinking on one of the vices of pride. Vainglory is a child of pride. What if you were told that you had a bacterial infection which has affected your health in ways you may not have

recognized? Vainglory is such a spiritual infection. But there is an antibiotic that attacks this “bacteria.”

This sin can be overcome. But first it necessitates a brief review of the glory of God, goodness, and human glory. Glory belongs to God (Psa. 19). His glory is the display of all His perfections. We are to do good deeds for the glory of God (Matt. 5:16; Jn. 15:8). Glory is goodness displayed. The violas my wife plants are beauty on display. Bathed in the light of the sun their colors receive due approval and praise from us. We were made to bring glory to God but our sinful impulses become glory-robbers. In self-focused glory we seek to take credit where none is due. Within our hearts we crave the display of our goodness in the place of the display of God’s goodness. We find this truth in Philippians 2:3, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory” (KJV), translated “conceit” in the ESV. Vainglory is fostered and nurtured by sinful human pride. Pride is the spoiler. It is the displacement of God by oneself. Vainglory is pride strutting across the stage of life.

The flames of vainglory are fanned by our contemporary culture. Social media keeps a constant virtual audience alive for whatever we say and do. We set a value on what we perceive to be a good thing. Our expectations become corrupted. The desire for an audience infects our motives with the result of a disordered desire for glory taking center stage (DeYoung, p. 33). Vainglory can infect anything you are, anything you have, or anything you do. Speaking, music, athletics, writing, cooking, physical appearance, clothes, skills, talents, achievements, even the pursuit of holy living. Being vainglorious has never been easier; YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. “Our culture forms us to crave recognition. Our social world – online and in person – is a whirl of attention-seeking, an expected way of life. Vainglory is a social vice, its pollution is the very air we breathe” (DeYoung, p. 117).

Vainglory has its poster-children in Scripture. Satan is the superstar. He tempted Jesus with it atop the Temple Mount telling Jesus to throw Himself down. A vast audience would be awed. He would be “glorified” for having suffered no harm (Lk. 4:1-13). Hezekiah paraded the goodness of Israel’s wealth before the Assyrians, for which God disciplined him. The Pharisees had few equals in the art of showing-off their religious achievements (Matt. 6:2,5,18). Much more is left to be said about vainglory. DeYoung opens up corridors of thought on vainglory’s mischief. It is the mother of a thousand losses; the loss of the pursuit of God’s glory, the loss of God-honoring servanthood, the loss of sharp-eyed biblical perspective. Vainglory produces poisonous fruit; boasting, hypocrisy, desiring the latest toys to make others think well of us, contention, discord (We tend to refuse to agree with those wiser than we are.), disobedience (We refuse to carry out the command of someone in authority over us).

The vice of vainglory requires surgical removal. Its temptations are almost endless. As a Christian we live to serve God. Serving means doing and being a good example. How quickly this can be turned from pleasing God to seeking to draw attention to ourselves. God must give wisdom to enable discernment. *Pride must be replaced with humility.* This is a life-long journey. Day by day, stay overwhelmed with God’s undeserved grace and goodness. See yourself as no better than others. Work at having a biblical view of your gifts and abilities. They are to be used for the good of others. *Prune away the bad fruit of vainglory.* Do I talk too much about myself? Do I view myself as better than others? Am I a grateful person? *Engage in the grace of meditation,* thoughtful, disciplined, and consistent study of the Scriptures. This goes a long way in developing clear-headedness and putting off former lusts (1 Pet. 1:14). Give yourself to

Scripture memory. Start with Philippians 2:5-8. *Keep your gaze fixed on the gold standard of Jesus' resistance to vainglory (Lk. 4:9-13)*. Like Jesus we need periods of rest and retreat from the crowds, dependence on the Father, and renewed eternal perspective.

There is no quick fix in the battle with vainglory. It lingers where we least expect it. It sneaks up on us in cross-bearing service for Christ. I return to DeYoung's helpful words, "We cannot anchor our fragile egos in the glory that human audiences give us, for it will never be enough" (p. 100). Peacocks don't think. They are ruled by instincts. Our thoughts are to be ruled by the cross of Christ.

A Fight to the Finish (November 2, 2018)

What fault in human nature makes those perceived to be guilty of it very unpopular? What fault are we more unconscious of in ourselves than any other? The answer is pride. C. S. Lewis in his essay on "The Great Sin" offers the unsettling assessment that "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness are mere fleabites in comparison" to pride. Some theologians have even gone so far as to assert that pride is the very essence of sin. That's close. The essential nature of sin is best understood as, in the words of Millard Erickson, "failure to let God be God." In other words, unbelief is the ultimate spiritual felony. Erickson says further, "Anyone who truly believes God to be what he says he is will accord to him his rightful status. Failure to do so is sin." Where does pride fit into this? It is the other side of unbelief. Pride is an attitude of independence from God. It is self-worship. It is the sin that makes God seem irrelevant.

The question with regard to pride, according to Stuart Scott, is not "Do I have it?" but "Where is it?" and "How much of it do I have?" One of the reasons the degree of our pride may elude us is how it is camouflaged. It can hide under the cover of serving others, giving, church attendance, witnessing, and even prayer. Jesus unmasked the pride of those who practice their righteousness before people to be noticed by them (Matt. 6:1).

Pride is a devilish thing. It brought about Satan's fall (Isa. 14:12-17; 1 Tim. 3:6). Peter denied his Lord because of pride (Jn. 13:37). Haman was hung on his own gallows because of it (Esther 5-7). Uzziah spent the last years of his life with leprosy because of it (2 Chron. 26:16-19). Nebuchadnezzar was afflicted with a serious mental disorder because of it (Dan. 4:30-34). Pride deceives the heart (Jer. 49:16), hardens the mind (Dan. 5:20), brings contention (Prov. 13:10), ruins churches (Rev. 3:17), stirs up strife (Prov. 28:25). God hates it (Prov. 16:5, 17).

Like an infectious disease pride creates discontent, ingratitude, presumption, rudeness, bigotry, and the lust for power. That is why C. S. Lewis said that "there is nothing that makes a man feel so superior to others as being able to move them about like toy soldiers." Are you getting the picture? Pride is a dragon that must be slain. It stands in the way of the kind of humble service required of Christ's followers. It is vicious in that it "recognizes neither sin nor grace, in fact, pride hammers them flat and discards them" (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.).

"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 4:6). How is the Christian to go about waging war against the pride bound up in the heart? In the first place, it must be admitted that one is afflicted with it. You may not know how much or where it lurks, but it is there. Ask God to flush it out. Call out to God to search your heart. Mean it, and humble yourself

before Him when the serpent crawls out from the under the rock of self-contentment. Lewis rightly says, “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”

Secondly, you can look around the corners of your mind and see if you are overestimating yourself, your talents, abilities, your perceived good job of parenting, your success as a teacher, organizer, you name it. Then consider the possibility that your pride may be disguised as feigned humility. Are you under estimating yourself (“I am useless.” “I am worthless.”) waiting for a pat on the back to affirm that you are much better than you think?

Thirdly, resolve to pour contempt on your pride. Repent of it, wherever you find it. Slay vain thoughts (e.g. “What can she teach me?” “I could help this church if they would only listen to me.” “I am prettier than she is, and I am going to get more boys to like me than she has.”). Fourthly, evaluate patterns in your life that may be influenced by pride (e.g. avoidance of certain people, or kinds of people, failure to read the Bible and pray, lack of meaningful involvement in the lives of others). Pride, like beggar lice, can attach itself to just about anything.

But we must go beyond the dredging work. It is not enough to discover all the muck of pride in our lives. Jesus calls His people to humility. Read the Gospels. Marvel at the humblest man who ever lived. How did He relate to people? What did He do for those who hated Him? What did He say when He was criticized? How did He assess Himself as the Servant of God (Mk. 10:45)? What did He do when His men were competing with one another for position and power (Jn. 13:1-20)? What did Jesus do when the pressures upon Him were overwhelming (Mk. 1:35; 6:46)? Look at Jesus long and hard. See yourself as God sees you. Don’t try to embellish it with more or less. And, finally, be ready for the long war. All of our motives, thoughts, words, deeds, and relationships are honeycombed with the tunnels of pride. We are in for a fight until we see the Servant of God face to face.

Striking a Match (November 9, 2018)

My brother, Tim, and I were six and eight years old, out looking for a creative project. As we walked into a field of sage grass the idea came to us that building a camp fire with rocks around it would be fun. We had a match. We lit the fire and things turned bad quickly. The field of sage grass cooperated with the flames. A neighbor called the fire department. A nearby house was put at risk. One small match and two unwise boys caused a lot of trouble.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness” (Jas. 3:5, 6). The tongue has terrible potential for harm. An uncontrolled tongue can destroy a home, a church, and even start a war. The only insurance policy available for the tongue is getting it under God’s control.

The tongue is a world of trouble. *It can be used for lying and deception* (Prov. 4:24 “Put away from you crooked speech and put devious talk far from you.”). We can lie in many ways. This is done by deliberately telling an untruth, by exaggerating the truth (“my husband never listens to me”), by creating a false impression, by misrepresenting what another person has said or done, by unkept promises. *The tongue can be used to spread gossip and slander* (1 Tim. 5:13). How

easily we can listen to and pass on information about other people that harms them. Slander is a favorite weapon among politicians. Make false charges against your opponent and hope some of them stick. *The tongue can be used to boast and flatter*” (Rom. 1:30). Complimenting others for personal gain may work in the short run, but according to Scripture it “spreads a net for one’s own feet” (Prov. 29:5). *The tongue can be used for blame-shifting and as a substitute for action* (1 Jn. 3:18). Our first parents became immediately adept at blaming someone else for their disobedience. *The tongue can be used for judging and criticism*. Passing judgment on others can be hypocritical, uninformed, impulsive, and superficial (Matt. 7:1-5). A critical tongue driven by bitterness, jealousy, and revenge can produce a scorched earth in a church. Ridicule, the tongue’s first cousin to destructive judging, enjoys making fun of others to make them seem little and unimportant.

The tongue can be used for filthy language (Eph. 5:4 “Let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk nor crude joking which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.”). One of the losses in our day has been clean humor. Comedians and their “want-to-be’s” have popularized verbal pornography. The gift of sex is treated as a lewd side-show. *The tongue can be used to profane the name of God* (Ex. 30:7). God’s name is not to be used to hide a lie or treat His name with contempt, asking God to damn something or someone. It has become quite fashionable to use “OMG” to add emphasis to one’s words. It is human arrogance that attempts to strike blows at God’s holiness. *The tongue can be used to say the wrong things at the wrong time* (Prov. 21:23 “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.”). We all have our stories on this misuse of the tongue. It happens by not knowing when to keep our mouths shut, talking too much, and using words not suitable to the situation. *The uncontrolled tongue creates untold problems* (Prov. 18:7 “A fool’s is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.”). The chatter box venues of Facebook, Instagram, texting, and tweeting are filled with potential for unnecessary trouble.

The answer to the wayward tongue is not taking a vow of silence. It can be tamed by the grace of God (Col. 4:6 “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned by salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”). Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Sin creates disordered love. In conversion to Jesus Christ a transforming work begins by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit and desired obedience to Jesus Christ. Part of this work of life change is taming the tongue. Taming takes time and attention.

Firstly, control of the tongue requires careful self-examination (Jas. 3:2). How do I most often fail to control my tongue? Do I pass on rumors too easily and speak critically of others without knowing the facts? Am I quick to make promises and fail to keep them? Do I use God-dishonoring expletives when I get frustrated and angry? Secondly, control of the tongue must be viewed as a supernatural issue (Eph. 4:30-31). We need God’s help if we are to have mouths that produce the refreshing waters of wisdom and kindness. There is work to be done with the desires of our hearts and our thought world. The human heart is the source of the venom of sinful words (Matt. 15:19). Thirdly, control of the tongue considers the fact that it sends messages that can’t be recalled. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). Words sent out will find their mark. The right words can protect us. They can prevent sin (Prov. 15:1 “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”). Our words can be missiles or medicine, deceptive or honest. Fourthly, control of the tongue lays hold of the ways the tongue can be used for good. It can be an instrument of praise to God (Jas. 5:13). It can be used for witnessing for Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). It can bring honesty into our relationships (Prov. 28:23). It can be the means

of instructing others in the Word of God, building one another up in the faith, comforting those who are grieving, and encouraging one another.

On a cold winter's day, I love to prepare the fireplace. I open the flue, I find newspaper, kindling, and put the wood on top of it according to its size. Only one item is then needed. I strike a match and soon we have a roaring fire bringing warmth and a comforting, crackling sound. A small match brings that pleasure. Like the tongue a match can be destructive or constructive. May God be glorified in the use of our tongues.

The Remote (November 16, 2018)

Ted works hard at his job as a lab technician. Testing samples for the hospital means long hours and constant concentration to details. Coming home after work offers needed relief. Over the approaching weekend his wife, Dawn, is going to be away with some old friends from college days. On Friday Ted drops into his comfortable lazy boy chair and picks up the remote. Their new wide screen TV is visual pleasure. As he begins to graze through the various channels, he comes upon a movie that captures his attention. The sexual intimacy in the story leaves little to the imagination. His heart is racing and he is hooked. Soon Ted finds himself on his breaks at work exploring the internet for another sexual fantasy fix. His conscience bothers him at first, but he rationalizes the escape it gives him from lab work.

The problem with Ted was not actually his remote. He could have chosen another channel or turned off the TV. The issue is self-control. Your problem may not be the remote, but could be a host of other decisions: anger at other drivers in traffic, chain smoking, over-indulgence at food events, too many purchases on the shopping channel, procrastinating the unpleasant task of cleaning out the garage, too much wine, chronic lateness to church, watching too many football games over the weekend, talking too much about yourself. We have to admit it. Self-control is one of our greatest challenges.

If you are a Christian you have to be impressed with what the Bible says about the subject of self-control. The apostle Paul had the opportunity to speak to bear witness of his faith in Christ to the governor of Judea, Felix. Luke says that Paul “reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25). Self-control? It seems most likely that the apostle explained how one lives before God as a justified sinner. How is sin overcome as a Christian? How is temptation defeated? What is self-mastery? This theme can be found throughout the New Testament (1 Cor. 9:25; 7:9; Titus 1:8; Gal. 5:23; 1 Pet. 1:5-9). Self-control is necessary in the quest for godliness. We must learn to say “no” and “yes” to ourselves if sin is to be routed and holiness is to dominate.

Particularly noteworthy is the occurrence of self-control in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Christopher Wright makes the discerning observation that “the works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21) “show human nature out of control and at its sinful, excessive worst” (Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit, p. 142). Within the broader context of Galatians, we see that self-control is not merely some moralistic, “just do it” kind of effort. It is produced by the Holy Spirit. It is part of Christ-likeness, and its exercise is driven by love for God.

In order to overcome the lack of self-control we must engage in wisdom-directed thought. *First, let's agree that the ability to subordinate all our desires to the pursuit of the God-pleasing life is essential.* Ask God to stoke the passion to live life His way. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the desires of the new nature, and serious effort, we are to submit all of our appetites to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Read and meditate on 2 Peter 1:3-9. It is rich in what God has provided and what He wants us to be. *Secondly, review the stories of Joseph and David.* Joseph's self-control in resisting the seductive power of a beautiful woman, the wife of another man, is overwhelmingly admirable. Joseph gave two reasons for his actions. It would have betrayed his master's trust and been a sin against God. "He left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house" (Gen. 39:12). Self-control triumphed. King David is another story. He succumbed to his lust and committed adultery. To make matters worse he attempted to cover his sin by having Bathsheba's husband killed. David sought God's forgiveness, but his family life was never the same. He failed to exercise self-control. Joseph put the remote down and went for a run. David let his remote rule him and he paid the price.

Thirdly, take inventory of your life. Are you in control of your temper? Do you shout at your children? Are you in control of your appetite? Thanksgiving Day might be a good test. Are you in control of your attitude? Is there a grudge smoldering in your heart because your boyfriend is showing attention to someone else? Are you in control of your time? What about those homework assignments that are put off to the last minute? If time with God in Bible study and prayer are in short supply, that is a self-control problem. Are you in control of your tongue? For many of us that is one of our biggest battles. Are criticism and complaint polluting your home atmosphere?

Fourthly, drive a stake in the ground regarding your beliefs about God and the gospel. Is God receiving your undivided attention? Are you rehearsing the gospel often enough? *Fifthly, stop making excuses.* Is alcohol really what you need to gain relaxation and peace of mind? *Sixthly, take charge of your thought life (Rom. 12:2).* Are you fantasizing about that pretty co-worker? *Seventhly, start making decisions. Start now to make healthy eating a way of life.* *Eighthly, get help in becoming more self-aware.* Do you have a stop button in your conversations? Am I rude and talk over people? Self-control cannot happen if one does not know how and where they need it. *Tenthly, heed Jesus's call to his disciples to a life of self-control;* "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). This takes us to the core of the meaning of self-control, which is saying "no" to desires (good and bad) in order to say "yes" to God's will for us. A girl wants to date a certain boy, but he is not a good choice. A student loan of tens of thousands of dollars would be necessary to attend that certain college. These are the kinds of situations into which wisdom and self-control must function.

The decisions of life are a "remote" in the hands of each of us. I can think of no greater example of self-control than God's Servant, Jesus Christ. He lived in perfect obedience to the Father. He was tempted but resisted every pull of disobedience, for it is said that "He learned obedience through what He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). "Lord, give me the grace to live with such self-control that Christ's presence is plainly seen."

Throwing in the Towel, Or Not (November 30, 2018)

In boxing there were times when one boxer was beat-up so badly that he could not continue. His manager would throw a towel into the ring to signal defeat. The fight was over. This idiom is used to describe discouragement that has led to the decision to quit. A young man may seek to win the heart of a girl. She is not interested. He becomes so disappointed that he gives up the pursuit of love and marriage. He allows the avoidance of a committed relationship to define him. An employee throws himself into his job, giving it his all. In spite of this, he receives criticism for his work and gets passed over for a promotion. He adopts a “what’s-the-use” outlook, starts doing mediocre work with an attitude and ends up having to look for employment elsewhere. A student finds math particularly difficult. Rather than seeking out a tutor and trying harder, she drops out of school. The challenges of life are as abundant as leaves on a tree. Sadly, discouragement can become the gateway to losses that create a life that we did not want.

Discouragement is a condition common to us all (1 Cor. 10:13). The Holy Spirit has recorded numerous examples. Israel did not respond well when the twelve spies came back with a report of seemingly overwhelming odds against them. In their estimation the inhabitants of the promised land could not be overcome (Num. 14). Their unbelief resulted in forty years of funerals in the desert. The next generation would experience the land of milk and honey. In the name of the Lord the prophet Elijah stood up against 450 prophets of Baal. It was a spiritual Rambo moment. God’s power was displayed and the false prophets were executed. But soon thereafter with a price put on his head by Jezebel, we find Elijah wiped out by discouragement, hiding in the wilderness and wanting to die.

We have our own stories. A state of mind can come over us with its temptation to quit fulfilling our responsibilities because of some disappointment. The loss of desire due to a loss of hope can darken our thoughts. Discouragement, if allowed to run its course, can spiral into chronic gloom and doom. First there is responsibility. God has given each of us various assignments which take time and energy. Loving, rearing children, providing for one’s family, exercising one’s spiritual gifts, showing hospitality, attending church, encouraging others, running errands, helping with the grandchildren, going to family functions, turning in assignments, and on it goes. Life in the grace-land of God’s enablement is stressful and filled with the speed bumps of disappointments. Losses and perceived set-backs come with the territory. Personal failure, the letdowns and sins of our children and grandchildren, spouse, someone in church, an officer or leader in the church, a new convert, a close friend can create discouragement. There are degrees of this condition, but in essence it is the loss of will to keep on keeping on. We can lose our perspective and allow a disappointment to dominate both thinking and emotion. A quitter mentality takes over. If not checked disillusionment can crowd out biblical thinking and long-standing foundations can begin to crumble. Before you know it, you are in the suburbs of depression. The tide of hopelessness and despair roll through one’s life. Demoralization with its total disorder and confusion make life unbearable. The desire for escape by whatever means can take over. Death can result and not just physical death, but a sense of uselessness, inoperative faith with no production of good works. When depression becomes intolerable, suicidal thoughts can seem to be a way out.

Discouragement need not metastasize. It can be overcome. The Lord Jesus Christ overcame it. Tucked away in a bold picture of Jesus Christ in Isaiah 49 we can hear the anguished cry of God’s Servant who is the only hope of the world. Time and space do not allow for a full treatment of this song of Israel’s coming Messiah (Isaiah 49:1-12). But we must see an extraordinary glimpse into the soul of the Savior. Hear His words; “But I said, ‘I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and

my recompense with my God” (49:4). The Servant is confessing His sense of failure. The crowds thinned out. His disciples seemed unable to grasp the true intent of His messages. Jesus was despised and rejected by men. He wrestled with the seeming failure of His work. He knew He was chosen, prepared, and would be revealed at the right moment (49:1-3). Battles with discouragement are not experienced without feelings of futility. The key is found in the words “yet surely.” Jesus did not turn from His Father and His mission. His resistance to the pull of discouragement came from doing the will of God, not from apparent results.

There is a way through discouragement. Jesus struggled with it in His earthly ministry. When He died, what had He accomplished? In the words of one writer, “to all appearances, nothing. By every measure of the world, His life had been futile.” This was echoed in the plaintive cry from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). He fought with discouragement, yet He did not sin (Heb. 4:15). “He was despised and rejected by men . . . Yet He bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:3, 12). He knew who He was and what He had come to do.

Dear friend, does discouragement have you by the throat? You say, “I am a failure.” Do you know that it is for the Lord to decide whether we are a failure or not? Bare your soul before the Lord and ask for the grace to work your way through the time of testing. The Psalms can be a great help. They show us how to think our way through the dark shadows of life. God meets us as and where we are. Let us follow Him who “learned obedience through what He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). There must be an immediate turn in our thinking to the settling truths about God. Relate your circumstances to His perfections. Don’t stand away from God. Stand with Him. Jesus said “My God.” Revisit the truth that the work to which God has called us can never be a failure. Obey Him no matter what the cost. Embrace the contentment that comes from doing the will of God, not from apparent results. Don’t throw that towel in the ring.

God’s School of Contentment (December 7, 2018)

Are you a contented person? “Yes,” you say. Allow me to ask a few questions. How do you handle disappointments, such as a job that is unfulfilling and which leaves you with too much month at the end of the money? Do you find yourself complaining about an unhappy marriage? Have you grown bitter over your single status? Do you feel entitled to certain rights and an income which you have not earned? Would an independent audit reveal a lack of generosity in your giving habits? What attitudes and behavior are your continual bad health bringing to the surface? Do you yield to the urge to find comfort in alcohol and certain drugs? Do your physical appearance or disabilities stir up discontentment and resentment? Have you put yourself in debt by spending money you don’t have?

It is possible to experience a self-defined kind of contentment. One can be satisfied by an acceptance of circumstances by forgetting, restless endeavor, aloofness, or grudging resignation (Jerry Bridges’ *Respectable Sins*, pp. 74-75). Some through times of great difficulty, stoically live on. But this is not Christ-centered contentment. True contentment is the freedom to live completely satisfied in God, independent of one’s circumstances. It is a disposition of thought and life which enjoys delight in Christ in every circumstance. I like the Puritan, Jeremiah Burroughs’, description; “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition” (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, p. 19).

The apostle Paul in the context of speaking of his needs is careful not to give the wrong impression by saying, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4:11). This contentment is not natural to most of mankind. The key to Paul’s contentment is found in the words, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (4:13). Spirit-produced contentment did not come from the iron will of self-sufficiency, but from God-sufficiency. However, we must not overlook the active verb, “I have learned.” Contentment is not based on having plenty. It comes from knowing certain truths and acting upon them. The apostle says that he had learned “the secret of facing plenty and hunger.” This so-called “secret” was knowledge of the fact that God was in control of all the details of life, that He was to be trusted, and therewith to serve God and others.

Being schooled in God-given contentment requires us to realize that the natural heart is a complaining heart. We are covetous and envious. Our culture conspires to keep us discontent. Your neighbor has a better car. Your classmate has a smart phone. Their phone is much newer. Certain brand names in clothes and shoes is a must. We hunger for instant gratification. Politicians work at the fine art of creating class-envy. How often do we hear about the “top 1%?” The deception of all this is that our idols always fail us. Our wants can lead us in wrong directions. Money, clothes, car, house, success, travel, friends, health, sex, family, job, hobby, sports, or a better body cannot give us contentment in life.

We ask, if then contentment comes from God, how does He teach it to us? The following is no formula, but is a truth-based curriculum that must be mastered. *The empowering Christ gives what is necessary to live above both want and plenty.* My identity is not determined by what I have or don’t have. It is my identification with Christ that defines me. I am His. I will love and serve Him. He will take care of my needs. *God’s school of contentment requires instruction.* Get a firm grip on the promises, commands, and examples of Scripture. Initiative is necessary. God’s initiative comes in the tests He designs for us. Paul lists some of the classes and tests he took; “Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.” There was shipwreck, robbers, false brothers, sleepless nights, thirst, without food, and on top of it all anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:25-29). Personal initiative is also involved. We have choices to make. If I love others, I am exposed to possible hurt. When I have more than enough, I can fall into the trap of thinking I don’t need God. Doing without and being disappointed presents me with temptations. What will I do about the loneliness that knocks at my door when my spouse divorces me for someone else? How will I choose to think when I am shut down by chronic physical illness?

Though contentment is essentially a disposition of the heart, it will bear fruit. Gratefulness for what I have is an acknowledgement of God’s provision whether little or much. Generosity will overflow its banks as I find ways to serve others with what I possess. Inner peace and joy will calm me and cheer me no matter what the circumstances. Kindness and patience will characterize my dealings with others.

Let’s bring a guest “lecturer” from the 1600’s into the classroom. I love what Thomas Watson, the Puritan preacher and author, offers us.

Discontent is a leaven that sours every comfort. It puts aloes and wormwood upon the breast of the creature. It lessens every mercy and triples every crisis. The contented spirit sucks sweetness from every flower of Providence. It can make something sweet out of poison. Contentment is full

of consolation. . . contentment. . . makes a fair interpretation of all God's dealings. The Art of Divine Contentment, p. 69

“Our God, continue to teach us contentment until our graduation into your presence and everlasting contentment.”

A Creed for Christmas (December 14, 2018)

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16

Creed (krēd), n. 1. A brief statement of the essential points of religious belief as approved by some church. 2. any statement of faith, principles, opinion, etc.

The general public, viewing the state funeral of President George H. W. Bush, witnessed an order of service that included “The Apostles’ Creed.” Many Christians are unfamiliar with such a statement of truth in a funeral. But one need not be a member of the Episcopal Church to appreciate the value of reciting 111 words which articulate truth about the Trinity and the person and work of Christ. Though it was not formulated by the apostles of the early church, it does represent an ancient summary of Christian doctrine found in the Scriptures. Creeds were formulated in the early church to concisely express the beliefs of Christianity that grew out of the elementary forms of confession found in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3).

I would like to make a modest proposal that we lay hold of a creedal-like statement found in 1 Timothy 3:16. It is a gospel rich expression, wonderfully suited for the Christmas season. Paul wrote to Timothy, his understudy in the city of Ephesus, to provide a kind of church manual. House churches were scattered throughout the environs of Ephesus. They needed basic guidelines for life in the church. The apostle likens the local church to a temple which is to display and protect the truth of the gospel in contrast to the world famous, magnificent temple of Diana (Artemis). Ephesus was “cult city.” But in the midst of a demonically infested religious and commercial center was Christ’s church. Great is the church because great is its exalted Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 16 we have the content of the truth upheld by the church. Let’s look at the grandeur of the gospel.

He was manifested in the flesh. The gospel is about the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus existed in all eternity and assumed humanity to effect salvation for sinners. In the virgin conception He changed His dwelling place, possessions, glory, position, and form without surrendering His deity (Phil. 2:5-11). Why did Jesus humble Himself? To die for sinners and save from sin, to give eternal life, to know human life from inside by personal experience, to reveal ideal humanity, and provide an everlasting revelation of Himself in visible human form. The triumph is that humanity has been brought into relationship with God.

Vindicated by the Spirit. The gospel is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. Do messiahs die? God's Messiah did. All of Jesus's claims were proven to be true. The headwinds of a world deluded by its willful rebellion cannot deter the believer's optimistic outlook on the future (1 Pet. 3-5). Christians are born again to a living hope.

Seen by angels. The gospel is about the exaltation of Jesus Christ. Jesus triumphed over rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15). Like a Roman general parading his defeated and humiliated enemies behind his chariot, Jesus Christ broke the power of Satan and his angels. Victory was pronounced over the forces of evil. "O death where is your victory. O death, where is your sting" (1 Cor. 15:55). The angelic host in the grandstands of heaven witnessed Christ's stunning victory in the great angelic conflict.

Proclaimed among the nations. The gospel is about the bold declaration that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit descended and the apostles proclaimed the saving power of Jesus Christ to an international audience. The reverberation of this good news traveled to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20). The Despised One began to be universally heralded.

Believed on in the world. The gospel is about the salvation that is found in Christ. Faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone turned the world upside down. Thousands believed (Acts. 2:31; 4:4). The Jews believed. The Samaritans believed. An Ethiopian eunuch believed. Saul/Paul believed. Gentiles believed. Cornelius and his household believed. A Philippian jailer believed. All over the Roman empire both the religious and pagans placed their trust in Jesus Christ.

Taken up in glory. The gospel is about the ascension of Christ. A man has gone into glory and is at the right hand of the Father having "become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (Acts 7:56; Heb. 1:4). He represents every blood-bought believer at the throne of God.

What a marvelous theological encapsulation of the "power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Consider this an invitation to carry the creed of 1 Timothy 3:16 everywhere you go. First of all, memorize it. Repeat it to yourself every chance you get. Repeat it to your family. Secondly, meditate on it. This means reflect on its truth. You can do this by repeating it in other words and responding to God in thanksgiving and worship. Thirdly, make it your own by applying it and passing its message on to others. Think of ways you can communicate this creed in your relationships, in your conversations, and in your witnessing. As someone has said, "meditation without application is like chewing without swallowing."

Christmas can easily keep us preoccupied with shopping, running errands, delightful extra time with the family. These things are good and necessary, but at the same time let's find ways to hold onto what matters most, namely, "the mystery of godliness." The gospel existed before the birth of Christ, but it was in His birth, life, death, and resurrection that God revealed the secret which produces the life of godliness in lost sinners. The best Christmas is the one in which we rejoice in the greatest gift of all, the gift of God's Son.

Homeward Bound (January 4, 2019)

An adventurous American bulldog, a wise golden retriever, and a cautious cat set out on a treacherous and thrilling journey to find their way back home through the California wilderness. What a story! The pull to be reunited with their family creates a willingness to overcome incredible obstacles. "Homeward Bound" is a movie that will leave you teary-eyed.

There is another journey to which every Christian is called. It is filled with dangers, temptations, pain, suffering, and sacrifice, but the destination is glorious beyond description. Nowhere is the necessity of sustained urgency in the Christian more vividly expressed than in the apostle Paul's own experience. Hear his words;

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The struggles of life were daunting but they did not deter God's gospel messenger from pursuing the prize of the full glory of the resurrection. We, like the apostle, have some forgetting to do, namely forgetting the past. But first there are some things we are not to forget. We are not to forget God by the refusal to live in obedience to His Word (Deut. 8:11, 14). And we dare not forget the lessons of the past (Deut. 9:7). Like irritants in an oyster, a pearl of character can be formed by learning from our failures.

What are we to forget? The unbiblical values by which we lived in the past are to be considered as rubbish (3:8). Put them away and live with the insatiable appetite to know Christ (3:10). The nectar of shared life with Christ will supply all the spiritual energy needed. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ fuels triumph over our sin nature (Rom. 8:1-4). Old sins are not our friends but villains who rob us of joyful service for Christ. One of those villains comes disguised as pleasures to be revisited. Israel fell into this trap as the "leeks" and "garlic," the fantasy of the good-life in Egypt, seduced them. We can look back nostalgically to the old life and its fleeting pleasures. This is a trick we play on ourselves. Looking back to Egypt with flawed memories kept Israel from looking forward to the future and the Promised Land. Dear Christian, let's know what not to forget and what to forget.

All of which brings us to what homeward-bound living looks like. Pressing on in the pursuit of our upward call requires straining toward what is ahead. Paul uses two terms that are quite expressive. In 3:12 he says "I press on." It is a term of intensity. It is translated "persecute" in most of its occurrences in the New Testament. Focused effort is the idea. The other word is a double compound in the Greek meaning "stretching oneself out towards." It was used to describe a runner going all out for the finish line. In the 1972 Munich Olympics Dave Wottle stunned the crowd with a never to be forgotten race. Wottle in the weeks leading up to the 800 meters final had been hampered by tendinitis in his knee. He started off well behind the pack but at the beginning of the second lap he began to move up. With 200 meters to go he was passing runners. Down the stretch he hit another running gear and beat the favored Russian competitor by 0.03 seconds to come in first place and win the gold medal. It's worth watching on You Tube. Dave Wottle never gave up. Do you catch the urgency bound up in Paul's language? Every day of our lives is to be one of straining toward what is ahead with mental, physical, and spiritual discipline.

We are not left hanging as to what straining toward the goal of blessings and rewards looks like. But first let's be clear what is included in the goal of life in glory. It means being with Christ, a resurrection body, the rewards of ruling and reigning with Christ in His kingdom, complete freedom from sin's tyranny, the new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth, the wiping away of every tear, no more death or grief, or crying, or pain, or suffering. Until then, follow Paul in Philippians, watch out for enemies of the cross (3:18). Stand firm in the faith (4:1). Learn to get along with fellow believers (4:2,3). Rejoice always ((4:4). Adopt a generous spirit that rises above offenses, not insisting on our rights (4:5, 2:1-4). Instead give attention to our Christ-centered responsibilities. Throw away worry and replace it with a prayer saturated life (4:6). Clean our thinking of the clutter of human opinion and replace it with God's thoughts (4:8). This is the life that pushes hard toward the finish line of the gates of glory.

Dogs and cats finding their way home against incredible odds serves a useful purpose. We who are made in the image of God are lost in the wilderness of sin. We can never find our way home without rescue. That rescue has come to us in a Redeemer. He saves us by paying the price of our sin. He died on the cross and was raised from the dead. We have a fully qualified Savior, and he leads us to His home. Rejoice, O Christian, we are homeward bound.

The Meeting (January 23, 2019)

"I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways."
Psalm 119:15

Meeting with God is hearing God's Word and talking with God. This entails setting things aside and scheduling time to engage our minds with the truth of God's Word. It is opening up our hearts to the Lord and seeking Him in adoration, confession of sin, thanksgiving, and bringing our needs to Him. The example of Jesus should be an incentive. He grew up studying the OT Scriptures under the tutelage of His parents and the synagogue. Jesus was awakened morning by morning to learn from the Father as He learned obedience from the things which He suffered (Isa. 50:4, 5; Heb. 5:8). Early mornings, while it was still dark, found Him in isolated places praying (Mk. 1:35). Can we, who have sin within, do less? We marvel at how Jesus always had the perfect response to every temptation, trial, and questions asked of Him. He was steeped in the whole counsel of God and lived with delight in doing the will of God (Isa. 40:6-8). In His darkest hour Jesus fell on His face and prayed (Matt. 26:39). May God give us the grace to follow in His footsteps (1 Pet. 2:21).

Two matters need attention before we consider what it means to hear God's Word. One, meeting with God at a special time does not rule out moment by moment communion with God. All of life is like living in a house with God. He is always home. But there will be times when we have dedicated times with Him. These are necessary for intentional study time and extended prayer time. Second, hearing God speak to us is not a matter of training ourselves to receive direct revelation from God. It has become quite fashionable to claim that we can receive direct revelation from God. As one advocate of this way of listening to God has said, "I knew God communicated with me through the Bible, but I yearned for more. Increasingly I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day." The writer goes on to affirm that such messages from God "were not inspired as Scripture, but they were helping me grow closer to God." I am in full sympathy with wanting to grow closer to God, but it is to happen in the way

He has made possible. God has spoken in the sixty-six books of the Bible and I hear Him by understanding what He has said by the enabling work of the Holy Spirit. Pastor Doug McIntosh has put it succinctly: “The Christian who meditates on the text of Scripture. . . because he believes God has already spoken. We enter the presence of God to worship on the basis of a completed revelation, not to acquire more of it. Meditation is not seeking after *revelation*, but *illumination*.” (God Up Close, How to Mediate His Word p.38). Searching the Scriptures to learn what God has said is not a second-class way of hearing from Him. It is the divinely designed way to receive the wisdom in order to live a Christ exalting way of life.

Why is meeting with God for meditation on the Scriptures and prayer so important? Because this is one of the primary means the Holy Spirit uses for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness. God uses people and circumstances to bring us to stronger faith. Spiritual disciplines also serve as spiritual exercises in training ourselves for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). But how should we go about meditating on God’s Word? Meditation is an active mental engagement with the Scriptures in order to understand what God has said and wants us to do. The psalmist said long ago, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” (Psa. 1:1-2) I recommend the following way to go about understanding and applying a passage of Scripture.

Observation: What do I see? Look for what is emphasized, repeated, the relationship of thoughts, contrasts, true to life situations.

Interpretation: What does it mean? Pay attention to the content, context, comparisons, and culture issues. Remember, there is only one correct interpretation. The meaning of the passage is in the author’s mind, not in our subjective impressions.

Apply: What does it mean to me? How does the passage apply to my personal life, family life, church life, work, community, and the world? There can be many applications.

For example, read through Psalm 1. Read it out loud with the necessary inflection in your voice. As you get a grip on what the psalm is emphasizing, your reading will bear this out. The psalms are written in poetic form. Learn from this. “Walk, stand, and sit” (v. 1) are an example of synonymous parallelism which is saying the same thing but adding nuances of thought. Write down your work in a few sentences. This can contribute to a concise summary which will include wisdom to guide you in your decisions (e.g. where have you searched for happiness?). Memorization will help tremendously in driving the nail of truth deeper into to your thoughts. Psalm 1:1-2 are wonderful verses to have on the bottom shelf of your memory.

In your dedicated time with God in your favorite place delight in talking with God whether in adoration, confession of sin, thanksgiving, or petitions. When you have meditated on a passage of Scripture, this offers the opportunity for Bible truth to flow into your prayers. Don Whitney captures this thought nicely: “After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer.” (Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, p. 72) Organization can help toward a more effective prayer life. A journal divided into the days of the month can facilitate many different prayer items such as prayer promises, personal needs, family, church family, the unsaved, missionaries, government officials, etc. Our church provides a monthly prayer calendar when, if used daily, can assist in praying through the church family. I have found it helpful to

carry a small notebook as a memory aid for names, quotes, ideas, and prayer requests that come up in meetings and conversations. Our church's annual missionary prayer guide is of tremendous value in the overall prayer-care of our church supported missionaries. Berachah Worldwide emails give detailed updates for prayer. I suggest reading periodically a book on prayer. This can stoke the furnace of our heart to entreat God. One such book is [A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Priorities from Paul and his Prayers](#) by D.A. Carson.

Prayerfully, consider the following resolutions. "I resolve that I will build into my daily routine a special time to meet with God and meditate on His Word." "By God's grace I will determine a time to meet with God in daily prayer."

We must discipline our lives, but we must do so all the year round, and not merely at stated periods. I must discipline myself at all times.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

Kill the Bull (February 1, 2019)

The book of Exodus may very well be the most politicized book of the Bible. It has been a biblical wax-nose for Marxists, liberation theology, the English revolution, and the American revolution. The Exodus story is powerful. A beleaguered, oppressed, and enslaved people are dramatically delivered from their Egyptian oppressors. This narrative of redemption has been written into literature, politics, movies by the hundreds, and a long line of social movements. Political philosopher, Michael Walzer, in his 1986 book, [Exodus and Revolution](#), "offers a moving meditation on the political meanings of the biblical story of Exodus – from oppression to deliverance and the promised land." In one example he cites Leninist political revolutionaries being fond of arguing that just as Moses had to purge the people to save his revolution, Lenin had to do the same. Even in our own nation's history in 1776 Benjamin Franklin proposed that the great seal of the United States show "Moses with his rod lifted and the Egyptian army drowning in the sea."

Can we not let the second book of the Torah speak for itself? Exodus has been described as the book of Acts of the Old Testament. A redeemed Israel is freed from Egypt to become established as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). They were to be God's representatives in an idol-saturated, pagan world. There was no nation on the face of the earth with "in God we trust" on its coinage. For four hundred years Jacob's twelve sons and their descendants had lived in the shadow of Egyptian idolatry. The entire culture was given over to devotion to Re, the sun god, Horus, the god of heaven, Osiris, the god of vegetation, and a host of other gods and goddesses. Religion was not simply a part of Egyptian's life, it was everything. The pyramids, carved inscriptions on the walls of tombs, and thousands of priests were all witnesses to a people and government that lived in a different spiritual universe from that of the sons of Jacob.

The two million Jewish people delivered from Egyptian bondage needed minds and lives filled with the true God of the universe, the God of the Exodus, their covenant God. Exodus is about the person of God; a sovereign, holy, an all-powerful, just, and redeeming God (Ex. 15:3). God's people, Israel, had to be steeped in the wonders of redemption. Their preparation for entering their promised land demanded lives centered upon the worship of the true God. An Egyptian

worldview had to be purged from every aspect of their lives. They needed a body of laws to regulate their daily lives. They were to build a tabernacle for “the God who would live among His people” (Ex. 25:8). And vital to it all was an order of worship and sacrifice.

Emblematic of their “bloody” worship was the killing of prized animals from their flocks and herds. At the outset the consecration of priests was dramatic and detailed. The induction ceremony is described in Exodus 29. How many topical sermons in our own day would premier Exodus 29? But it is vital to the story, not only of Exodus but of the whole Bible. One writer describes the ceremony in this way: “First, sacrificial animals and bread are brought and prepared; then the priests are systematically clothed in their sacred vestments. After the animal is slaughtered, its blood is dashed against the altar and the innards are burned as an offering; the sacred ram is slain.”

Why all the specifics? Because Israel had to have it drilled into their minds and worship habits that the right approach to God would not happen in the way of pagan systems. The words of the apostle leap to mind: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom.12:2). The circumstances are different. We don’t live under the rule of the theocracy and the Mosaic system. However, we are incentivized by the mercies of God in Jesus Christ, “to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” (Rom.12:1). Instructions were for bulls and rams to be selected for sacrifice. The priests were to lay their hands on the bull calf to symbolize personal identification and substitution in this sin offering. The bull calf was to have its throat slit. It’s an uncomfortable scene but we must not leave the butchery too quickly. Blood was to be smeared on the horns of the altar of burnt offering. Then the remainder of the blood was to be poured out at the base of the altar (v. 12). If you find this reprehensible, do not lose sight of the fact that blood represents life. A Jewish commentator says this: “The animal’s life-blood must, as it were, be ‘returned’ to God - either by sprinkling it on the altar or by pouring it on the ground (Deut. 12:16 and 15:23).” Even entrails of the bull calf were to be turned into smoke (Ex. 29:13). The Egyptians, as did other pagan societies, invested great value in reading animal’s entrails for the purpose of divining signs from the gods (Ezek. 21:26). Think of the irony of this bull-killing. Israelite priests were inducted into service for God by sacrificing “Egyptian gods.”

Exodus is rich in its anticipation of the new covenant. The everlasting high-priesthood of Jesus Christ was signed, sealed, and delivered by offering up His own blood “once for all. . . not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). Thousands of animal sacrifices were vital to Israel’s role as a nation and kingdom in declaring God’s salvation to the nations. The shedding of an animal’s blood vividly displayed death as the price of sin. If God were to “tabernacle” among Israel, atonement for sin must be made. And it was, but only temporarily. The perennial repetition of blood sacrifices for sin was a powerful preparation for the coming Messiah who would make the final and complete sacrifice: “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12). The slaughtered bull was a small but significant part of the story of redemption under the Old Covenant as it anticipated the New Covenant. One day God will establish His kingdom on earth. A redeemed Israel and the Church will join together in ruling and reigning with Christ all because of the blood-bought reconciliation between God and man.

Until then the self-deceived human race desperately and blindly attempts to create its own redemption and kingdom on earth. It is a fool's errand of ill-fated utopianism. The church of Jesus Christ, like Israel of old, lives in an idol-worshipping world with a mandate to declare the excellencies of God as revealed in His Son. There is no more need for killed bulls. We have a Savior who is alive forevermore.

It's a Crying Shame (February 22, 2019)

The governor of New York pompously announced his state legislature's decision to legalize all abortions, including later-term abortion. In light of the cheering at its passage, one would have thought a disease had been eradicated. The governor of Virginia dispassionately lends his support to what sounds like infanticide. The crying shame of it all is how quickly the media moves on to other things. Yet it gets darker. The idea that it is permissible, even necessary, to kill innocent babies gets a pass in the wider culture. What have we become conditioned to? This is bad, really bad.

Abortion is about God. God has made it very clear that the developing fetus is already a human life. The psalmist, as God's mouthpiece, vividly describes the formation of the life of a person in the womb (Psa. 139:13-16). John the Baptist is said to have "leaped for joy" in his mother's womb in the sixth month of pregnancy when he heard Mary's voice. The virgin Mary was informed by the angel Gabriel that she would bear a son. Elizabeth called Mary "the mother of my Lord" (Lk. 1:43). From the standpoint of Scripture, we should not need more evidence that the embryo is a human being. But modern medicine has opened up an understanding of fetal life previously unseen. A research biochemist/biologist writes,

At fertilization the '23' chromosomes of the sperm have combined with the '23' chromosomes of the egg to produce a single-cell human zygote containing '46' chromosomes (the number and quality of chromosomes specific for the human species). The single-cell human zygote contains all of the genetic information the adult human being will ever have.

Surely "there is an inconsistency between doing fetal surgery on a baby in the womb to save life, and at a similar stage of development, killing a baby down the hall." We know this, that at eight weeks all the organs are present--brain functioning, heart pumping, liver making blood cells, kidney cleaning the fluids, fingerprints formed, etc. Yet society is largely quiet about the fact that almost all abortions happen later than this date. There is a reason why abortion providers discourage a pregnant woman from accessing ultrasound. The sight of seeing the unborn at eight weeks sucking a thumb, recoiling from pricking, and responding to sound asserts great moral and emotional pressure on the father and mother of the baby.

Abortion is an assault on God, not just human beings. For this reason, defenseless fetal life will be vindicated by God. God hates those who shed innocent blood. Innocent blood includes the blood of children (Psa. 106:38; 94:6, 23). Human government was established by God to protect the lives of the people it governs. To abdicate this responsibility invites the retribution of a holy God. Wayne Grudem in his book Christian Ethics, pp. 577-578, recommends the following governmental policies and laws regarding abortion:

1. *Governments should enact laws prohibiting abortions except to save the life of the mother.*
2. *No government policies should promote or fund abortions.*
3. *No government policies should compel people to participate in abortions or to dispense drugs that cause abortions.*
4. *No government funding or support should be given to the process of creating human embryos for the purpose of destroying them in medical research.*

The Supreme Court of the United States unleashed a torrent of evil in its *Roe v. Wade* decision, January 22, 1973. Since then abortions have risen from about 775,000 in 1973 to about 1.6 million annually. The Court managed to find “a right to abortion” where it had not been found before, with one result being the failure to distinguish between the legality of abortion on demand with its immorality.

The conscience-defying destruction of fetal life has been defended in a variety of ways. Some argue that “a woman alone has the right to choose what is done to and in her body.” We hear this rationale articulated in terms of “reproductive freedom” or “a free society should not invade the privacy of a woman’s body.” The truth is that “freedom of choice” can never justify freedom to take innocent lives at will. We should also ask, what about the rights of the unborn? Who is his or her advocate? Pro-abortionists often make the charge that Christians should not try to impose their moral standards on other people. But the issue is really whose morality will be reflected in our law and public policy. Many of our laws are based on moral convictions. John Feinberg in *Ethics for a Brave New World* (p. 71) is certainly correct that “we are not embarrassed to impose a morality on society that requires us not to kill another human being on whim.”

There are measurable and meaningful actions that we can take to challenge and correct the culture of death in which we live. We are to live in such a way as to be a purifying influence on the moral pollution around us (Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:11-17). We “should support pro-life candidates for office, especially for the presidency and the Senate, because the president alone nominates Supreme Court justices, and the Senate must approve those nominations before a nominee can join the court” (Grudem, p. 578). Finally, we are to be a merciful community providing assistance to those who are crying in the darkness. The single pregnant woman needs our compassion.

We must speak to that woman who has read these words and wept over an abortion. God is a forgiving God who welcomes those “who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Patricia Sandoval worked in a Planned Parenthood facility where she “witnessed biohazard freezers full of bagged body parts. . . She says she saw a giant petri dish filled with aborted parts of unborn 6-month-old twin brothers: ‘That’s when I faced the truth. I didn’t believe in God at that point, but I knew that I killed my three children.’” As Sandoval sat on a curb, despondent and hopeless, “a woman came out of a nearby restaurant, hugging her and telling her about Christ’s love and forgiveness. She gave Sandoval a meal and a ride to her father’s house.” (WORLD magazine, Jan. 19, 2019, “Living pro-vida”). An abortion need not define the bereaved mother. God’s forgiveness and compassion exceed the crying shame.

May God bring us as a nation to cry in shame.

On the Basis of Race (March 8, 2019)

Moody Bible Institute was founded in 1886 by evangelist Dwight L. Moody, perhaps the most influential “clergyman” in the last quarter of the nineteenth century according to church historian, Earle E. Cairns. The course of American history was altered by Moody’s revival services and evangelistic outreach. MBI has produced over 6,100 missionaries. Beth’s uncle attended Moody Bible Institute before serving as a missionary in Brazil for over forty years. The following news story is not meant to diminish MBI’s faithfulness to the Word of God for over 120 years.

The news headline reads, “Torn Over Racism.” A brief account follows,

A rending demonstration cut into alumni-day celebrations at Moody Bible Institute’s Founder’s Week this month when two graduates tore up their Moody diplomas in a Chicago street-side protest over alleged racial discrimination . . .

Moody graduate Melvin Warren, a Reformed Church in America minister and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School student, charged that Moody’s emeritus dean of education, Dr. S. Maxwell Coder, in a statement . . . said “the Bible teaches that inter-racial marriage is inherently wrong.” Warren challenged Coder to defend that statement publicly on a radio program.

When Moody authorities didn’t respond, according to Warren, he and Leona Jenkins tore up their diplomas and one belonging to Miss Jenkin’s sister, Leola.

Said Warren, as his shredded sheep-skin floated into a trash barrel: “We do this to inform the black Christian community and all Christendom of the institutional white racism at Moody.”

The above story is from “Christianity Today,” February 27, 1970. Moody Bible Institute has long since removed itself from charges of racial discrimination and exemplifies integrity in racial matters. Fifty years later, however, charges of discrimination against people based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds are still not uncommon. Has anything changed? Yes and no. No longer do we see signs above water fountains and restrooms that read “colored only” or “white only.” Boarding passengers on public transportation are not instructed that “whites sit from front to rear and colored from rear to front.” Yes, some forms of racial discrimination have vanished but others still exist. “A June 2016 study by the Pew Research Center found that an overwhelming majority of blacks (88 percent) say the United States needs to continue making changes for blacks to have equal rights with whites, but 43 percent are skeptical that such changes will ever occur.” (Christian Ethics, Wayne Grudem, p.638)

The extent and places of racial discrimination is debated. However, it is essential that a biblical foundation be established if progress is to be made in overcoming any form of ethnic and racial prejudice. God created Adam and Eve from whom all human beings have descended (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:20; 9:18-19; Acts 17:26; Rom. 5:19; 1 Cor. 15:21-22). The human race shares undeniable physical unity. This did not come from animal ancestry, but from the supernatural and sudden creative work of the God of the universe. All human beings have been created in His image (Gen. 1:28; 5:3; 9:6). Our likeness to God prohibits believers from showing partiality (James 2:1; 3:9). Our identity, though the subject of much confusion in our day, is first and foremost not in

our skin color or sexuality, but in being an image bearer of the God of heaven. No race or people group is superior or inferior to another. Every human being is to be treated with dignity and respect. The indignities placed upon blacks in the Jim Crow era in the South after the Civil War should never have been tolerated by white, evangelical Christians. Our departed brothers and sisters in Christ who lived with racial prejudice have already been introduced to what is awaiting all believers: “And I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . .” (Rev. 7:9-10).

Believers in Jesus Christ are given through example and instruction the way those from different racial backgrounds should relate to one another. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, challenged the racial prejudices of His day. He breached social barriers between Jew and Samaritan. He conversed with a Samaritan woman and made a Samaritan the hero of one of His best-known parables (Jn. 4:1-42; Lk. 10:25-37). The disciples were commanded to go all the nations and preach the gospel (Matt. 28:19). Peter was schooled by God in the truth that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). The converted Jewish rabbi, the apostle Paul, taught the churches that “there is neither Jew or Greek . . . for you are all one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28). Picture the faces and backgrounds of those in a typical house-church in the first century: converted Jews, Gentiles, slaves, slave-owners, educated, uneducated, civilized, uncivilized, representatives of people groups in the Roman Empire (Col. 3:11, “in contrast to such discrimination and prejudice against other races and cultures, Paul shows that Jesus, who is *all*, and *in all*, binds all Christians together in equality, irrespective of such differences.” ESV Study Bible).

The sad story is that we have all kinds of impediments to the realization of racial and ethnic harmony in our society. Sinful hearts are filled with pride and prejudice that pollute our discourse. The media contributes to division and suspicion by spreading victimology, rushing to judgment, seeking to advance a secular agenda and selectively focusing on an outrage of the day. Divisive forces conspire to divide by shatter-shooting with the accusation of racist and racism to attack those with whom they disagree. The indictment of people groups by the use of such promiscuous labeling as, “xenophobia,” “bigot,” “haters,” and “Nazism” does not help us. The abuse and misuse of language to depersonalize and dehumanize people tears down a civilization. The word phobia as used in “homophobia,” “Islamophobia,” etc. is designed to conjure up images of a mental disorder and the dangerous reactions to certain kinds of people. As Christians we serve as salt and light in society by making our speech gracious (Col. 3:5) and a fire retardant (James 3:5,6). Civility and courtesy have become distant memories. Evil speech destroys and serves the cause of Satan.

There are personal, everyday steps we can take to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (Jn. 13:34). The Savior knew that His disciples, and all believers, needed this command considering the intense rivalry among them. The natural heart is a me-first, prejudice-inclined heart. Washing one another’s feet is a vivid picture of what it means to serve others in thought, word, and deed. Be mindful of the example of Christ and the world will sit up and take notice. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Me and My Shadow - Part 1 (March 29, 2019)

“Shades of night are falling and I’m lonely, Standing on the corner feeling blue, Sweethearts out for fun, Pass me one by one, Guess I’ll wind up like I always do, With only, Me and my shadow, Not a soul to tell my troubles to, And when it’s twelve o’clock, We climb the stair, We never knock, For nobody’s there, Just me and my shadow, All alone and feeling blue, When the sun sets on the far horizon, And the parlor lamps begin to glow, . . .”

If you want to flirt with a mood of loneliness, listen to Judy Garland cast the spell with her rendition of the song “Me and My Shadow.” But this is not necessary. We’ve all had our bouts with loneliness. It can overtake us in the strangest times and places. You don’t have to be by yourself like “Danny Miner, a 66-year old retired chemical plant supervisor, (who) spends most days alone in his Tooele, Utah, apartment, with ‘Gunsmoke’ reruns to keep him company and a phone that rarely rings” (“More Than Ever, Americans Age Alone”, WSJ, December 12, 2018). Loneliness can be especially haunting when you are in a crowd. It may visit you while sitting in a church service, at a ball game, even with friends.

Loneliness does not beset us just in occasional bouts. Some live with it chronically. According to the Wall Street Journal the Baby Boomer generation (1946 to ’64) “is increasingly living on their own as they age – and are more likely to say they feel lonely than other generations. Social isolation costs Medicare an estimated \$6.7 billion a year, mostly from spending on nursing facilities and hospitalization” (Ibid). This same article points out that research “suggests that those who are isolated are at risk of depression, cognitive decline and dementia.” But loneliness is no respecter of persons. According to some polls, loneliness is the number one problem in the USA today.

What is loneliness? It is not merely being alone. It’s primarily a matter of the mind, not geography; a feeling of being cut off from others, a longing for the company of others, a sense of isolation, a feeling of not belonging and not being understood. It can be particularly grievous when a believer battles loneliness. After all, hasn’t God declared that He is everywhere present and watches over us (“I am with you always, to the end of the age,” Matt. 28:20)? However, the psalmist of the Old Testament confessed to a feeling of abandonment by God, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psa. 13:1). Elijah found himself alone and lonely (a toxic mix) after a brave confrontation with the prophets of Baal. One of the features of loneliness is spiritual amnesia, forgetting the wonderful things God has done for us in the past. The dejected prophet’s words drip with self-pity, “and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away” (1 Kgs. 19:10). Paul gives us a whiff of loneliness when he coped with the desertion of Demas who had been a valued fellow worker (2 Tim. 4:10).

Loneliness seldom travels alone. It often comes with depression, grief, restlessness, temptation, anger, guilt, anxiety and doubts about God. It occurs because we live in a fallen world and inhabit bodies likened to jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). We are fragile. The human condition is afflicted with a deficient relationship with God. The “togetherness” enjoyed with God by Adam and Eve was short-lived. Sin became the great disrupter. Those without the presence of Christ in their lives must deal with spiritual separation anxiety; in the words of Augustine, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” Loneliness is the result of alienation from God. Born again Christians can experience their own battle with

loneliness due to a defective relationship with God. Unconfessed sin takes its toll on fellowship with our heavenly Father (1 Jn. 1:1-9). Bitterness, anger, jealousy, an unreconciled relationship with a fellow believer, letting people become bigger than God, all create a sense of distance from God.

Loneliness is often self-inflicted. Fearfulness, being busy, inability to communicate, laziness, the failure to develop friendships, self-centeredness, and always talking about oneself contribute to isolation.

Our culture does not help. Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) create the illusion that we are connected to others when the reverse is true. Sherry Amatenstein, LCSW, describes the link between social media and loneliness:

We've all been in a public place, waiting for a friend to arrive or simply dining, traveling, or sitting alone, and opened an app to avoid "awkward" eye contact with those around us. And it is common for social anxiety sufferers to open social media apps to temporarily feel some connection to others. But when they unplug, the feeling of connection dissipates. Furthermore, frequently viewing curated snapshots of other people's lives might leave social media users feeling as if everyone else has a better life, is smarter, funnier, more interesting, has more friends, etc. . . .The online world might begin to feel like a minefield of potential triggers: from the comparison trap outlined above to obsessively checking if someone has "liked" their post or wished them a happy birthday (<https://www.psychom.net/mental-health-wellbeing/mental-health>).

Loneliness is nurtured by a wide variety of social circumstances; mobility (moving, being transferred, modern transportation), retirement, television commercials (if you drive a certain car, appear a certain way, less lonely?), lack of intimacy in one's marriage, materialism, technology (emphasis on production, efficiency, specialization), urbanization (fear of strangers, suspicion), secularization (denial of the existence of spiritual reality and the possibility of a personal relationship with God), changing churches (no roots, no meaningful relationships), television - in heavy amounts with a distorted view of the real world, and the lack of relational interaction among family members.

We can see from the above a few of the ways in which modern life subtly draws us into isolation and that is-there-anybody-there feeling. But the danger does not stop there. Loneliness craves for relief. The "medications" are many and attractively offered; alcohol, drugs, internet sex, and hiding in the cave of further withdrawal. As the sought-after remedies fail one may spiral into despair, hopelessness, and even suicide.

Before advancing to divine wisdom for overcoming loneliness, it would be helpful to assess ourselves. How many close friends do you have? Do you find yourself often isolated from people? How do you handle it? Do you prefer to stay home and watch television than attend church? How do you spend your time? What are your priorities? Are you increasingly spending more time at home by yourself? Do you drink alcohol to deal with lonely feelings? Are you frequently depressed or sad? Don't despair. There is hope. There is a friend who is not a mere shadow.

To be continued

Me and My Shadow - Part 2 (April 26, 2019)

It was on a Good Friday in April of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. The azaleas were blooming, and the forsythia was seeking its own attention. Fifty volunteer marchers walked on the downtown street and were met by barricades and a gruff, shouting Chief of Police, Bull Connor. Dr. Martin Luther King and Ralph David Abernathy knelt in prayer. Swarms of detectives and motorcycle police took them by the seats of their pants and shoved them into a paddy wagon. Arrested and jailed, Dr. King found himself in solitary confinement. It was a dark and dank dungeon without a mattress or pillow. The loneliness was suffocating. In the words of Dr. King: “Those were the longest, most frustrating hours I have lived... I was in in a nightmare of despair.” (I am indebted to Stephen B. Oates in his title, Let the Trumpet Sound for the account he gives of Dr. King’s experience in Birmingham.)

Loneliness comes with a sense of abandonment and marauding moods of hopelessness and depression. But we do not have to be alone in a jail cell to know what it is like. Loneliness stirs longings for relief and hope. Such circumstances beg a question. Is there a way out of the clutches of such gloom? Yes, there is. God has opened the way to mercy. Loneliness can be resolved by a God-pursuing, Spirit-enabled, biblically directed plan of action.

At the outset, a distinction is to be made between being alone and loneliness. Being alone is a necessary part of living, potentially bringing life-changing thoughts and self-examination. We have biblical examples of the value of being alone. Jesus willingly entered into aloneness for a period of testing. Satan, dark shadows, cold nights, hot days, wild animals, hunger, and thirst conspired to maximize the temptation of the Son of God (Matt. 4:1ff.). But a key victory over the devil’s schemes was won. The apostle Paul was enrolled in a desert experience as part of his training (Gal. 1:17). The time to rethink his theology made Paul a gospel force to be reckoned with. John was enduring alone-time on the Island of Patmos while he received the content of the book of Revelation. As a result, we possess the record of the glorious triumph of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Loneliness can creep up on us when we are cut off from family and friends. Soul searching is useful on these occasions. Am I afraid of being alone? Do I need people around me all the time? We need sequestered experiences alone to rethink our priorities and to be reminded that we need to be with God for more effectiveness with people. Aloneness and battles with loneliness are unavoidable trials. Bouts with those who are antagonistic to gospel realities can socially isolate us (Jn. 16:33; Jas. 1:2; Isa. 43:2). Death separates us from those we love. What must we do in the valley of the shadow of death? Lay hold of God. The psalms show us how to think and fight our way through desperate emotional lows. James told his readers to “count it all joy” while we endure hardships (Jas. 1:2). We need to listen to the right voices.

A sense of loneliness can become the door to a great discovery. Perhaps, my friend, you may come to the realization that the bitterness of being disconnected from people is a symptom of a deeper problem. Our natural condition as human beings is that we are alienated from God by our sin. We are indeed alone in the ultimate sense. We were made for God and His companionship. Drop what you are doing and go to God. He is waiting for you. Throw yourself into His open arms. He is ready to forgive you and give you eternal life through Jesus Christ. How awful it is to step out of time and into eternity without fellowship with God. An eternity of loneliness. How dreadful.

Lest we forget, as children of God we are not exempt from our own feelings of being a castaway. We can be unfriended, ignored, and forgotten by others. The most profitable first response is to think about how Jesus coped with rejection. Nothing in the universe can compare to what He experienced at the cross. His disciples chose to distance themselves from Him. His enemies encircled Him with taunts and mockery. He was dying and drowning in a sea of abandonment, even by the Father. No one who has ever lived has tasted that kind of loneliness. But the truth of the matter was that the most wonderful transaction in time and eternity was being accomplished. Our estrangement from God was being remedied. The head of the serpent was being crushed. Sin's debt was being paid. Death would no longer exercise its tyranny.

Because of Jesus Christ's victory over loneliness, we who are His children possess an extraordinary inheritance. We have a treasure chest of promises such as "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20) and "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (Jn. 14:18). Our aching, fragile, and mortal bodies will be replaced with immortal ones. Cast your eyes on the light at the end of the tunnel. Because of Christ our loneliness can be transformed into greater love for Him and others.

Loneliness can be cured by sensitivity to those who are lonely. Our own descent into loneliness should create greater compassion and understanding toward those who feel deserted. If I find myself wandering off into the unpopulated zones of my thoughts, I need to identify and eliminate those attitudes and practices that breed loneliness. Fear, selfishness, rigidity, inflexibility, perfectionism, pushiness, and a critical spirit are not the kinds of traits that attract others. Consider yourself a servant. Reach out to people. Become more conscious of the friendless. Pray for a Spirit-induced radar. Refuse to be a stranger in your own church family. Start talking to people. Consider writing down a note to yourself; "I will serve _____ by helping him/her." Or "I will love _____ by ignoring his rudeness and ask about his family." Forgive those who treat you harshly and push you away, yes, even those who throw you into jail.

It was out of Martin Luther King's battles with loneliness and discouragement that Birmingham jail became "a turning point in the civil-rights struggle." Dr. King did not allow loneliness to define his life. He fought through it and left the legacy of freedom, so long denied blacks throughout the South.

The Parakeet (May 17, 2019)

It all began on a Monday in late afternoon. I was sitting on my back porch reading. I looked up and saw a beautifully colored, unidentified bird walking across the deck toward the porch. It was soon climbing up the screen, seemingly unafraid of my presence. It seemed to want some kind of companionship. So, I maneuvered him around, and opened the screen door. He flew in and made himself at home, perching on my table and then on the chair next to me. I had a friend. As I saw him up close, I knew he was a parakeet, probably a stray one who had gotten away from his owner. I stopped by Pet Smart and bought some parakeet seed. I put some seed in a dish with water nearby. The next morning, I would decide how to handle a place to stay for a homeless bird. Did I really need a pet parakeet?

Morning came and I immediately checked on my guest. He was not moving or responding in any way. He was dead. Sadness came over me. I felt responsible. He had been so entertaining. I had even Googled “parakeet.” I found out parakeets require special care. They enjoy people and need toys to play with. I could arrange for that. But I had to bury him. It was just a bird, but still a beautifully feathered creature God had made and he needed help.

Having spent so much time indoors in my adult life studying, reading, and surrounded with books, I have been too often cut off from God’s creation. My study windows give me a view as I reminisce about my youth and life in the woods; playing in creeks, finding salamanders, climbing trees, finding flowers to take home to my mother, discovering the great outdoors. I love birds. Their freedom in the skies with the wind under their wings. The variety and richness of their colors. The variety of animals God created is simply amazing. He has made them all, each with their peculiar characteristics.

Parakeets are small members of the parrot family. They come in brilliant colors and usually are affectionate and clever pets. But like all creatures they die. We know that “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected in hope...” (Rom. 8:20). Birds die. Dogs die. Cats die. The truth is that cats eat birds, weeds take over the garden, drought blight kills crops, the wooly aphid kills the spruce, and so on and on it goes. Nature, red in tooth and claw. It is under a curse, imposed by God because of human sin. He did so that He might liberate it. In the mean-time creation is one grand symphony of sighs, a witness to Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God.

Nature’s yearning for its redemption is tied into the glorious future that awaits all believers in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul explains this in Romans 8:18,19: “For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” These two sentences are loaded with optimism. In the first place, the future glory of believers surpasses all present suffering. We long for glory because we live in the ruins of a dying world. Secondly, the future glory of believers has creation standing on its tiptoes to see what is coming.

The collective thought of an unbelieving world makes two colossal errors in its view of creation. It worships nature. The history of man is written in its made-up myths about the cosmos. There is no “Mother Nature.” The words of Carl Sagan echo the gloom of nature without a Creator: “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” The ancient Canaanites had their own way of making nature a god. They worshipped Baal, the storm and fertility god. It was a religious and moral cancer that destroyed an entire civilization. Nature worship never ends well. Charles Darwin introduced the modern world to the disastrous theory of evolution which sees nature as invested with some kind of on-going and automatic perfecting principle (J. Boice, Romans, Volume 2).

“The revealing of the sons of God” will change everything. The coming kingdom of Christ on this earth will be the opening chapter in creation’s renewal. One day harmony will be restored to the animal kingdom. When Jesus Christ is ruling the earth from Jerusalem “the wolf will dwell with the lamb,” the cow and the bear will graze together as will their offspring, “and the lion will eat straw like the ox” (Isa. 11:6-7). In the kingdom there will be “animal-human” harmony (Isa. 11:8). We won’t need cages for birds, lions, and tigers. My imagination soars. If children can

play with poisonous snakes and not be harmed in the Millennium, why could not birds come to visit us and sing some of their special songs (Isa. 11:8)?

God oversees the obituary of the smallest of birds (Matt. 10:29). He also sends the hummingbirds to entertain us, some of the smallest and most brightly colored birds in the world. They have returned from their winter south of the border just in time to join us for breakfast on our back porch. They compete for time at their feeder, darting in and out, buzzing one another, making their mouse-like twittering squeak sounds while performing their acrobatics. When I think of the hummingbird one of my first thoughts is of the Creator who designed their wings to beat as fast as 70 times a second. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of creation with all its wonders. Death is here but it cannot diminish the delights of God's handiwork.

“Let the Trumpet Sound” (June 2, 2019)

A book may be an axe that breaks up the frozen seas within. My recent experience in reading “Let the Trumpet Sound,” a life of Martin Luther King, Jr. did break up frozen seas. No biography can completely explain any man or woman. Human beings are too complex for that. We can follow their words, understand their aspirations, study their deeds, and examine their strengths and weaknesses. But only God perfectly knows our hearts. He alone will judge us with omniscient, wise, and perfect justice.

Stephen Oates, professor emeritus of history at University of Massachusetts, took his title from 1 Corinthians 15:52; “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” Noted author, William Manchester, has said that this biography is “The book on Martin Luther King... moving, scholarly, lucid, invaluable.”

The story of Martin Luther King was invaluable to this reader. My youth, college, and seminary days paralleled King's leadership in the Civil Rights movement. This is not meant to be merely self-referential. I retrospectively reexamined my southern Bible belt whiteness. What did I know? What were my values? Where was my church in those tumultuous days? When and where did I become “woke?”

He was a preacher's kid which meant long Sundays in church. His parents and grandparents adored him. And to top it off his grandmother and mother were “world-class” cooks. There was a back yard for playing ball and streets on which to ride his bike. His upbringing took place in a middle-class section of black Atlanta. But the specter of a social evil was never very far away, massive racial injustice. Jim Crow, the era of segregation, with its separate schools, restrooms, water fountains, and hundreds of other dehumanizing restrictions defined painful normalcy for M.L. and the King family.

On April 4, 1968 at 7:05 pm., a white racist's bullet ended Martin Luther King's life at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. A thirty-nine-year-old courageous black man's life was snuffed out. But the legacy of racial justice of the grandson of a former slave remains with us today.

Martin Luther King was a courageous man. He walked away from what could have been a comparatively safer life as a pastor or professor. Rather than seeking safety, he was drawn to the plight of his people and the burden of racial injustice forced upon them. King endured hatred, angry mobs, club wielding police, ruthless and racist sheriffs, ridicule, threats against his family, and the constant danger of assassination attempts. He pushed against the locked doors of segregation. Constant demands on his time, indifference of white pastors, beatings, and jails in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma did not stop him.

Martin Luther King worked at overcoming his anger, forgave and chose not to hate his adversaries. The irony was that he exhibited the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice, patience, and the willingness to turn the other cheek while at the same time facing a churchgoing, white culture filled with a mix of passivity, prejudice, verbal assaults, and physical brutality.

Martin Luther King was an orator supreme. Whether on script or off script he was eloquent and a master of moving metaphors. Audiences were often brought to tears amid shouts of acclamation. After his speech, "I Have a Dream," at the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963, a British journalist said to King that it was "the most moving and magnificent public address I have ever heard."

The theological convictions of Martin Luther King were shaped by a number of sources. The preaching of his father and the beliefs of the church, of his youth, Ebenezer Baptist, left their mark on him. He saw his life as an opportunity to serve others. Upon graduating from Morehouse College, King attended Crozer Seminary in Chester Pennsylvania and Boston University's School of Theology. He became immersed in liberal theology which drew him into the social gospel and the pacifism of Mahatma Gandhi. According to Oates, "by his senior year at Crozer, King was an unabashed exponent of Protestant liberalism." In King's own words he acknowledged, "I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason (Oates, 33)." Aspects of socialism seemed to have guided his vision politically (442).

One of the most disheartening aspects of Martin Luther King's battles with racial injustice was the failure of fundamental white churches. He expected the support of white ministers in the Montgomery bus boycott. It did not happen. It was then that King decided such a hope was "the most pervasive mistake I have ever made." White fundamentalists were by and large AWOL on the matter of racial injustice. My own experience during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s bears this out. I heard sermons preached defending the segregation of the races, but not a word about the necessity of repentance for racial prejudice. Where was the message of black and white Christians worshiping together? On August 7, 1960, a group of black and white students staged "kneel-ins" to protest against segregation in Atlanta churches. I have in my possession a card that was prepared by the leaders of my church to give to those students who might wish to attend our Sunday morning service. It reads as follows:

"This statement speaks for itself, and no other comment will be given. Believing the motives of your group to be ulterior and foreign to the teaching of God's Word, we cannot extend a welcome to you and respectfully request you to leave the premises quietly. Scripture does not teach 'the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God.' He is the Creator of all, but only the Father of those who have been regenerated. If any one of you is here with a sincere desire to

know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, we shall be glad to deal individually with you from the Word of God.”

This statement was then followed by “Four Things God Wants You to Know.” Only two churches allowed the students to join their congregations. My church was not one of them. I am ashamed of my passivity about the matter. I had some awakening to experience. But that’s another story.

I have chosen not to discuss King’s moral failures. They are readily accessible in various sources. Martin Luther King’s infidelities, however, do not diminish his willingness to put his life on the line in order to bring down the walls of racial injustice. Feet of clay do not annul the contributions of those who fight for justice and mercy.

It was the moral audacity of Martin Luther King, a twenty-five-year old pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, that brought him onto the stage of history in 1955. “Let the Trumpet Sound” will break up seas within.

Politics in Proverbs (August 4, 2019)

Politics dominate the news cycle. We are inundated with virtual nonstop coverage of the 2020 presidential campaign with the election well over fifteen months away. Christians, as the general population, have different ways of viewing the American political scene. Complete avoidance is the tactic favored by many. Ignore the news. Pursue a hobby. Watch a ball game. I recently asked some teens if they followed the news. None did. The other extreme is obsessively trying to keep up with the latest turn on polls and legislative hearings, staying glued to the same old stories on cable news.

I offer a better way. Have a biblically informed approach to politics, ration your exposure to cable and the social media, pray informatively, and vote according to a biblical worldview. The Bible’s book of Proverbs serves us well in developing a wise perspective on polls, pundits, and politics.

Human governments everywhere derive their right to rule from God and are responsible to Him for how they govern (“By me [divine wisdom] kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.” Prov. 8:15-16). Are the policies of our government, national and local, in harmony with divine righteousness (“It is an abomination to kings to do evil. For the throne is established by righteousness.” Prov.16:12)? Lest we forget, the voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of God. We are a nation of laws with a Constitution that establishes our form of government, and the rights and liberties of the American people. In my judgment, the structure of America’s government, a Constitutional Republic governed by laws, is the best humans have devised. But no matter what kind of government we live under, God is sovereign over all nations, and all people are accountable to Him.

The national strength of any government is gauged by the moral caliber of its people (“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” Prov.16:34). The hardness of a nation is not found in words and symbols but in actions rooted in wise thought processes. A

challenge faced by any nation is the coming and going of generations. The potential for moral disorder in thinking and character raises legitimate concerns. When the virtues of personal responsibility, selflessness, and self-discipline recede, societal stability is compromised. If the divine institutions of family, government, freedom, and the church are degraded, it is only a matter of time until a civilization and nation crumble.

Wisdom tells us that human government derives its stability and effectiveness through the exercise of justice. Justice exists when people get what they deserve (“Steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king, and by steadfast love his throne is upheld.” Prov. 20:28). Also, we are told that “by justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down” (Prov. 29:4). Bribes and corruption are nails in the coffin of a civilization. Many nations are dysfunctional due to leaders who are self-serving and squander national wealth. Effective administration in government must be based on integrity and equitable decision making.

God’s purposeful design for government is to encourage good behavior and restrain evil (“To impose a fine on a righteous man is not good, nor to strike the noble for their uprightness.” Prov. 17:26; “A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.” Prov. 20:8). As citizens are honest in business and trade (Prov. 16:11) and are encouraged to achieve excellence, a nation will thrive (“A servant who deals wisely has the king’s favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully.” Prov. 14:35, 22:29). Economic freedom, guided by adherence to God’s righteous moral order, is in the interest of national stability and human flourishing.

God is in charge of all human affairs. He sovereignly controls and uses governments and their leaders to accomplish His purposes (“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, he turns it wherever he will.” Prov. 21:1). Nations rise and fall. Civilizations come and go. Human government is subject to its own demise by morally collapsing from within. But the one constant and sure reality is that all governmental plans, policies, and decisions are controlled by God.

Wisdom tells us that government should seek to be impartial and objective in its application of justice (“It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the righteous of justice.” Prov. 18:5; 25:2; 22:22-23). It is reprehensible to pervert justice. Legislative bodies and courts must sit in judgment on themselves to uphold the rule of law. Bribery and power without accountability are a recipe for a failed state. In our form of government, the voters have an obligation to scrutinize and vote for those who are committed to our Constitution, with accountability for the laws they make.

Government’s authority should be respected (“My son, fear the Lord and the king, and do not join with those who do otherwise...” Prov. 24:21). Christians must be wary of revolutions and political agitators. Protests must stay within the bounds of the law and the rights of fellow citizens. The French Revolution of 1789 remains a historical marker giving warning of the danger of a revolution “run by sociopaths.”

Those in positions of authority and responsibility in government are to exhibit self-mastery (“It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.” Prov. 31:2-9). Leaders need clear minds and self-control. Sex, alcohol, and greed can become intoxicants that impair judgment and

compromise justice. Kings/presidents, lawmakers, and judges are to be servant-leaders, not self-indulgent narcissists.

Bad leadership in government results in instability and confusion in a nation (“Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days.” Prov. 28:15-16). Elected officials who use identity politics to strengthen their hold on power are like wild animals who feed off their prey. Instead of using people for their own selfish ends, leaders in government should work at creating opportunities for all people to benefit from economic freedom. Without biblically informed values and divine wisdom people will groan under the weight of oppression (“When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.” Prov. 29:2).

The spiritual decline of a nation brings with it confusion of thought, inversion of values (calling evil good and good evil), self-indulgence, a growing bureaucracy, and a general loss of moral integrity, especially among its leaders (“When a land transgresses, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge, its stability will long continue.” Prov. 28:2). Tyrants arise in times of economic and moral instability. A populist (ostensibly a man of the people) often turns out to be an oppressor. Our own nation is not immune to those who seek to subvert our freedoms seeking absolute power, rewriting our national history, and disregarding our Constitution. Predictions of impending catastrophe can make people do foolish things and become driven by supposed conspiracies, the call for revolution, and fear. When fear of the Lord is displaced by the fear of man, morally dark days are ahead. Good government and hard-won freedoms are fragile gifts.

There will be no perfect government or rulers until the Messiah comes (“A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it. In the light of a king’s face there is life, and his favor is like the clouds that bring spring rain.” Prov. 16:14-15). The story of Israel’s kingdom and its kings is one of growing disappointment. Even the best of the kings, king David, could not fill the sandals of the promised Messiah. The ideal king has come and is coming again (Isa. 11:1-5; 53:1-12; Psa. 72). In the midst of the seeming madhouse of our current political scene, the church of Jesus Christ must keep a clear head, soak its thinking in Scripture and pray for wisdom for living in a world that has forgotten God. Come, Lord Jesus.

Some observations are in order as we look over our contemporary political landscape. There are ominous signs that should leave us deeply concerned about America’s future. (1) The attempt to erase God from our national heritage and accountability to His moral law. (2) The replacement of liberty with material equality. (3) Religious suppression in the name of tolerance and inclusiveness. (4) The proliferation among politicians and public officials of lying, personal insults, vulgar language, inflammatory invective, and threats of physical violence. (5) The push for open borders. (6) Complete agreement with a pro-abortion agenda. (7) The assertions of identity politics replacing character and moral standards. (8) The acceptance and promotion of socialism. (9) Globalism as superior to nationalism. (10) The weaponizing charge of “racism” against all political foes. (11) The family as a married father and mother replaced by no ideal, only love. (12) The resurgence of anti-Semitism. These trends and other moral/social categories demand thought, attention, and the application of the Word of God within evangelical churches. May God give us wisdom as pilgrims living in a world in love with itself.

Last Days Living (August 16, 2019)

The past few weeks have been filled with a tempest of contrary societal winds. Recent mass shootings, rather than drawing our country together, have only created further division. Blame shifting and fault finding have eclipsed grief and clear thinking. The 2020 presidential election campaign is in full swing. Differing worldviews are on full display. A movie depicting a liberal elite, hunting deplorable citizens is slated to appear at theaters on September 27. At present it is on hold. The media continues to function as the fourth estate furthering a partisan political agenda. Social media is filled with shame-based attacks on conservatives of all kinds. Facebook, YouTube, Google, and the Twitter world work underhandedly at shaping opinion while creating a secular conscience. Public discourse is corrupted by invective, vulgar, and profane slander. The Christian world is being rocked by the defection of a high-profile former mega-church pastor and author.

If I were to say that we are living in the last days, some, without hesitation, would assert that present societal conditions prove that the last days have arrived, citing 2 Timothy 3:1-8. But what did Paul mean when he said, “that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.” But when are the last days? What is being described in this time reference is that Messianic times have come. The last days began at the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and will be consummated at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. God is completing His purposes in this present age, an age increasingly characterized by “times of difficulty.” Like an approaching storm the waves and wind become increasingly powerful. It could be put this way, “Within the last days, difficult times will occur from time to time. But conditions will become progressively worse” (2 Tim. 3:13). This from-bad-to-worse scenario will culminate in the Great Tribulation (Rev. 6-18).

When various biblical texts that speak of the last days are gathered together, six obligations emerge. These define the way the church is to think and live. (1) Last days living understands God’s kingdom purpose in the sweep of human history (Dan. 2:44, “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed;” Rev. 11:15, “and He (Christ) shall reign forever and ever.”). Certain politicians glibly throw out the importance of being on the right side of history. By which they mean “agree with me or be quiet.” For the record. Being on the right side of history is signing on to the truth that Jesus Christ is the crushing stone who will come and set up His kingdom that will never be destroyed.

(2) Last days living views adversity as being invested with the meaning of the suffering and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:11, “the “Spirit...predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”). Believers in Jesus Christ know that the evils in nature and in humans witness to a sin-cursed world, not an inadequate God.

(3) Last days living is supercharged by the mandate to sow the seed of the gospel (Matt. 13:11, 19, 23, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”). As members of the body of Christ we have been given the privilege of knowing, among other things, that in the time between the two comings of Jesus we can understand why some reject the kingdom message and others receive it. Neither the sower, Jesus, nor the seed, the kingdom message, are the problem. It is the sinful hearts of those who hear the gospel message. Children of God, everything we are, what we have, and what we do, is to be seen as the circumference of a life filled with passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The kingdom parables of Matthew 13 reveal what it means to be on the kingdom side of history.

(4) Last days living is not daunted by the battalions of evil marching through the streets of time (Rev. 6:10, 11, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”). In the infinite wisdom of God evil is being given its day, culminating in the seven years of the Great Tribulation. We are not to panic and worry. God rules over Satan’s plan, but its full development and implementation awaits removal of the restrainer (the Spirit of God), which will take place at the Rapture of the Church (2 Thess. 2:7).

(5) Last days living steels itself during days of spiritual darkness by the power of God’s infallible, inerrant Word (2 Tim. 3:1,16, “that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.”). We are reminded by Paul’s words to Timothy that believers in Jesus Christ are to expect an increasing ferocity of false teaching and deception. Societies will experience moral breakdown: disrespect for authority, assertion of independence from God, the celebration of personal autonomy, runaway selfishness, destruction of the divine institutions (marriage and family, nationalism), child abuse, haters of good. The apostle Paul’s counsel to Timothy and all believers is to stand fast on the fact, the truth, that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” (2 Tim.3:16). God is trustworthy and what He wrote is trustworthy. This is our anchor as the adverse winds of menacing times are upon us.

(6) Last days living requires mental and spiritual sobriety (1 Pet. 1:13, “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”). When is Christ coming again? We don’t know. But until then we are to keep our minds clear. Living a God-like life calls for a mind that is fully engaged in loving God. The winds of human opinion or emotion must not be allowed to blow us off course. Living to please God calls for a mind that is guided by a hope-filled outlook.

Living in the last days has been the experience of the Church for over two thousand years and it will be until Jesus Christ returns. Are our times worse than they have ever been? Increasingly difficult times have come and gone. But the nearer we are to the Tribulation described in the book of Revelation, that awful day of God’s wrath, we can expect the days to darken. It will be a category 10 moral and spiritual “hurricane” of devastating proportions. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that Satan’s schemes and the world’s fight against God will be unusually extreme as that day draws near. Until then, dear Christian, drive on into the headwinds of unbelief without fear or flinching.

A Man’s Man (September 1, 2019)

“Far Side” cartoons have given me many laughs through the years. One of particular interest shows a wife looking at what she thought had been her husband. He stands there in an oversized coat holding his manface mask and a baseball cap with a long tail trailing from beneath his coat. He says to her, “Dang it, Monica! I can’t live this charade any longer. I’m not a telephone repairman who stumbled into your life - I’m a Komodo dragon, largest member of the lizard family and a filthy liar.”

Manhood has fallen on hard times. A steady line of books is being written on what constitutes masculinity. There seems to be some confusion. Men are depicted in commercials as bumbling

incompetents when it comes to figuring out everyday problems, like which is the better water filter. Feminists have floated the view that women need men like fish need a bicycle. And now we have what has apparently been a hidden, “Komodo dragon” a.k.a, toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity is defined as “exaggerated masculine traits like being violent, unemotional, sexually aggressive,” and having a negative impact on society. This is being touted as partly to blame for mass shootings. The shooters are all men who “tend to share elements of white entitlement, and heterosexual masculinity pressured by anxieties about middle-class instability and downward economic mobility.” A popular men’s product corporation launched an advertising campaign, “accusing men of ‘excusing bad behavior’ and portraying traditional masculinity in an entirely negative and stereotypical light” (James Barrett). We get the impression from some quarters that men are flawed females. Until men can learn to behave better, social and political problems can be better addressed by bringing more women into traditional male roles. This is the culture with which our boys will contend.

Men can act badly. Sin is no respecter of the persons. Both men and women have been created in the image of God, with that image marred by sin. But what exactly constitutes masculinity? Is it merely a frame of mind, a feeling? We are being led to believe that a young girl with “rapid onset gender dysphoria” may become a male by surgery and the right kind of medications. Gender fluidity is in, and binary sexuality is out. The moral revolution is spreading its damage. I will be so bold as to declare that true masculinity exists, and we can see it in a man’s Man, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Though Jesus did not come to earth to be a role model for masculinity, He is what every man should aspire to reflect. All the features of ideal manhood are found in Him. He was a male. He came to this earth to undo what Adam had done. The historical Adam, the first man, disobeyed God. It was through this sin that the curse of death fell upon the human race (Rom. 5:12). As the representative of all who descended from him, it was necessary that the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, in an act of obedience, die for our sins. This leads us immediately into essential features of manhood. Jesus Christ was a leader. We are told that He is the “leader and completer of faith.” He blazed the trail for us by bearing our sins in his body on the cross and has shown us how to live in a way that pleases the Father (Heb. 12:2).

Jesus was also a provider by making our faith possible. He reflected in His prayer that He had guarded His men (Jn. 17:12). Jesus was a leader, provider, and protector. These are characteristics of real men. Though we, as men, function at a different level than Jesus did in His redemptive work, we are to display masculinity by taking responsibility, leading the way in protecting the family and the nation, and fathers taking the initiative to provide for their families.

As we follow Jesus through the Gospels other masculine traits emerge. He had courage. The hostility of His enemies did not sway Him from doing the will of His heavenly Father (Jn. 17:4). Read the account of Jesus overturning tables, sending panicky sheep looking for a safe place, and challenging greedy money changers in the courtyard of the temple. All this was done by physical power and moral force (Jn. 2:15). By His commanding presence He walked through an angry mob intent on killing Him (Lk. 4:28-30). Without hesitation He called out self-righteous, hypocritical religious leaders telling them they were of their father the devil (Jn. 8:44). No matinee male idol can even begin to rival the bold and brave Jesus.

Strength and courage are not antithetical to tenderness and kindness. Jesus ignored the customs of the day and told a thirsty woman where she could slake her spiritual thirst (Jn. 4:14). He treated her with respect. His mother was the object of His affection and attention as He hung on a

brutal Roman cross (Jn. 19:26). Jesus did not have to be taught to cry or not to cry as a male. Tears flowed from a heart touched by empathy and grief at a grave site of a dear friend (Jn. 11:35). Compassion is not alien to true masculinity. Helpless and needy people moved Jesus deeply (Matt. 9:36).

The record of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels tells a story about masculinity. He was the only perfect male to ever walk on the face of the earth. While our culture flounders about on a sea of subjective gender search, deconstructing masculinity, there is a perfect example of complete humanity. His is the one who worked in the construction business, whose mind was alive with the Scriptures, whose mission was to be the Lord's Servant, who fought discouragement and humiliation, who suffered a shameful death. But through it and in it, was successful. In Jesus of Nazareth, we have a masculine role model whose character is developed in every man and every woman through faith in Him. He is the kind of man every male should want to be, a man's Man.

Berachah Missions - A Trip Down Memory Lane (September 26, 2019)

How did we get here? As we come to our 36th annual World Missions Conference, it's worth looking back upon the providences of God in forming our commitment to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

God in His mercy placed my growing up years two blocks from a church with a world class missions program. It was in the fall of 1956, six months after my conversion in this church, that I attended my first world missions conference. Missionary statesmen and missionaries from around the world gave the congregation a clear picture of the Scriptural mandate for making disciples of all the nations. We heard of how every tribe, tongue, and nation was receiving a witness about Jesus Christ, the challenges that were faced, and the incredible needs of unreached people. This teenager was deeply moved by the thought that so many in this world had no access to the gospel. Was it not my responsibility to do something about this?

In the fall of 1959, I began my first semester at Columbia Bible College. I was drawn to its reputation for training missionaries. I majored in Bible. Through four years representatives of mission boards, pastors, and Christian leaders from across America called the student body to live self-denying and cross-bearing lives for the sake of Christ. The only question that remained was where to spend my life for the sake of the gospel.

God worked in ways that I had never envisioned in bringing me back to the Atlanta area in 1968 to teach at Carver Bible College. While serving as the Academic Dean, I began teaching a Bible study in 1970 which resulted in the founding of Berachah Bible Church. Our initial efforts in bringing world missions into our congregational life came on November 8, 1981. Our speaker was Beth's uncle, Percy Bellah, a lifelong missionary in Fortaleza, Brazil.

The signal moment in developing a world missions' culture in Berachah came with a Great Commission Workshop led by the President of Columbia Bible College, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, on November 5, 1983. That Saturday was an intensive time of assessing our fledging missions program. That session and the messages by Dr. McQuilkin on Sunday changed our church. In the first hour the focus was on "Prayer for Missions" followed by "Compassion: The

Heart of God and World Missions.” Out of this came our commitment to a month of missions emphasis in October of 1984. Among our speakers was Bernie Holritz, a missionary in Japan. One of our men, David Huether, presented in costume a biography of Hudson Taylor, missionary to China. On the second Sunday of that month, John Sherwood challenged us with the necessity of “Church Planting.” Alma Huether, also in costume, introduced us to Mary Slessor, missionary in Nigeria. During the Sunday evenings, Paul Curtas walked us through a history of missions. Every Sunday that month was filled with world disciple-making opportunities.

It should be noted that energized Mission’s Committees for thirty-five years have invested thousands of hours in planning, promoting, overseeing, and praying for our missions ministry. I will never forget Dan and Mimi Lee’s trip to Chicago where they attended the Association of Church Missions Committees conference. They came back with renewed enthusiasm for missions which impacted our entire church. They gave themselves unrelentingly to missions at home and abroad. It was in the 1990s that Berachah received special encouragement from Briarwood Presbyterian in Birmingham. We visited with their missions leadership and were given invaluable wisdom from a church that had a worldwide reputation for missionary outreach.

Our annual missions conferences have been the iconic representation of commitment to reaching our world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A personal review of those thirty-five conferences reveals a collage of contributions to our missions’ history. Over two hundred speakers have instructed and motivated us to lengthen our cords and strengthen our stakes in missions. Church planters, presidents of Missions Boards, authors, pastors, college and seminary teachers, presidents of colleges, and Bible translators have poured themselves into us. The gospel needs of the nations resonated in our hearts. To the extent that we have become a congregation of world Christians, knowledgeable about the status of the church in reached and unreached nations, is due to the Spirit of God working through so many of His servants.

On a further note, Berachah began making it possible for the pastor to be involved in numerous mission trips. In January 1992, the church made it possible to travel to India to become better familiar with the church-planting work of Mission India. This enabled our church to participate in the training of national church planters in the state of Karnataka. During that same year Berachah generously gave Beth and me the opportunity to visit John and Rachel Sherwood in the Philippines. In subsequent years teaching ministries were made possible in Kazakhstan, Guyana, and Romania.

It takes money to underwrite the cost of taking the gospel to the nations. On November 3, 1985, we presented the Grace Promise plan. We took on new missionaries for support. Some of our own young people took up the challenge and made preparations to leave America and go to places like Africa, the Philippines, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Haiti, and Morocco. Short-term missions teams were sent during the summers to Kazakhstan, Costa Rica, and Bosnia. The generosity of our congregation made these trips possible.

The story of the birth and growth of world missions in the life of Berachah Bible Church is more than sentimental remembrances. Our missions’ history is one of bringing together a thousand providences and people in tune with the compassion of God for the lost. The story is still being written. We look to the future, never forgetting the words of our Savior:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

A Call to Prayer (October 18, 2019)

“Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons – but they are helpless against our prayers.” Sidlow Baxter

One of the impressions left upon me traveling through the Middle East was its attention to prayer. In the old city of Jerusalem, the strange mix on Sunday morning was the church bells and the Islamic call to prayer. Scattered throughout eastern Turkey the tall spires of minarets were vivid reminders of Islam’s dominance. The sound is unforgettable and personal sadness lingers. Five times a day the Adhan (“to listen”) rings out as an alert to Muslims to pray.

God has given Christians the amazing power of prayer to commune with our heavenly Father and plead for His will to be done on earth. With that, hopefully we all agree. But how do we go about establishing a consistent prayer life? I offer the following acronym to lay out a modest proposal to achieve that (P R A Y E R).

Prepare a prayer notebook. This is merely a tool, not a secret to prayer itself. The idea is to create some kind of organization for prayer requests, quotes on prayer, and various prayer classifications (praise, thanks, confession, supplication). Prayer is a discipline. It takes time, attention, and energy. Prayer requests can roll in like waves, one after another, and therefore the need to record them. Names, necessary information, and dates can easily slip away into faded memories. The convenience of a notebook is that prayer concerns can be transported easily when traveling, at church, or whenever a need comes to mind.

React to all situations prayerfully. Donald S. Whitney has succinctly reminded us that, “We learn to pray by meditating on Scripture, for meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer.” Avenues of truth open up as one prays for family, friends, decisions, marriages, funerals, travels, news, those who are suffering and walking through the valley of the shadow of death. For example, when I read Amos 8:11, “Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine in the land – not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.” My prayers may go along the lines “Lord, please don’t remove the riches of Bible teaching from my life. Forgive me for being content with shallow thinking, self-centered living, and trying to make you merely a good luck charm. Have mercy on your church and on our nation.” From there one can engage in intercessory prayer in fresh ways. Names and situations are called out before the Lord with His revealed will in mind.

Accumulate (to act upon) prayer requests. My father-in-law was known for his habit of writing down names on any paper available to him. One of his end-of-life legacies was used envelopes covered with people for whom he had prayed. The digital age makes it possible to log prayer requests into phones, iPads, and personal computers. But I remain retro. I carry a small journal with me and try to keep paper and pen near at hand. A few suggestions: write down names, dates, needs, specific things, and memory joggers (e.g. chemo begins on...). Talk with people and listen (yes, don’t forget that). Keep up with our church’s missionaries, their prayer letters

and what is happening in their part of the world. And don't forget to pray for the unsaved. What a joy it is to read over these prayer records in the years to come.

Yield your best time and available energy to the work of prayer. It's interesting how much instruction in the New Testament is given within the context of the return of Christ. One example of this is Peter's exhortation: "The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be self-controlled and sober minded for the sake of your prayers" (1 Pet. 4:7). Prayer has two supporting conditions. We need a mind that has a truth-grip on reality. An obsession with movies, cell phones, and video games can cloud one's thinking process and decision making. Do I really know what is going on around me and how to respond in prayerful ways? Also, needed is a mind that refuses to be intoxicated with the cares of the world. Sports and binge watching on Netflix can drain off mental energy needed for spiritual disciplines.

Engage yourself in a biblical study of prayer. Start by taking the "Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6:9-13 and examining each petition. I recommend Philip Ryken's book, When You Pray. At the present time the ladies Sunday School class is studying "Lord, Teach Us to Pray." The syllabus used develops over thirty principles on the biblical doctrine of prayer. If you want to stoke your prayer life, feed your soul on what God has revealed about prayer.

Read a good book on prayer at least once a year. I began my Christian life reading Power through Prayer by E.M. Bounds. I have never gotten over it. R.C. Sproul has a very helpful little book, Effective Prayer. J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom have combined their gifts in the book, Praying. The subtitle says what is needed, "Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight." Many books compete for our attention but a few pages a day on the fundamental spiritual disciple of prayer is vitamin packed.

A Comfort in Grief (November 8, 2019)

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Cor. 1:3-4

A time of great sorrow and grief was thrust upon Ed and Jackie Sherwood with the tragic news of the death of their son, Edward. In such times, the hope of the gospel and victory over death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is much more than a doctrinal statement. In addition, the kindnesses of fellow believers are a treasured gift. From my vantage point, the following evidences were some of the ways God surrounded the Sherwood family with the embraces of His love.

Edward's death drew in a wide audience to hear the best news in the universe. The Lord Jesus Christ defeated death in His death on the cross, came forth from the grave on the third day, and offers freedom from sin's enslavement. Hundreds of people, first responders and friends of the family were called upon to think about the most critical question in life. Are you prepared to meet a holy God and face His righteous judgment? Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

The Sherwood family and friends were given the opportunity to share the larger story of a pro-life, adoption experience. Edward had been adopted when he was two days old and accomplished extraordinary goals in his short life. Jackie's and Suzanne's reminiscences of Edward's place in the family were deeply moving. Ed's written account of his son's life is a story movingly told. The adopted son was given a life he might not have had without the love of the Sherwood family.

Edward's death brought together believers and non-believers for a reestablishment of relationships, as well as creating conversations for faith-building and witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. I saw people who had not been connected for years reentering one another's lives. It was a joy to see. In my case, I met a man, retired army, whom I had not seen in over sixty years. These kinds of providences are anticipations of the arrival of the body of Christ in heaven.

The kind of death by which Edward died provokes thought, discussion, and an invitation to become involved in addressing a tragic trend in our society. A Christian world and life view is increasingly giving way in many quarters to a world view of "nothingness" (Nihilism). Reality is what one wants to make it, "there are no facts, only interpretations" (Finding Truth, Nancy Pearcey, p.119). Meaninglessness sucks the oxygen out of life. Too many of our young people are coming home from war having to cope with horrific encounters with evil while carrying an inexplicable despair about life. Add to this the trauma of personal moral disruptions with no resolution and hopelessness which occupies the thoughts. When anger, depression, anxiety, guilt, and failed marriages go untreated with God's wisdom, death may be seen as the only option. Mix into this the deception of relief by drugs and alcohol, and a lethal, toxic cocktail numbs the mind.

The narrative of death at one's own hands demands Scriptural assessment. Can a Christian end his or her own life? Believers differ on this matter. Personally, I find it an unwarranted assumption that a genuine believer will not take his or her own life. Some teach that "ultimate failure... is not possible for true Christians." Who is it then that secures the believer's salvation, one's own good works or Jesus Christ and His abiding love (Rom. 8:35-39)? We cannot know what happens inside a person's brain when a combination of the darkness of unconfessed sin, medication, and depression create a complicated spiritual amnesia (2 Pet. 1:9). It is best to leave final outcomes in a person's life in the hands of an infinitely wise, just, and loving God.

The comfort that a grieving family experiences was seen in a church family that came together in gospel-rich hospitality. Food was prepared, pictures were taken for remembrance, security was provided, songs were sung to strengthen and soothe broken hearts. It was, if you will, God's embrace of love.

The First Responder (December 6, 2019)

The hour was late, but Michael was used to coming home after 12-hour shifts. He could feel his body relax in his favorite recliner. He had been asleep for a couple of hours when his phone rang. A multi-vehicle wreck with possible casualties put Michael back into action. This was to begin another first responder extended time of duty.

Many years ago, I was given the example of praying for first responders whenever I heard a siren. The life of a first responder is filled with constant demands mentally, emotionally, and physically. PTSD afflicts many who have to deal with the trauma of rescue and death.

The life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ was that of a first responder. He demonstrated a readiness to respond to human pain and suffering wherever He encountered it in thousands of miracles of healing, acts of mercy, feeding the hungry when cut off from a food source, and raising the dead. Three of these are recorded in the Gospels. Luke 7:11-16 is the account of Jesus encountering a widow whose son was being taken to his burial. As all of the miracles of Jesus, it certifies Him as Israel's Messiah. Jesus was no stranger to death and the grief it brings. He was fully aware of death's damage. A mother was without her husband and now her son was no longer. Jesus was filled with compassion. As Ecclesiastes attests, funerals can teach us more than parties. They force us to face the reality of death. In this moment near the town of Nain, grief was palpable. Many emotions can congregate at funerals, such as sadness, joy, regrets, good memories, not-so-good memories, anger, hopelessness, hopefulness. There is a story bound up in the words, "When the Lord saw her." He sensed the significance of the mother's loss. Her only son was gone. Who would be her support in her final years? Jesus told her not to weep. If one did not know better, this could have seemed like mockery. Not at all. The Savior was about to do something.

This is the place to hit the pause button. The humanity of Jesus asks for clarification. He was fully human in His mental, emotional, and physical functions. God did not become man to increase His knowledge. Omniscience does not need more facts. However, we know that because of His human experience Jesus was able to sympathize with our weaknesses. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16). The Lord Jesus Christ in His glorified humanity is in heaven light years away, fully aware as deity. He is also able to come alongside believers and uniquely understand our condition, our grief, our memories, our tears, our loss which is not replaced in this life, our questions. As Wayne Grudem reminds us, it is like a woman physician who first writes a textbook on obstetrics. But having experienced childbirth, she can sympathize much more fully with women who are having babies (Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 542).

Jesus, our first responder, brings a supernatural qualification to human suffering and death. He has the power over death. He touched the plank on which the body of the dead man was being carried to its place of burial. Astoundingly, the young man sat up and began to speak. We are left wondering what his first words were. Especially touching is the moment when Jesus "gave him to his mother." Immediately, the people who witnessed this miracle began to worship. God was indeed among His people.

A striking feature of this death and resurrection story is that it is possible to be awed by Jesus and yet not know who He was. If a first responder comes upon the scene of trauma and death, then is able to bring the deceased back to life, that begs for an explanation. Who is this man? He was Israel's Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man, Lord. That's who He was. This same Jesus will one day descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, 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, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

It must be known that the Lord Jesus Christ is the ultimate and incomparable First Responder. He came to the scene of a horrific murder. It was through Satan that Adam became mortal. Jesus said that the devil was a murderer from the beginning (Jn. 8:44). He murdered the whole human race, talking Adam and Eve into spiritual suicide. He contributed to Cain's murder of Abel (1 Jn. 3:8-12). He entered Judas to kill Jesus. But by His death and resurrection we who were dead in our trespasses and sins can have victory over death. In His death the judgment of God fell upon Christ Jesus. As our First Responder, He gave His life that we might have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is beyond merely assessing the severity of our condition. The death of death has occurred in the death of Jesus.

Our condition is desperate. Our spiritual and physical condition is terminal. Have you found your rescue in the Lord Jesus Christ? He came to deliver us from sin and death. Our sins stand between us and God. But Jesus died for those sins. He took the punishment we deserved. Our physical death has also been overcome and one day this "perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). A final word from our First Responder:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my Word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life." John 5:24

Mary and Her Savior (December 22, 2019)

"And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'" Luke 2:34-35

"Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would one day walk on water . . . that your Baby Boy will give sight to the blind . . . that your Baby Boy is Lord of all creation?"

These words, penned by Mark Lowry, provoke us to ponder Mary's world of thought as few other Christmas songs do. But it remains for Simeon, who held the infant Jesus in his arms, to say things that amazed Joseph and Mary. What supernatural insight had Simeon received about the identity of the Christ child? A brief survey of Simeon's song tells us that salvation was bound up in Jesus and that it would be offered to both Gentile and Jew. He further says that the only way into the kingdom is through Jesus and that Mary would bear the agony of seeing her son pay the price of His life for sin's punishment.

"Blessed among woman" (Lk. 1:42). These words spoken by Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, celebrate Mary's privilege. A young Jewish virgin, unknown outside her family circle, engaged to a certain Joseph, would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and carry the world's Savior in her womb. Unfortunately, Mary's story has suffered from both neglect and hyped spiritual status, "The Queen of Heaven." Even football has added to misguided images of Mary. "Hail Mary" desperation passes into the endzone excite the imagination. The Bible alone gives us the picture of Mary that we should own.

Mary suffered pain so that her son, Jesus Christ, could suffer the pain of the cross (Matt. 1:21; Isa. 53; Lk. 2:11, 34-35). She suffered the pain of a misunderstood pregnancy. The stigma of pregnancy before marriage was a reputational challenge. Pregnancy with its morning sickness and labor pains were experienced as any other mother. Mary suffered the anguish of seeing her son rejected, slandered, and hated. This was true in Jesus' hometown, Nazareth (Lk. 4:28). Less we forget, this is a reminder that a woman's entire reproductive cycle and her unique bond with her children can play a vital role in God-pleasing sacrifice for others.

Mary exhibited extraordinary knowledge of the Scriptures and a grasp of the redemptive-dominion plan of God (Lk. 1:46-55). She delighted in the coming of the prophesied kingdom and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant with Israel exhibiting a literal understanding of it all. Having become the mother of Israel's Messiah was not lost on her. However, Mary was puzzled as to the full significance of the life of her son (Lk. 2:19, 34-35). She knew she had a special child. This required reflection and meditation on the meaning of Gabriel's message. When all the evidence is gathered, we can surmise that Mary saw herself as a critical link to the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. But like the prophets of the Old Testament the paradox of suffering and glory in the Messiah was not in sharp focus for her (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Like normal parents, Mary and Joseph chided Jesus for His temporary disappearance at the Feast of Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus stayed behind as His parents journeyed on to Nazareth. After three days they finally found Him engaged in theological discussions in the Temple. The exchange between Jesus and His parents is enlightening: "We were worried about you. . . (I) had to be in my Father's house" (Lk. 2:49). It was another piece of truth to ponder. Jesus' understanding of His identity and mission seems to have eluded His parents. Simeon had told Mary that she would experience hurt and grief because of her son. Jesus, Israel's Messiah, would be rejected and expose the depth of Israel's unbelief. Mary was conflicted both by what she understood and what she did not understand about her son.

Did Mary ever attempt to resolve the social tensions involved in Jesus' birth and life? She may very well have done so at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. She had lived for twenty-nine years under suspicion. Few may have believed the story of the birth of her son. There seems to have been some mild tension in her request of Jesus to take care of the wine shortage. A miracle could resolve the problem. Jesus' replied to her subtle request ("They have no wine") with the words, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn. 2:4). These words were part of Mary's painful education. It was more than a hint that He had come to do the will of His Father, and that it would involve the piercing of her soul.

Mary would experience the grief of watching her son die a cruel death on a Roman cross. The Gospel writers leave it to the readers to understand this. Mary's pardon as a sinner deserving judgment was provided for by the punishment of her son on the cross (Jn. 19:25-27; 2 Cor. 5:21). Yet in His darkest hour Jesus showed compassion toward the woman of sorrows, His mother Mary, "Woman, behold your son!" The message was clear. Her care for the duration of her life was passed on to the apostle John. Mary's grief was laid upon the nail-pierced Savior. Her son was now her Savior.

"Mary did you know that your Baby Boy would one day rule the nations? Did you know that your Baby Boy is heaven's perfect Lamb? The sleeping Child you're holding is the Great, 'I Am'."

We like Mary, need a Savior. None of us is free from sin. There is an infinite chasm between us and a holy God. Death has passed upon all men. Is Jesus Christ your Savior? We have only one escape from the wrath of God. There is no hope for us without the forgiveness of God in Christ, none whatsoever. So, you say, that doesn't bother you. That is the most dangerous thought imaginable. The life that God wants us to live and the kind of death by which we will die have true meaning only in Jesus Christ. The final question is not what Mary did not know. It is what we know and do not care.

Sheep and Wooden Horses (January 24, 2020)

Elders are responsible for the doctrinal, moral, and spiritual purity of the local church. We know this because the older, wiser, and Spirit-directed apostle Peter said, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you..." (1 Pet. 5:1). This is the same Peter to whom Jesus said, "feed my sheep," no less than three times at daybreak on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The apostle was still smarting after a triple denial of his Savior. Tenderly, Jesus calls Peter to a life of caring for His followers. This means that shepherds care for their flocks, not because they have to, but because they want to. They love Jesus. The goal of glory is before them.

The feeding of the flock takes place in a variety of ways, but a primary responsibility is to provide Bible saturated, truth-rich, life-impacting teaching. This will spill over into conversations, conduct, confrontation, and comforting in congregational life. I offer this personal word to my fellow elders. Stay at it, men. Keep those meals coming to the flock. We have our pantry shelves stocked with the whole counsel of God, Old Testament and New Testament, Bible topics, biographies, promises, commands, and warnings. Ours is a tall task. Unfed sheep can begin to graze in dangerous places.

A shepherd alert is necessary. There are gospels against which biblically minded elders must stand guard. The gospel without the cross is a threat. The absence of the substitutionary atonement of Christ belies a true gospel message. The social gospel pulls many out of the orbit of biblical fidelity by substituting the goal of changing society for personal redemption in Jesus Christ. The gospel of moralistic therapy has found a wide following among younger professing evangelicals. It shimmers on the outside by promising happiness by feeling good about oneself, but on the inside one searches in vain for the God of the Bible. The gospel of political hope has seduced its millions by the attempt to find meaning in a political agenda. Many of its adherents see a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow of socialism or even a resurgent conservatism. The gospel of final salvation by good works weaves its way through all false gospels. Its appeal is to the vain hope that by doing the right deeds one can go to heaven when they die. This gospel is frequently preached at funerals.

Sheep have enemies. That is why elder-shepherds must provide protection. The apostle Paul in his final words to the elders in Ephesus are sobering: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock..." (Acts 20:27-29). Jesus couched His warning in terms of

“false prophets” coming in among His followers as “ravenous wolves” in “sheep’s clothing” (Matt. 7:15). Deceit. That is how false teaching works its way into the flock of God. According to Greek legends a huge wooden horse was presented to the city of Troy as a gift. It was brought into the city with much celebration. Little did they know that Greek warriors were on the inside, and during the night, they slipped out and opened the gates to the city for the Greek army to enter. The Trojans were killed, and their city was burned.

Beware of the wooden horses of our culture. The sins of the culture can easily become the sins of the church, disguised as gifts of the wisdom of this world. The wooden horse of social justice, as an equal partner in the church’s great commission mandate, has slain many a Christian organization. The term “social justice” can easily disarm the unsuspecting. God delights in justice among His people and in governments (Jer. 9:23-24). But the adjective, “social,” changes the conversation. There is an ideology spread abroad known as critical theory. Its objective is the elimination of all forms of social oppression. Power exercised by dominant groups over subordinate groups is the enemy (sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, etc.). Along with this is the perspective of intersectionality. The intersection is where the identity markers of an individual converge (e.g., race, sex, class) and where discrimination takes place. The idea is that the more a person is oppressed, the more and better perspective they have. This then becomes the basis of what is truth. For example, a woman of color with same sex attraction can see things others cannot. There is much more to this worldview than this space allows but be warned. It is pervasive and religious in commitment and activism. Code words such as privilege, diversity, inclusivity, equity, and “woke” have their special meanings and some evangelicals have taken the bait.

There are other wooden horses that carry their own kinds of destruction. Spirituality without the Bible, a relationship with God on one’s own personal terms, is a wooden horse that is not what it appears to be. Words familiar to Christians such as meditation, peace, experiencing God, listening to God can be redefined and actually end up leading us deeper into ourselves. As one writer has put it, “At last people have a god who agrees with them about everything” (Lutzer, *The Church in Babylon*, p. 208).

The Praying Church (February 7, 2020)

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”
Luke 18:1

It is always a good time to revisit the condition of the prayer life of our church. I offer the following guidance for being more fully engaged in spiritual warfare as it relates to prayer.

The church of the first century gave itself to prayer. We know this from the snapshots of church life throughout the book of Acts. The house meetings of the early church were alive with Bible teaching, generosity, worship around the Lord’s Supper, and prayer (Acts. 2:42). Decision-making, persecution, evangelism, sickness, and gatherings of every kind pulsed with readiness to pray. Fellowship was not limited to meeting and greeting but was expressed in helping one another with times of prayer (2 Cor. 1:11).

Prayer was the evidence that the church depended on God for everything (Eph. 6:18). Opposition to the gospel, false teaching, and Satan's attempts to defeat the advance of the church were met with Spirit-filled pray-ers. The church's debt to the unsaved to take the gospel to every people group must move it toward more prayer (Rom. 10:1).

- God in His sovereignty opens doors to evangelistic opportunity by means of prayer (2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Cor. 16:9; Acts 14:27).
- All planning and action are under the sovereign God who directs all things to accomplish His purposes (Col.4:3).
- We should pray that God will open the doors of evangelistic opportunity. The life of the church must include consistent, focused, bold prayer for other sheep to come to the Shepherd (Jn. 10:16).
- The church must pray for neighborhoods, the nation, and the world.

The prayerful church prays for a wide range of people and needs (1 Tim. 2:1-8). The apostle Paul instructs the church to pray for "all men." The church at Rome was to pray for Paul because he faced those who hated him and were hostile to the gospel (Rom. 15:30-32). The church is to be responsive to the people and circumstances in our world at any given time and include them in our praying. The prayerful church has leaders that pray and people who pray for its leaders (Acts. 6:4; 13:2; 14:23). The elders are to pray for the flock. The ministry of the Word must be supported by prayer. Let it not go without being said, elders must have a personal prayer life.

The prayerful church responds to trials by prayer (Acts 4:23-31; 12:5; 14:22-23; 1 Pet. 4:7). The church needs boldness in a hostile environment. It needs protection. The church faces special kinds of temptation in times of hardship. There are those who are tempted to break and run to return to the old life.

The prayerful church engages in "one-anothering" through prayer. This means:

- The church is to pray that it will grasp the meaning of biblical teaching and experience the truth of that which has been taught (Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9).
- The church is to pray that it will be protected from the devices of Satan (Eph. 6:18; 2 Thess. 3:2).
- The church is to pray for the healing of the sick (2 Cor. 12:8; Jas. 5:13-18). Paul prayed that he might be healed, but the Lord rather promised grace to endure his affliction. God wants us to seek Him in our illness. We must remember that. Sometimes it takes more faith to remain sick.
- The church is to pray by giving thanks for one another (Eph. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:4).
- The church should have meetings where praying is the main business (Small groups, men's prayer meetings, women's prayer meetings).

Developing a strong prayer ministry in the local church is a never-ending process. The natural tendency of the human heart is to drift away from consistency and fervency in prayer. It was the great preacher of the twentieth century, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who said, "There is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christian people so much as our prayer." We may be certain that this is also true of a church congregation.

A Man for All Seasons (February 14, 2020)

Dr. John C. Whitcomb (June 22, 1924 – February 5, 2020)

Dr. John C. Whitcomb went to sleep on the night of February 5 and woke up in the presence of His Savior. Sir Thomas More has been acclaimed as a man for all seasons. My vote is for Dr. Whitcomb, a man who refused to salute the accepted views of many evangelicals on Genesis, creation, and Noah's flood. There was more to him than this, but we must stand at attention in how God used a seminary professor to exalt Christ in his generation.

Multiple times Dr. Whitcomb has been the featured speaker at our Biblical Creation Conferences at Berachah Bible Church. Many of us share fond memories of being lifted in worship as the miracles of God's creation were described in Dr. Whitcomb's well-chosen vocabulary. We were pointed to "the only book God has ever written," the Bible. In one of those conferences two rows of Chinese university students sat in rapt attention as they heard of the wisdom and power of the Creator. It was in Dr. Whitcomb's last visit with us that he learned of the homegoing of Dr. Henry Morris, co-author of The Genesis Flood.

Paul J. Scharf, in his biographical tribute, has struck a resonating chord. He speaks of the life story of Dr. John C. Whitcomb as being filled with paradoxes.

"Whitcomb is a gentle man with intense convictions. He is a famous scholar and author and a humble professor; a man who has traveled the world and yet spent more than 40 years at one seminary; a peaceful man who has never run from righteous conflict; a light-hearted man who has endured tumultuous crises. The son and grandson of army officers, he served in the infantry and then trained for a career as a diplomat. But he found fulfillment as an ambassador of a higher kingdom. Taught from childhood to be an evolutionist, he devoted his life to studying and teaching creation." (Coming to Grips with Genesis, Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, Editors)

It was my distinct honor and privilege to have known Dr. Whitcomb as one of his students (Grace Theological Seminary, 1963-1968) and as a pastor. Never had I sat under a teacher who had such a command of the Scriptures with scholarly zeal and passion for a Christ-pursuing life. I took every class he taught in theology, Old Testament, and apologetics. My life was changed and charged with renewed determination to run my course in life as a Bible expositor wherever in this world God would take me.

The truths of the creation account in Genesis exploded in our minds as John Whitcomb guided us through the days of the early earth. The miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels were of the same power as exhibited in the six days of creation. Jesus turned water into wine suddenly, supernaturally, and with the superficial appearance of age just as He did in the creation of animals, trees, and Adam and Eve. Every student besieged with the dogmatic arguments of evolutionists must make it a priority to read The Early Earth by Dr. Whitcomb.

God uniquely prepared John Whitcomb for his life work. He grew up as the only child in a military family spending some of his early years in Tientsin, China, where he learned to speak Mandarin Chinese. It was his deep attachment to the Chinese people that gave him a longing to return to China as a missionary. He also became fluent in Spanish, German, and French.

According to his children, he loved to go to Mexican restaurants in order to use his Spanish. He attended McCallie Military Academy in Chattanooga, Tennessee (1940-1942) and was then accepted to Princeton University. It was there that he studied under some of the leading evolutionists of the day. His German study at Princeton prepared him to be a German interpreter during the Battle of the Bulge (1944). He shared the gospel as he dealt with German prisoners-of-war.

When John Whitcomb was converted to Christ his freshman year at Princeton, he became, in the words of his son, David, like a “rocket shot out of a canon.” He began witnessing to his classmates, recorded all their names and began praying for them. In one student meeting at which the famous theoretical physicist Albert Einstein attended, the young student, John Whitcomb, gave him a copy of the Gospel of John.

Moral and spiritual courage were marks of John Whitcomb. He did not flinch at challenging any hint that compromised the sufficiency of the Scriptures. As a young Christian he was dismayed to discover the weak and inadequate beliefs of some evangelical scholars regarding the Genesis Flood. This propelled him toward a doctoral dissertation in the defense of a literal interpretation of Genesis 6-9. It was at this time that he became acquainted with Dr. Henry Morris, an engineering professor. This friendship culminated in co-authoring The Genesis Flood (1961) which “became a classic is the foundation of the modern Creationist movement.”

Thousands of former students of Dr. Whitcomb can be found throughout the world. We sat under his teaching, “absorbing his theology and philosophy, adopting his views in areas such as young-earth creationism, presuppositional apologetics, traditional dispensationalism, premillennial eschatology, and Old Testament theology” (Schraf, p.443).

John Whitcomb was an example of what it means to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with joy in the Lord. An artillery shell exploded near the place where he had previously been on guard (Scharf, p.440) in the Battle of the Bulge (1944). Whitcomb’s first wife, Edisene, developed an autoimmune liver disease and died in 1970. In a lecture visit to France in 1989 Dr. Whitcomb developed blood clots in his right leg, nearly dying from the experience. In 2002 Dr. Whitcomb was diagnosed with colon cancer but recovered. In all the years of knowing Dr. Whitcomb, I found him to be unwavering in his trust in God and joyful in the midst of suffering.

The banner of world missions flew over John Whitcomb’s life. His early years in China, his time in Germany during WWII, his burden for lost people, and a gospel-loving heart, all contributed to Whitcomb’s life-long commitment to foreign missions. He served as Chairman of the Board of both the Spanish Gospel Mission and Grace Brethren Missions for decades. His lectures in over 23 different countries plus multiple mission trips to the Philippines stand as witnesses to a man committed to taking the gospel to all people through careful exposition of the Scriptures.

As a speaker in demand, twenty published books on the Bible and science, and heavy teaching responsibilities, John Whitcomb was a family man. He and his first wife had four children. His oldest son, David, spoke at his funeral, including that their dad led all four of his children to Christ. David fondly told of how his two brothers and sister were enlisted by their father to go through their neighborhood and hand out invitations to Vacation Bible School. As Edisene, Whitcomb’s first wife, was dying she “informed her husband that it would please her if he would marry Norma after her passing” (Schraf, p.444). Norma Pritchett had been widowed in 1970. In

1971 she and Dr. Whitcomb were married bringing two of her own children into the new family circle. Norma played an important role in Dr. Whitcomb's ministry through her writing, artistic gifts, and speaking. They made a great team.

John Whitcomb did not rest on his laurels in his eighties. He stayed busy writing, conducting his radio program, and speaking engagements. He gave me his book, Jesus Christ Our Intelligent Designer, in 2010, a much-needed evaluation of the intelligent design movement. When I think of John C. Whitcomb the words, a happy genius, Christ-pursuing warrior come to mind.

Beth and I enjoyed having Professor Whitcomb in our church and home. He did not parade his amazing intellect and accomplishments. In the words of another, he "remained a humble, gentle, approachable, and caring man. He loved humor. He had a quick, subtle wit and would roar with laughter at a good joke." He was no distant, dull academic. He took me, as he did with many of his others students, under his wings and encouraged me in many ways. I watched him write down the names of people in his little notebook for prayer. He handled the Scriptures with great hermeneutical agility, honoring the plain meaning of the text, drawing in other relevant passages, letting the Bible illuminate itself. The gospel was always at his mental fingertips. Dr. Whitcomb's life has loomed large in keeping us determined to finish our final days faithfully following Christ and committed to the only book God ever wrote.

Is Your God Big Enough? (February 21, 2020)

Go ahead. Admit it. You were really, really afraid of something when you were a child. Well, actually, this is not hard to confess. But as we grow older our fears do not go away. Not by any stretch. We come into this world with a fear problem. I am not talking about those legitimate fear issues, like attempting to walk across a busy highway. That kind of fear keeps you alive. Then there is the fear of God. That is a fear we all should have. It's a good thing. If we love God, we don't want to do the things that displease Him. But back to the "monster in the closet" kind of fears we fight daily. Our fears can be found in many closets of life. To name a few: the flu and the coronavirus, fear of flying, that our children will be sexually harmed, an economic recession, the safety of a loved one, the potential of an active shooter on your school campus, fear of driving, flying. The list is almost limitless.

Fear can range from "uneasiness to total insecurity." This is the place to recommend a psalm that meets insecurity head on. We don't know the exact circumstances of Psalm 46. The city of Jerusalem faced serious threats from invading armies on a number of occasions. Imagine the Taliban occupying what is now Canada and Iran being on our southern border instead of Mexico. Whatever the situation it was a time of great crisis in Zion, that special city to which God had pledged to make a blessing to the whole world. The Reformer, Martin Luther, counted Psalm 46 as one of his favorites. The opening lines inspired Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." The words of the commentator, H. C. Leupold, capture the mood of the psalm: "Few psalms breathe a spirit of sturdy confidence in the Lord in the midst of very real dangers as strongly as does this one."

There is a way to work Psalm 46 into our minds as a powerful corrective to the malignancy of fear and worry. But first we must master the flow of thought in this magnificent song. It is a celebration of God as Israel's security. To catch the spirit of these eleven verses it helps to ask

ourselves “is our God big enough?” God is praised as a refuge, fortress, and exalted ruler. If you are craving a reliable sense of security, savor these thoughts.

Our God is big enough for every situation in life (46:1-3). What more could you ask, knowing that though the mountains may slip into the sea and earthquakes shake the earth’s foundations, we need not fear. No matter what happens God is present. Talk of impending doom from climate change, raging forest fires, floods, and monster hurricanes are not a threat to our peace and stability. This means that God is more than enough as parents send their children off to school in a dangerous world. God is our refuge, our ultimate safety net.

God is big enough to give joyful confidence in the midst of every circumstance (46:4-7). The resources which God provides for His beleaguered people are reflected in “a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” Jerusalem had a river, actually a canal, from the Gihon spring to the pool of Siloam (2 Kgs. 20:20). It was no match for Assyria’s river, the Euphrates, in size. But Jerusalem’s stream signified the Lord’s presence as being like a peaceful flowing river. Folded into this truth is what may be called “eschatological ethics.” Simply put, it means that when Messiah establishes His throne in the Millennial temple in Jerusalem peace will reign (Ezek. 47). Israel was to live and act in anticipation of the fulfilled promise of an Eden-like environment in the future. We can be joyful as we are refreshed, nourished, and satisfied in the midst of evildoers by the great arch of history bending toward the coming of Jesus Christ. The Lord of armies is and will be our fortress. We can live with a vibrant sense of security.

Our God is big enough because of His power over the whole warring world (46:8-11). God’s covenant with Israel through Abraham will be fulfilled. We play an important role in this story. God brings the blessing of peace to His people. At the return of Messiah, the weapons of warfare will be destroyed throughout the earth. The Lord of hosts will one day remove evil instigators, troublemakers, ruthless dictators, rebels, and all expressions of hostility to Himself. The words “Be still and know that I am God” echo down through the corridors of time. The nations will be forced to bow their knees to the God of Jacob. Does not this prospect tell us where the right side of history is? King Messiah is our Exalted Ruler. The fear of fears, death, cannot have victory over us.

Where does Psalm 46 leave us? What are your fears? Name them. Place the thought of God and His perfections in the middle of whatever infects you with insecurity. What I recommend is this. Develop the habit of meditating your way through Psalm 46, often. Memorize it. Make sure you have a grasp of the meaning of each verse. Then reflect upon its truth, considering its implications for you personally and for the world.

Responding to God in thanksgiving and obedience puts fears to flight. Is your God big enough?

Wings Like a Dove (March 20, 2020)

“Managing coronavirus – related anxiety as numbers continue to rise.” This was one of many headlines leading into the latest reports on the spread of COVID 19. There is a host of questions that are being asked: How serious is this virus? Who are the most vulnerable? Where and how is it being spread? What precautions can be taken to limit the epidemic? Will the virus disappear? Will I get sick? Leaping into the middle of this developing epidemic is the challenge

of fear and its child, anxiety. There are legitimate fears which can serve to prevent unnecessary exposure to the disease as well as efforts with the medical community to find a vaccine. There have been tremendous strides made in epidemiology. Thankfully, our society is much better prepared than in the past to mitigate the impact of spreading viruses.

However, fear itself can become viral. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to have an investment in overcoming fear that is not devoid of God's wisdom. When we set aside divine wisdom, we invite a legion of fears to live with us. Fear flourishes in an environment of the unknown. As one writer has put it, "It's what we don't know that scares us."

We have much to learn from King David about the paralyzing effects of fear. As a young shepherd boy, he fought off a lion and a bear that threatened his flock. Saul, the king, and the father-in-law of David was madly driven to kill David. David's son, Absalom, conspired to take the kingship from him. The life of a king, warrior, and head of a dysfunctional family kept David fighting anxiety. Psalm 55 records a prayer of David while surrounded by strife and treachery. In bearing his soul in grief, wisdom emerges. Heart-stopping fear tormented the aged king of Israel. Saul was dead. David was living in Jerusalem. The city was overrun with lawbreakers and those hostile to David's rule. Age had not padded the problem of fear. It remained a beast: "Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me" (55:5).

In putting fear in its place, initially several states of the soul emerge. First, David is transparent before God. Fear can be very disorienting. The seeming silence of God, feelings of abandonment and isolation drew David to God. Listening to ourselves communicate with God has a way of clarifying our thoughts and pulling us out of our hiding places. Our feelings can betray us, like that feeling we get when we are having car trouble on the freeway, and everyone passes us by. We must not give into our feelings. God alone can ultimately settle us down. He does this with reminders of who God is and His reliability. At the conclusion of Psalm 55 David consoles himself with the assurance of the value of "casting your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you" (55:22).

Additionally, the immediate cause of David's fear is identified. It was the wicked and their flaunted vices (55:9-11, 15, 9-11). A virus does not have arms and legs. It is not visible to the naked eye. For all practical purposes, it is invisible due to its microscopic nature. This only enhances its power over one's imagination. Do I have it? What kind of pain will it produce? Will it kill me? Interestingly, David tips us off in how to pray against evil as it arises in nature. In David's case the evil deeds were the culprit. Nonetheless, we can plead with the Lord of every molecule in the universe to deliver us from sickness. However, there is no promise that the prevention of a disease or healing is guaranteed. What is needed is the kind of confidence in God that doesn't waver whether we live or die.

One state of the soul that David experienced does surprise us. His fear was so intense that it drove him to thoughts of escape. Usually in these situations the warrior king meets his fears head-on. Here we see David's longing for the "wings of a dove" so he could "fly away and be at rest" (55:6). Battling fear does not get easier as we grow older. The old fears come in new disguises. Endurance through "underlying physical conditions," general weariness in combating long term evils, and cultural changes bring their own unique combined weight on all believers, but especially so in advancing years. Rest and solitude can be rejuvenating, but running away from responsibilities is not the hiding place we need. The resolve of the psalmist

can be ours: “But I will trust in you” (55:23). God can be trusted to deal with evil doers in good time and with a creation that can kill us.

Twenty-first century plagues and pandemics are not new to this world. We live in the ruins of a sin cursed creation. The ability of viruses to attack our bodies, mutate, and spread is part of that creation that has been “subjected to futility” (Rom. 8:20). Nature weeps waiting for its redemption. In the meantime, diseases take their turn drawing us into the darkness of paradise lost. The menacing presence of fear must be pushed aside with divine wisdom for the present.

- The coronavirus is not the end of the world. Our minds are understandably, to the extent they are biblically informed, drawn to the closing act of the redemptive-dominion drama. The pale horse of the of the fourth seal (Rev. 6:8) predicts a dystopian disaster in the coming Tribulation. Disease will contribute to the death of 25% of the earth’s population. That would be two billion in today’s world. We are not there. This is not meant to conjure up unnecessary anxiety, but instead reminds us that before Christ comes again and establishes His kingdom our refuge is in Christ alone.
- Viruses are indifferent to so-called human progress. Thank God for what we know as common grace. He makes it possible for sinful humanity to discover and disseminate antibiotics and vaccines to counteract new diseases.
- Don’t panic and overreact. By panic, I mean fear explosions and irrational behavior. This is not a call to passivity and business as usual. Overindulgence in the latest statistics can nurture a thousand anxieties. Don’t hoard and deny others needed medical resources and the food supply at grocery stores. Take charge of your thought life. We must not get so wrapped up in our own survival that others become forgotten and neglected.
- Refuse the invitations of fear to anger, blame shifting, excessive finances being spent to placate insecurities, and substituting the world’s wisdom for God’s wisdom.
- “If I get it, I’ve got it.” This is not a call to a cavalier attitude about dangers. This is no time for careless talk or behavior. However, Christians are not guaranteed freedom from contagion and misery. Think and live Christianly. Hear the counsel of the apostle Paul: “All things are yours whether... the world, or life or death or the present or the future-- all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21-23). How does the coronavirus belong to believers? Life’s purpose, all things in the moment, the any moment possibility of death, and everything in the future, all of this serves God’s redemptive purpose in our lives. The evil around us requires disciplined countermeasures. We make choices in how long we are willing to think about our problems. In the final analysis, it’s hard to fight an enemy, like fear, which has an outpost in our heads. If you want the wings of a dove in order to flee your fears, seek God and His thoughts. Let us carry on with the task He has assigned us.

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” Psalm 55:22

A Pandemic and the Empty Tomb (April 10, 2020)

The invisible hand of God has placed the coronavirus pandemic next door on our calendars to the celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection. There is more to this than timing. To that we will return. Our experience with COVID-19 is changing us now and for the foreseeable future. I lived through World War II as a child and adjusted to an America recovering from its civilizational impact. Not being a prophet nor a scientist, I don't pretend to know how this pandemic is going to develop epidemiologically or how it is going to restructure our way of life. How should we think and live by hope? There are questions that lead us, as Christians, through some biblical responses.

Is the coronavirus pandemic the judgment of God? We cannot say that it is a specific act of judgment on any particular nation. We would need divine revelation for that answer. However, any pandemic is a phase of the judgment to which God has declared upon the world through the curse of sin and death in the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:22). The degenerative nature of death resulted in disorder. Bacteria and viruses experienced mutational changes causing them to become adversarial and harmful to living organisms. God used plagues as part of His covenant chastening of Israel. They served His purposes in bringing an idol worshiping nation to its knees (Lev. 26:25; Ex. 7-12).

Can we learn spiritual lessons from an epidemic? Yes, we can. Disease reminds us that we live in a sin-cursed world under the penalty of death. Pandemics are part of a nature that is "red in tooth and claw." Disease, storms, earthquakes, and congenital abnormalities are opportunities to overcome another kind of evil, natural evil as distinguished from moral evil. Sometimes faith delivers from sickness. Sometimes faith enables us to live through sickness. But at all times it is God who rules over nature gone wild and uses it to advance His purposes in the lives of His children (Heb. 11:33; 2 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 12:9; 1 Cor. 3:21-23).

Are pandemics a sign of the end times? The fact is we have been living in the last days since the ascension of Jesus to heaven. But as we draw closer to the Rapture of the Church and events leading to the Second Coming of Christ, it is not unreasonable to begin to see the shadows of coming world conditions. We know that in the seven-year Tribulation of the Book of Revelation plagues will be one of God's instruments of judgment on an unbelieving world (Rev. 6:17; 9:20). Pandemics are vivid reminders that even greater miseries will come upon mankind before the Second Coming of Christ.

Can pandemics change entire civilizations? Yes, they can, and they have. Thoughtful writers such as Henry Kissinger and Frank Snowden have recently spoken to how this can happen. Science and epidemiologists will work even more aggressively to develop their understanding of infectious diseases with intensified efforts to find vaccines. Plagues have played a major role in disappearing civilizations through transmission of diseases for which there was no immunity (e.g., both in the Americas and Europe). Globalization both accelerates epidemics and offers opportunities to better control them. Frank Snowden says that Europeans who survived great plagues became impressed with the idea that "you could be struck down at any moment without warning" (WSJ, March 28-29, 2020). The great cathedrals of Europe are monuments to mankind's sense of its need for God.

What can the resurrection of Jesus Christ tell us about the COVID-19 pandemic? In terms of the future of all viruses, the physical resurrection of Jesus from death tells us the most important thing we need to know. In 1 Corinthians 15, the premier chapter on the resurrection in the New Testament, two facts stand out. One is the gospel itself. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is no gospel. If the resurrection of the body is denied, as some in the Corinthian church were apparently embracing, the gospel falls apart. Christ's own physical resurrection becomes questionable. The truth is that Jesus really died. It was not faked. He was actually raised on the third day. These two realities are the foundation of the truth that we have a qualified Savior. He is the Son of God whose perfect substitutionary sacrifice for sinners is sufficient for victory over sin and death. Death by a virus, or any kind of death, belongs to the believer in Jesus Christ. Our death takes us immediately into the presence of the glorified, risen Savior.

The second fact, which overcomes the ravages of countless deadly viruses, is the promise of a resurrection body. After documenting the truth and meaning of the resurrection of Christ, the apostle Paul explains exactly what it means to have victory over death (1 Cor. 15:57). We have nothing to fear from death as believers. Our bodies will be transformed. These mortal bodies will no longer be subject to death, no more aging and no more disease. We will function at a level we can't even begin to imagine with bodies perfectly suited to eternity.

Does all this not make our physical losses in this life endurable? Passover rolls over into Easter and Easter into the fabulous future of living with, reigning with, and serving Jesus who overcame death. My dear friend, diseases with their physically destructive powers will disappear by the ultimate cure of the empty tomb. He is risen. He is risen indeed!

The Winds of Change in a Post-Pandemic World (April 24, 2020)

Today, as I write, the wind is out of the northwest at six miles per hour. As we amateur weather people know, the direction of the wind can often provide forecast indicators. No less true are the winds of cultural change. We have been experiencing quickly changing wind directions in the last several months, with more to come. It seems as if everything with which we are familiar has been turned upside down. One small example, I don't immediately shake hands in ordinary social settings.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should want to think about change within the boundaries of biblical wisdom. Change is a part of life. It can be good change or bad change. It can be unsettling and create anxiety. It can be welcomed and improve the way we do things. Many of us have lived BTI (before the internet) and ATI (after the internet). Any explanation of the changes is unnecessary. What I wish to do is lay out six Bible-ways of living with change. These will receive limited elaboration. Then we will survey some of the changes that can be anticipated as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Change is a necessary part of a creation that is groaning and a world system that is passing away (Rom. 8:22; 1 Jn. 2:17). God has designed us with a capacity for change to bring glory to Him (Gen. 1:28; Isa. 43:7).

God is the only changeless being in a changing universe (Mal. 3:6; Psa. 102:25-27). Because God is unchangeable, we can have stability in a world of change (Isa. 46:9-11). Because God is who He is, we can change. He has made it possible for us to be forgiven and flourish for His name's sake as we make the right choices.

All change is a part of the sovereign design of an infinitely wise and omnipotent God for the purpose of bringing glory to Himself (Eccles. 3:1-8; Eph. 1:11). The changes that come with the aging process are an opportunity for the exaltation of God (Psa. 90:5-10; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Change can be mismanaged and its meaning missed. Longing for the past, prolonged grief, fear, self-indulgence, unbelief, anger, and failure to learn from the past can contribute to rewriting the past and emotional distortions in handling change.

Change is the opportunity to know God in new faith-building ways (Heb. 11:8-10). All change belongs to the believer in that it is in the hands of a loving, trustworthy, sovereign God. The hall of faith in Hebrews 11 beckons interested visitors to see what it means to live a faith-driven life. Heroes in the faith had to constantly deal with change.

Change will play an eternal role in the life of the child of God (Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-5). Every believer will experience an eternal succession of moments of God-designed service and enjoyment.

How we relate to one another and function as a nation in a post-pandemic world will bring winds of change. As perverse as it seems, the politicization of the coronavirus is already in full force. Blame shifting and the use of contagion statistics are daily weapons. Expect more of this as the presidential election cycle gets closer. As if there were not already enough political factions, the lockdown protests for and against divides us further. Christians will increasingly find themselves differing with one another on a variety of issues. Experiencing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace will be a challenge.

As the shelter-in-place restrictions begin to loosen, some may break free with cautions set aside. Others will proceed to make adjustments, but with the new habits of social distancing and masks still in place. This only scratches the surface of the new patterns of behavior that will require forbearance and accountability among Christians.

Preparation for the next pandemic should be in the back of our minds, as the blame-war calms down. It is an opportune time for Federal and State governments to reassess their readiness for national emergencies. For some reason our nation has been unprepared for such catastrophes as Pearl Harbor, the 911 terrorist attack, and a series of plagues. As Christians it is our duty to go to the ant and learn (Prov. 6:6). We must be self-starters by staying out of debt, creating a personal emergency fund, and being good stewards of our bodies. The local church ought to look for ways to provide safety-net funds and appropriate ministries for those hit especially hard by the next disaster.

School closures have opened up fresh thought about the opportunities of home-schooling and appreciation for the responsibilities placed upon schoolteachers. The erasure of organized sports from our calendars has shifted the spotlight off athletes to the everyday workers who help keep

our country running. We value those in the supply chain for grocery stores, as we do clerks, doctors, nurses, truckers and the often-unappreciated clean-up and maintenance workers.

With many of our neighbors at home we have been able to get to know them better. Six feet apart is better than not at all. Hopefully, out of this can come closer bonds, opportunities to help one another, and open doors for gospel witness.

Habits of absence from the gathered assembly on Sundays must not be allowed to become a substitute for meeting with God's people to worship in song and hearing the Word of God. Virtual church cannot produce the same vitality as that of physical presence.

On a worldview note, the Chinese people need our prayers, especially the millions of believers among the one and a half billion population of the People's Republic of China. It is the Chinese Communist Party that rules with an iron fist and uses lies and propaganda to maintain its control. The cover-up of the early stages of the coronavirus has exposed the evil nature of a totalitarian regime.

So as the unknown world of tomorrow unfolds, let us as believers in Jesus Christ live with courage and caution.

With God in the School of a Virus, Part 1 (May 14, 2020)

It was February 1969. I had just returned from a trip by plane to Wisconsin to perform my brother's wedding. Upon returning home I developed a fever that would not go away. I could do nothing but lie in bed with misery for two weeks. The Hong Kong flu pandemic which entered America in December of 1968 caught up with me. It killed more than 1 million people worldwide, more than 100,000 in the U.S. Things were different then. For children born in the early 1940s, it wasn't unknown to get chicken pox, measles, mumps, German measles, or scarlet fever. The threat of polio haunted parents. Closed swimming pools and the specter of living on an iron lung were reminders of nature's dangers.

Plagues have been a part of human history since the fall of man. Sin entered the human race and with it the penalty of death. Tracing the history of pestilences tells a story of millions of deaths and alterations of the human story. The great plague of Athens (430-29 B.C.) wiped out as many as 80,000 people (a fourth of the population of Athens). The medieval outbreak in Europe of the Black Plague (1347-51) killed half of the European population, 50-80 million people ("Plagues, and Panics, Ancient and Modern," Victor Davis Hanson). The plagues of the Old Testament could have been the Bubonic plague (1 Sam. 5) or the Pneumonic plague (2 Kgs. 19:35). Fever, chills followed by prostration, delirium, headache, vomiting and diarrhea was probably the experience in the numerous occasions of plagues that befell Israel and surrounding nations as recorded in the Old Testament.

When we gather the biblical references to plagues the following picture develops. Disease, plagues, and death became the lot of mankind as decreed by God because of sin (Rom. 5:12). The curse of Genesis 3 turned life and order into decay and disorder. The devastating nature of sin was reflected in nature's brokenness. Viruses became a part of the animal world, some of which can be transferred to human beings. The Edenic curse of corruption under which

man and nature groan makes death as big as the entire created cosmos. There are millions of ways to die. Some attempt to take God off the hook for unleashing evil into His good world by attributing it to Satan. The cost of this ill-conceived idea is the diminishment of God's rule over all things. The devil has the "power of death" (Heb.2:15), but only as God permits (Job 2:4-6; 1 Cor. 5:5).

Plagues were used by God as part of His covenant chastening of Israel (Lev. 26:16,25; Deut. 28:21). These epidemics were to bring Israel to her knees in repentance. If not heeded, hardened hearts would receive the hard treatment of national disintegration. Such an outbreak of disease afflicted Israel when David disobeyed God by seeking security in demanding a census to determine the might of his fighting force. Pride, prosperity, and hunger for power resulted in a plague sent by God which killed 70,000 combat-ready troops throughout Israel. The presence of the ark of the covenant among the Philistines resulted in a plague on their cities. Some have conjectured that it may have been the bubonic plague (1 Sam. 5:6-11). Whatever the epidemic, it was an act of God's judgment on idol worshiping pagans for the audacity of harboring the symbol of His presence in Israel. The panic of the Philistines was a reminder that their triumph over Israel on the battlefield did not mean that they had achieved victory over Israel's God.

It is within the power, compassion, and wisdom of God to lift the ravaging effects of a plague if He so desires (2 Chron. 20:9). King Solomon prayed with this confidence in mind. When God's angel was poised to stretch out his hand to destroy the population of Jerusalem he backed off from the impending calamity (2 Sam. 24:16). It was the mercy of God that further human misery and grief were prevented.

Epidemic disease in the Tribulation period before the Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 6:7-8) is symbolized by the pale horse of the fourth seal. This will contribute to the death of a fourth of the earth's population. That would be two billion in today's world. The accumulated wealth of the nations, secularized with a thin veneer of religiosity, will be visited by the wrath of God in the seventh bowl. Babylon's man-centered, godless society will be silenced by plagues in a single day (Rev. 18:8). Such frightening prospects ought to jolt unbelief to its senses. But it will not. Viruses and human catastrophes will not be eradicated. The worst is yet to come.

The psalmist prayed, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psa. 23:3). Our passion for following Jesus will direct us through the "valley of the shadow of death." Plagues can incite our insecurities and fears. Our protection is to take steps of confidence in God who orders every troubling circumstance for the good of His children (Rom. 8:28). Having been steeped in biblical wisdom, we are to determine what is sanctified self-interest. The when and where of social distancing, handwashing, masks, need not be obsessive or life-dominating. Rational risk-taking can serve the benefit of others.

A disease contracted is not necessarily a sign of God's judgment upon us. As the sun rises on the evil and on the good, viruses fall upon the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). Believers are not exempt from suffering the afflictions of plagues. They are designed to be opportunities to exalt Christ. The fires of affliction for the believer are purifying. At the same time, the fires of affliction in plagues for unbelievers are a forecast of greater affliction, eternal judgment, if there is no repentance and faith in Christ (1 Pet. 4:17-19).

There is good news. The perfect vaccine exists for immunity to the fatal disease of sin. It is found in the following Scripture: “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn. 3:16-17). When you place your trust in Jesus alone as your personal sin-bearer, the eternal affliction of judgment is removed. Only in this way is it possible to receive the eternal life God offers, free from the ravages of sin, safe in the presence of the Savior forever.

With God in the School of a Virus, Part 2 (May 29, 2020)

The pandemic of the coronavirus is no category five hurricane. As bad as such a storm could be, it is limited to a certain geographical area. Covid-19 is a global plague of incalculable human physical suffering with inestimable social, economic, and psychological consequences. Where are Christians to begin in thinking biblically about a disease that seems to be changing everything with which we are familiar? Let’s proceed with some necessary questions.

Why do we experience the spread of pain and suffering which diseases, like a virus, create? The sin of Adam brought death upon the human race and all of creation (Rom. 5:10; 8:20). Human mortality and the innumerable ways in which death comes to us all are witnesses to our sinfulness and the need for God’s redemption (Rom. 3:21,24). Moral evil can be traced to the first man, Adam. Natural evil finds its origin in God’s judgment on creation because of Adam’s rebellion against the Creator.

Does the current pandemic mean that God is angry with us? For the most part, the Bible keeps a curtain pulled over the specific reason(s) why plagues bring misery and death to millions of people. God has revealed Himself in the Scriptures as one who is “compassionate, and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Ex. 34:6). There is more to God than this, but this is the essence of what we need to know. He can be trusted. It should be noted that “this is possibly the most repeated and quoted formula” in the Hebrew Bible. Because God is slow to anger, people have time to repent before the hammer of His judgment finally falls. We have the example of Jesus when asked about two specific tragedies resulting in a loss of lives. The question behind these incidents was an assumption. Did these people deserve to die? Jesus “dodged” the issue, declaring that ten out of ten people will die. Therefore, seek the Lord while He may be found. Repent by turning from unbelief and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Should Christians pray the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 regarding Covid-19? This passage reads, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” A principle of Bible interpretation guides us. All Scripture is for us, but not all Scripture is to us. This promise was given to the nation of Israel under their covenant arrangement with God, the Mosaic Covenant. As His covenant people, God would respond to heartfelt repentance for their national sins and lift His covenant chastening. Can the church “cash in” on such a promise? No. The church or the United States of America cannot claim this promise. However, there is truth here for us. Revival in the church which would include repentance and seeking God in prayer may result in significant societal changes. God in His mercy may choose to limit the effects of a disease epidemic. God responded to the repentance

of Nineveh through the preaching of Jonah. We do not know if the judgment predicted on Nineveh was a plague, but the fact is that God relented and did not inflict the coming disaster, whatever it would have been (Jonah 3:10).

Should Christians ignore the lockdown orders from their state governments and insist on holding church services? Generally speaking, this would not be wise if the meetings of the church would contribute to the spread of the virus. Each church should take it upon itself to respect directions regarding hand washing and social distancing. The Covid-19 conditions in a given location should be taken into account. A decline in locally diagnosed cases may serve as a green light to proceed with church gatherings. Our State government has issued recommendations for public meetings.

What are some of the anticipated changes in our post-unlocking experience? This is a difficult question to answer. Some of the more obvious effects will be social timidity and reluctance to participate in group events. The contagion factor will loom in the back of our minds. Three months of warnings and predicted scary consequences of contracting covid-19 may limit travel, shopping, eating at restaurants, attendance at sporting events, and any number of other activities. The economy has constricted, and the demand side of supply and demand economics is low. Tens of millions of jobs have been lost. Going back to pre-virus habits will be conflicted. Expect a slow and painful economic recovery. I am personally concerned about the state of mind many will have developed. Fear is not a new challenge, but it may have metastasized in many lives.

How might the pandemic lockdown affect families and the church? Social distancing can have a down-side. Some are advocating varying degrees of social isolation of children from those over the age of 65. Families will want to discuss the best ways to exercise necessary care in protecting older family members, while maintaining relationships. The impact of the loss of older people with their wisdom and example for the next generation is not a good exchange for more “safety.” A church without the life-experience contributions of its aging members is a loss of wisdom, knowledge, and a calming effect on body-life within the congregation.

What personal challenges will we encounter from the Covid-19 pandemic? First, I will speak personally. The constant discussion of disease and death have served to remind me of the brief time I have left here on earth. By God’s grace I live hope-filled, not depressed. Contentment is a gift from God. At the same time there is a fresh sense of urgency to finish well. For our church family, I think of the words, “distance can make the heart grow fonder or further.” Over three months of relational distancing contains its own potential for spiritual viral infections. We must be conscious of the need to return to caring for one-another within the church family. Suffering, sadness, and disconnectedness from our brothers and sisters in Christ can produce pessimism and passivity. If your sheltering-in-place is lingering on, find things to do. Paint the house, clean out the garage. Get better organized. Read a book on something you know nothing about. Call an old friend. Plant some flowers. Start a small vegetable garden. Communicate with a missionary. Be patient with everyone. Thank people for working in these difficult times. Reexamine your finances. Figure how you can live on less and look for ways to give to others. Identify some realistic safety measures. Determine ways to live a healthier lifestyle. Walk more. Talk to your neighbors. Start a Zoom Bible study with a small circle of friends. Read and meditate your way through the Psalms identifying truths about God you have not seen before. And enjoy it all.

Racial Reconciliation (June 19, 2020)

John McNeal, an African American pastor, is now 88 years of age and soon to retire. He grew up in Metter, in South Georgia. Born in 1933, his early years were lived in an economic, social, and local government era steeped in the harsh realities of segregation. When John was age 14, as he walked home from a school function with a group of friends, they were confronted by a sheriff, a police officer, and a state trooper. John was singled out for questioning. "Do you drink alcohol?" He said, no. He further offered that neither did he smoke tobacco. The sheriff asked again, "Do you drink alcohol?" The same answer was given. He was immediately hit across the face. At that moment John's sister came to his defense verbally and stood in front of him. The hand of the sheriff went to his holstered pistol. Upon reaching home John's mother took a washbasin and cloth and lovingly wiped his reddened eye. She explained that God was no respecter of persons and someday things would get better. His father, a hard-working sharecropper, put on his hat, unable to take this incident to the police or any sympathetic person in authority. He walked across the field and cried.

In the 1940s and 1950s when I was a youth, positions of cultural privilege and authority were reserved for those who shared my skin color. It was a convenient arrangement, if you were white. There was ready access to the S&W cafeteria, the Lowe's Grand theater, and the public transportation system. Stepping off the curb on to the trolley to downtown Atlanta, my eye immediately met the stickered sign that read, "Whites sit from front to rear. Coloreds from rear to front." Among the indignities of this regulation was the forcing of the "Coloreds" to bunch up in the back of the bus, with many standing because of limited seating.

One of the horrifying features of a Jim Crow south was how oblivious most white people, including myself, were to what blacks were thinking and feeling. Segregation was not given a second thought by those who enjoyed their station in life as comfortable and privileged. That's just the way it was. God's order of things. So we assumed. The human conscience is capable of extraordinary guidance and reproof when correctly informed. However, it can also provide a green light for awful attitudes and deeds. Relegating other human beings to an inferior status and inflicting harm upon them can be justified and even written into law. Sometimes people appeal to conscience as the final court of authority. The truth is that our inner moral referee can be prejudiced and blind to moral truth.

The world of New Testament times was rife with racial animosity. Gentiles and Jews practiced extreme social distancing. Jews treated Samaritans like dirt under their feet. Then Jesus, Israel's Messiah, appeared, challenging racial barriers wherever He met them. He selected twelve disciples who were children of their culture. Racism and prejudice needed to be washed out of their systems of belief. They were stunned to observe the Savior of the world socially connecting with a Samaritan woman (John 4). James and John wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village for its inhospitality (Luke 9:55). They were rebuked by Jesus. When Jesus told a story of what neighborly love looked like, he made a Samaritan the example of what it meant to sacrifice oneself for others (Luke 10:25-37). When Samaritans were converted to Christ, it was announced that Jesus was the Savior of the world (John 4:42). This was a preview of what the church would look like (Acts 1:8; 8:1). The wall between Jews and Gentiles came crashing down through Christ's atoning work on the cross. The body of Christ became a powerful witness to what new life in Christ can do in bringing all races/ethnicities together (Colossians 3:11; Galatians 3:28).

We live in turbulent times. Racism and anti-racism are competing with Covid-19 for our attention. Is there an abiding answer to the push for racial reconciliation? Scripture is not silent. There is an enlightening account of one man, as a follower of Jesus, who needed his attitude toward Gentiles changed. He had been called and taught by the Master, but prejudice required an epiphany for Peter. The spread of the gospel was being obstructed by the apostle's beliefs that Gentiles were to be kept at a safe distance. While in a trance Peter was told to kill and eat animals that violated Jewish food laws. It was a lesson in a major change. Peter got the message. Unclean Gentiles were to be cleansed by the gospel. In real time, Gentiles who were "far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). The gospel overcomes prejudice through the changed hearts of God's people. Peter and the household of Cornelius became family in Christ (Acts 10:44-46).

It was in 1963 that God brought a new friend into my life. It was my first year of seminary. I worked nights for a janitorial service with a fellow student. His name was John McNeal. We talked about the racial tensions raging in the south. John was planning to come to Atlanta to teach at Carver Bible College and start a church in the area. His burden for the black community ignited a vision in my own heart. God had brought together two believers with different skin colors. One had overcome the injustices of segregation. The other was replacing segregation with a bond to a brother from Metter, Georgia.

Bless the Lord (July 3, 2020)

The lack of gratitude is a spiritual felony. It is the evidence of pompous self-sufficiency. The psalms of the Old Testament are lavish in praise to God, for God being God. He deserves every bit of praise we give to Him. Psalm 103 is a bright star in the galaxy of praise psalms. With an echo effect it begins, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." It ends with, "Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!" A gloomy, complaining spirit is shamed by acknowledging the majesty of God's mercies.

We will skim a stone across this pond of praise in its twenty verses. Its depth deserves a sounding, but we will observe the five skips of a stone across this great hymn of thanksgiving.

The first skip of the stone is self-determined praise to the Lord. At the very outset we see that thanksgiving is a self-administered means of changing our outlook on life (vv. 1-2). The psalmist pulls himself up, shakes off his encroaching gloom, and takes charge of his mind and memories. Emotions are best stirred by truth. Can we say we have had to do this? If we are careless, bad news can swamp our souls with forgetfulness. Forgetting to acknowledge our God-given benefits may be a sign of a deeper problem.

The second skip of the stone is praise for God's constant care and provision. The psalmist reveals that thanksgiving embraces the expanse of God's redemptive work (vv. 3-5). Forgiveness, the greatest benefit of all, draws our eyes toward the cross of Christ where He gave His life for us. How many times has God healed you and me? Thousands? We are still living are we not? What about that pit of grief into which God threw us a rope of renewed hope and joy? Include in your praise to God the ways He has made it possible to gather our strength

during overwhelming responsibilities. I believe in the Lord of immune systems, blood cells, a night's sleep, and a fresh spring in our steps.

The third skip of the stone is praise for the blessing of protection. Thanksgiving lifts the fog of secular propaganda, so we can see the light of God's mercy beyond the rain shadow of human unworthiness (vv. 6-14). This skip makes quite a splash. We are wired to admire what impresses us. God's ways and works are beyond comprehension. But don't let that stop you. He designs our journey in order to train us in righteousness. His grace is generous, and His justice is tempered with mercy. He is not like those of us who love to keep quarrels going and nurse grudges. We are to be God's instruments in seeking justice for all people.

In a dazzling display of fireworks God's enduring love and compassion light the night sky. We are left breathless as we contemplate the abundance of the Lord's kindness. As the Message has paraphrased it, "as far as sunrise is from sunset, he has separated us from our sin" (v. 12). Derek Kidner captures what we need at this point: "We are reminded of the sullen ingratitude which God encounters in reply to the healing, forgiving and redeeming of which the opening verses sang." God knows we are made out of dirt. Praise Him for His patience.

The fourth skip of the stone praises God for His eternally enduring love. It doesn't take long in Georgia for emerald green freshly watered grass to turn brown and tired looking. Thanksgiving chooses not to dwell on the boundaries of a fading life, but upon life with God forever (vv. 15-18). Birthdays have a way of going by at the speed of a sprinter. Clap your hands for the reliable love of God. But there is a contingency. God's elective love is unconditional, but as His children we cannot sin and expect God not to be displeased and exercise discipline when necessary. The cliché "God's love is unconditional" has been stretched beyond its limits. A Christian playing with sin cannot plead "unconditional love." The fear of the Lord is the wise and God-honoring response to His holiness and love. Trembling at the thought of displeasing the Lord is a healthy state of the soul.

The echo of the opening verse of this psalm is heard in the fifth and final skip of the stone. David concludes with praise for God, the sovereign King over the heavens and earth. Thanksgiving joins with all creation in giving praise to God (vv. 19-22). Star Trek's Spaceship Enterprise pretended to explore the universe. God alone is to be found in every solar system of infinite space. Every angel and all of nature are called to join in the celebration of praise to God. No child of God sings solo in the congregation of all creation.

This psalm takes us by the hand and shows a way to stimulate praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Too often, especially in these days, we can wake up with a sense of impending doom. In that moment we have to take charge of our minds and memories. Don't let pride and self-sufficiency elbow their way to the front of the line. We need to catalogue the goodness of God and list His blessings. Those we love don't want to be taken for granted, especially the One who "forgives all our iniquities, who heals all our diseases." The Lord has spared us from death to either put our trust in Christ for redemption, or He has extended our days to serve Him for a longer time on this earth and bless the name of the Lord all the more.

Seeing the Body of Christ in Technicolor (July 24, 2020)

And they sang a new song, saying, Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and you made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. Revelation 5:9-10

Revelation 5:8-14 is breath taking. All creation breaks out in exuberant praise because the Lamb of God is worthy to receive the crown rights to establish dominion over the earth. No human imagination can adequately capture the heavenly scene of the Lord Jesus Christ taking the title deed to the universe. The entirety of the redemptive story of the Bible hangs upon this moment. The Lamb deserves to open the scroll because of His atoning sacrifice in purchasing some from every ethnicity on earth. People of every language, nation, and skin color make up the composition of the kingdom and priests to reign on earth.

Some of us older citizens lived through the transition from black and white television and movies to color. The world of technicolor is taken for granted by all today. As we are dazzled by color in our screen viewing experience, how much more so should we revel in the variety of color in the body of Christ. By this I mean more than shades of skin color. I am also thinking of different language groups, cultural diversity, and nationalities. We human beings are amazingly dissimilar and similar at the same time. It should not surprise us that all colors, languages, cultures, personalities, experiences, and social classes can be seen in group pictures in the New Testament.

The body of Christ is seen in two striking photos in Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11. The churches in Galatia were being told that the gospel received from Paul was not the true gospel. However, the authentic gospel he preached was evident in authentic converts. The apostle reminds them that being in Christ means a new family identity. The gospel of free grace makes this possible. In Christ one's race, color, social status, national origin or gender do not make us superior or inferior. We are all grace-created equals. The distinctions that use to divide the Galatian believers; Jew, Greek, slave, freeman, male, female, made them, and all of us in the body of Christ, a unified personality. The world had never seen the likes of this before. The law did not make this happen, Christ did. The believers in Colossae, only 100 miles to the east of Galatia, had their own group picture. What a sight it was. No matter what their origin; Greek, Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian (uncultured), Scythian (talk about uncouth), slave, or free, the walls had come down. Racial walls, religious walls, cultural walls, social walls no longer existed in Christ. Their increasing likeness to Jesus created a striking family likeness to Jesus, our elder brother. Believers in Jesus Christ with all their ethnic diversity have more in common with one another than we do with unbelievers. I will never forget meeting my first Romanian Christian as we were trying to find the right train in Bucharest. He had been appointed to meet us and when he saw us, he shouted in his deep voice, "Brother!" It still rings in my ears.

A case of dissension can be seen in one of the photo-ops of the church in Jerusalem. Greek-speaking Jews and Aramaic-speaking Jews began to argue. Apparent preferential treatment of the latter was not received very well. The background to this were abiding tensions revolving around the tendencies of the native Hebrew-speaking Christians. They were suspicious of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Language differences are often reflected in differences in

outlooks and attitudes. We get the picture. It reminds us that prejudices formed before conversion to Christ are often carried over into the church. This happens in the body of Christ today. Conflicts over programs and methods, music preferences, selection of teachers, and the development of cliques can develop. The wealthy and poor, the outgoing and the quiet, expectations, unresolved offenses, cultural and ethnic diversity are the opportunity for believers to rise above such things and serve one another. The leaders in the Jerusalem church moved in on the problem immediately. Interestingly, the seven men who were chosen to render administrative assistance had Greek names, perhaps Jews from the Greek speaking dispersion. Body-life love overcomes disparities and dissension in the name of Christ. This is the way it ought to be. Harmony that overcomes cultural clashes in the church stimulates more effective evangelistic outreach.

It was a good thing that live-streaming of church services was unknown in the apostle James' day. The church was playing favorites. A near-sighted usher was guilty, not only of bad manners, but also of bad morals. James, in his in-your-face style, says, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (Jas. 2:1). What was going on? The assembly of believers was showing partiality to wealthy guests. The best seat in the house was given to the smartly dressed man while the poor man off the street was directed to a place on the back row. Christ is not honored by such decisions. Underneath such behavior was greed and pride, a denial of the gospel. Discrimination on the basis of race, class, or culture has no place in the church of Jesus Christ. It's an evil (v. 4). The moral compass of the congregation should always be pointing in the direction of loving our neighbors as ourselves (2:8).

Racial reconciliation and all other forms of diversity are reconciled in Jesus Christ. This is a reality in the body of Christ. We don't create it. However, it is to be realized in our relationships. We have to work at it. The letters to the churches in the New Testament are witnesses to what it takes to live out the oneness we embrace in Christ. When all God's children are gathered into His personal presence our praises will be sung in perfect unison and harmony. It will be a picture to behold.

Societal Morbidities and The Coming Messiah (August 7, 2020)

By this time, we have all been schooled in the meaning of a morbidity. Morbidity means to be unhealthy, sick, and, as we have learned, makes an individual more susceptible to contracting and dying from Covid-19. High blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and other such conditions create physical liabilities. In the same way, moral breakdowns in our society are contributing to the death of our nation.

The prophets of the Old Testament are famous for the smoking guns of courageous men sent by God to call Israel to covenantal repentance, or else. One example is Isaiah 5 with its "woe to those who." The spiritual diseases of Israel were called out for everything from greed to pervasive alcoholism. The following inventory focuses on some of the evils that are plaguing our own nation. Like Israel of old, if there is to be any hope the patient needs to know what is wrong and what can be done. We will come back to that. In the meantime, put on your face mask and buckle up.

The destabilization of government at the federal, state, and local levels is no minor matter. Many governors and mayors appear not to know what to do about lawlessness. Our police are being given curious job descriptions with no one having their backs. There is a fundamental malfunction. Thankfully, in the midst of it all some local communities are showing support for the police by taking food to precincts and expressing gratitude for their presence. Bankruptcies, economic recession, and failure to pay bills are mounting. This signals difficult days ahead. The growing acceptance of neo-socialism and the rise of a political class that condones coercion, intimidation, and threats is not good news. The closing of church doors, while in some instances is a necessary concession to Covid-19, is unsettling. The loss of sustained, strong, biblical exposition in pulpits throughout the land is a harbinger of confusion among the sheep. The politicizing of all things is unrelenting. This is not entirely a new thing, but it is contaminating education, sports, entertainment, and the work place. Fear of Covid-19 and a sense of impending doom accompanies all plans, routines, social gatherings, and family get-togethers. Fear is a debilitating emotion to live with 24-7. Compromises within professing Christian churches have a hollowing effect; looking the other way at public sins in the congregation, no church discipline, emotionalism, and the loss of clear gospel preaching are symptoms. An obsession with race is pushing society to view everything through the lens of skin color. Many of the gains of the civil-rights movement are being turned upside down. There is a resurgence of racism in the name of anti-racism. A breakdown in law and order is creating chaos and anarchy, along with attempts to substitute “psychological science” for police protection. Creeping totalitarianism with its cancel culture is setting up command posts in the consciences of corporations and the media trying to tell us how we must think. Covid-19 is being weaponized to gain political power and virtue signal. China’s menacing movements in the far east are moving west with eyes set on world domination.

Professional basketball teams have capitulated to communist values. The Supreme Court of the United States had determined that church gatherings in Nevada are a greater threat than gambling casinos. The affinity of college students toward socialism is turning capitalism into a villain. The substitution of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the place of biblical reconciliation, unity based on truth, and equal opportunity has become cultic. The secularization of our culture has spawned a denial of the existence of objective truth. The loss of wise, courageous leadership has created a vacuum, inviting the presence of empty suits to step in as pretended leaders. Ubiquitous left-leaning media denies the truth of what is really happening in America. So-called news sources are thinly disguised indoctrination forums.

A president who has an affair with himself, plays loose with his words and publicly signals his character flaws is seemingly the only political figure that stands between our nation and socialism. A fearful citizenry seems increasingly willing to resign itself to a small room of freedom in exchange for government-promised securities. A societal revolution is underway driven by street radicals who are destroying businesses and private property, while many evangelicals are sleepwalking through a disaster. Growing alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, depression, and domestic violence are a part of a tsunami of proliferating disorders sweeping through every village, town, and city. Sex trafficking is responsible for the slavery of millions of children and women. School openings with all of its unknowns and confusion has become a battleground between Teachers unions and parents with students caught in the middle. Today’s youth and tomorrow’s leaders are indoctrinated by university professors who spew hatred of America as they rewrite our nation’s history. A sexual revolution continues unabated looking for love in all the wrong places, marching under the banner of the LGBTQ

agenda. The disappearance of patriotism and the blood-bought freedoms we enjoy is grievous. A well-known national organization is advocating the elimination of the Christian view of marriage between a man and woman. Nefarious groups are clamoring for the defunding of police. Social justice is pushing its way in front of the Great Commission as the mandate of the church.

Like the streak of a blazing comet across the night sky are the prophecies of the prophet Isaiah of a coming Messiah. Against the backdrop of a rampant spread of evils and the spiritual breakdown of God's witness nation, Israel, God spoke. He gives marvelous bursts of true hope for the present and the future. The perfections of a coming Messiah are stupendous (Isaiah 9:6). He, the Wonderful Counselor, will rule with wisdom which no human has ever possessed. As the Mighty God, He is the victorious Warrior over evil. To have a ruling Messiah who is the Eternal Father rewards a deep longing. We want security and care, forever. And peace. Who doesn't want it? The coming Messiah is the crowned Prince of Peace. He is the real thing. He guarantees to make things the way they ought to be, bringing a time when God will restore all things.

How can all these wonderful excellencies be bound up in one person? Look no further than Isaiah 53 where God's Messiah achieves the grand success of the ages. The language used must have left the prophets overwhelmed. The Messiah would suffer for sinners and be glorified. It is an unparalleled paradox. All of societies' morbidities will be dissolved in the infinite worth of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and His triumph over the stench of death. Look to Him all you weary. The Messiah is coming again.

Why Jesus Wants You to Be Poor (September 8, 2020)

Many of us have our "poor stories." At some point in our lives many have had experiences of being needy. I once thought I had been poor. We lived in Florida in the early 1950's while my father was in the V.A. hospital. We were dependent on his disability check each month for groceries. We ate a lot of baloney, rice, and citrus fruit, that sort of thing. One trip to India knocked that idea in the head. I saw what real poverty looked like. People lived on street corners, begged for their next meal, with little hope for the future.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). Was the Master Teacher saying that being materially poor has great advantage with God? We must give Him more credit than that, considering the sum total of His teaching and the fact that He was, after all, God in human flesh. This first Beatitude takes us into depths of thought that require closer examination.

The divine stamp of approval is found in the word "blessed." The idea is that of having a right relationship with God and enjoying Him as we should. Our word "happy" is often used as a synonym for blessed. But that won't do. It has been too devalued. Happy carries with it the baggage of circumstantial emotional elevation, like "happy birthday." We are rich toward God when we are poor in spirit. The Beatitudes are all paradoxes which G.K. Chesterton said, "is truth standing on its head and screaming for attention." A paradox is a statement that appears to be a contradiction, but it is not.

The value of the poverty does not come from being physically needy, but from a sense of our need for God. Jesus was not offering economic relief or sanctifying a life of doing without things. Some have used the poverty value to construct a vow of poverty as a high calling. Others make simple living equivalent to being a devoted follower of Jesus. Both of these standards seriously miss the real issue which is living with recognition of our spiritual need. I can be economically destitute and be quite proud about it. Living on little can create a chronic craving for better things. Jesus desires attitudes of detachment from things and attachment to God. The Old Testament background for the word “poor” pours itself into its use by Jesus, namely, “those who because of sustained economic privation and social distress have confidence only in God (e.g., Psa. 37:14; 40:17; Prov. 16:19). Poverty can be turned to advantage if it fosters humility before God.” (D.A. Carson).

To live in God’s “poor house” means that I come to Him empty handed, that I live helplessly dependent on Him. This is to be the mark of citizens of the kingdom. Though Christ’s kingdom has not come, we have the privilege of living out its values. In a very real sense, the coming kingdom belongs to the disciples of Jesus. The poor in spirit are deeply invested in Christ’s kingdom. The Message, in its paraphrase, sets this up nicely: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.” The scribes and Pharisees were counting on a special place in the kingdom. But the reality is that a sense of one’s spiritual bankruptcy contrasts with the entitlement mentality of those who think God owes them something.

At the end, God gives us experiences that make us realize our impoverishment. We come to God empty-handed for eternal life. Circumstances then create an awareness of our limitations. A bout of covid-19 can do it. Fevers, inflamed lungs, and smell and taste loss are humbling. The loss of a job, an unplanned early retirement can shake us down to reliance on God. A marriage that begins to unravel with an awakening to chronic failures can put handicap signs on our most important relationships. Receiving an “unaccepted” letter from the college you dreamed of attending offers the opportunity to rethink certain aptitudes and abilities. Finding yourself in an environment away from home with challenges you never contemplated can make you cry yourself to sleep.

But these experiences must not be met with artificial self-effacement, wearing “humble looking” clothes, assuming another personality, or trying to create a new identity (Col. 2:18, 23). The poor in spirit don’t throw a temper tantrum when trials invade their peace and quiet. Afflictions are seen as a way to advance God’s plan. The poor in spirit don’t strut and demand attention nor do they see themselves as better than others. The poor in spirit listen, learn, admire and respect others.

A willingness to associate with the needy (Rom. 12:16), being joyful when doing without (Jas. 1:9), the ability to work with others, serve under others and for others (1 Pet. 5:5; Phil. 2:3; Eph. 4:2). That’s the stuff humility is made of.

Jesus calls His disciples to live as He relinquished His privileges for the sake of others. Kingdom men and women live desperately dependent on God. That’s the kind of poverty worth pursuing (Phil. 2:5-11).

Jesus Wants You to Mourn (October 2, 2020)

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4

The call of the mourning dove is an experience in truth if you will let be. It received its name for its haunting and sad cooing sound. Nature sings in the minor key. It calls us to mourning. Jesus wants His disciples to be mourners. At first, we must reaffirm the advantaged state of a mourner. In other words, don't be sad about being sad. There is a sanctified sadness. The word “blessed” alerts us to the fact that this is a complete reversal of the values of the world. According to the world the key to happiness is health, wealth, prosperity, fun. Grief is something that you want to get behind you as quickly as possible or medicate it away.

In order to create clarity, the mourning Jesus wants from us is not to be confused with self-pity, despair, or a pessimistic temperament. Artificial tears and instant emotions of grief can be self-generated moods. Another interference to the mourning of which Jesus speaks is the thinking that joy doesn't fit in. Wrong! True joy is possible because of the comfort of forgiveness. The world's values place a high premium on entertainment, laughter, and comedy as the great escape. The problem is not having a sense of humor and enjoying life, but the exchange of mourning over our sin for living in disregard of all that pleases and that which displeases God. A cavalier and dismissive attitude toward the gospel and the righteous standards of God lead to weeping forever under God's judgment (Lk. 6:25, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”). Spiritual blindness does not see the gravity of what sin has done to this world. An eternity without God is no joke.

The grief that characterizes the blessed is a virtue acquired. This moral goodness chooses to mourn over the pain of sin in ourselves and what is wrong with the world. We need to go upstream to the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” That sense of our own spiritual destitution draws us to dependency on God, an awareness of our true condition and need. John Stott expresses it this way, “It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and mourn over it...confession is one thing, contrition is another.” I remember the mourner's bench in a little church I attended early in life. It was for those who were convicted of sin and wanted to come forward in the church service and express their grief and repentance. The transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a believer opens sin-blinded eyes to the gravity of sin within. At the same time, the rebellion of mankind and its refusal to give proper glory to God leaves the disciple of Jesus grief stricken.

Can such sorrow over sin be compatible with presence of joy in the Christian? The answer is found in the comfort given by God. We cannot be genuinely joyful until we come to terms with the wayward pull of our own sinful nature. David in his confession of sin exclaimed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psa. 51:12). Mourning is the joy of God on the move against the enemy of joy, sin.

I recently came upon these thought-provoking words, “There is one thing worse than sin. That is denial of sin, which makes forgiveness impossible.” The spiritual climate of our day is not favorable to grieving over sin. The experiences of God's people in the Scriptures reveal the pain which sin inflicts upon the sin-sensitive soul: Paul was deeply aware of the war with sin within (Rom. 7:15-25). David wept over the sins of those who did not keep God's law (Psa. 119:136). Ezra and Nehemiah gave witness to Israel's grief over their nation's sin (Ez. 10:1;

Neh. 8:9). Jesus sobbed as He saw the toll that sin and death had taken on those He loved (Jn. 11:35).

So, let me ask us who are called to be mourners. Over what might we mourn? The mourner's bench of our soul could include the following: I mourn over the fact that I don't mourn over my sin as I should. I mourn that I more easily see sin in others rather than in myself. I mourn over those thoughts and deeds which displease God. I mourn over the ease with which I hold grudges and resentments. I mourn over the state of our nation and the spreading acceptance of anger and blame shifting that contaminates our public discourse. I mourn over racism. I mourn over a social media filled with lies and slander. I mourn over the harm that bad policing does to good policing. I mourn over those who are addicted to drugs and destroy themselves. I mourn over law enforcement officers who are killed in the line of duty. I mourn over riots and revenge-seeking mobs. I mourn over hate groups who fan the flames of racism. I mourn for the younger generation and the evils of the moral revolution they must face. I mourn over attacks on the God-given institution of marriage and the home. I mourn over abortion, injustice, and the loss of a sense of sin in our society. I mourn over the false gospels that are appealing to the masses who are rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the words of John R. Stott, we are reminded that "only in the final state of glory will Christ's comfort be complete, for only then will sin be no more and 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'." As for me I choose to be a joyful mourner.

The Crown Rights of the Messiah (December 18, 2020)

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." Matt. 1:1

Personal identity has become the standard by which people are being appointed to political offices. We call this "identity politics." It is a short-sighted and ultimately a dangerous way of creating leadership. Was Jesus qualified to be Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world because it was time for a Jew to have some say-so in Palestinian government? There is much more to Jesus' qualifications to be Israel's longed-for King.

To many people the Christ-child of Christmas is merely a sentimental favorite. A manger scene, Christmas carols, Christmas trees, the baby Jesus, all give good feelings. For others Jesus is the poster child for the cults. They use Jesus as a front for what are blasphemous views of the Son of God. "Jesus the Spirit brother of Lucifer, the offspring of a heavenly father and heavenly mother, a polygamist who came to America after his death and resurrection." This is the Jesus described by Mormon apostles and prophets. "Jesus the archangel Michael, a created being who died on a stake and never rose bodily from the grave." This is the Jesus of the Watchtower for Jehovah's Witnesses. The list of candidates for the Jesus of the Bible is a long one. Jesus as a model of love and peace for mankind, Jesus as the feeder of the hungry and healer of the sick.

God has the final word as to who Jesus was. The truth about the Christ-child is found in the Gospel accounts of His birth. These accounts were not written by dreamy idealists who wished Jesus was something other than what He was. They were written by prophets of God, men who knew Jesus, who were taught by Him and guided by God's Holy Spirit as to what to say.

It all starts with a genealogy in Matthew's Gospel. It gives a record of the origin of Jesus Christ in His role as Israel's Messianic King. This is the purpose of the opening chapters of the book of Matthew. Four identity markers can be found in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1-17).

Jesus was the Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures. The title "Christ" is the Greek equivalent to "Messiah" or "Anointed." Israel's Messiah was to come to die for the sins of His people and establish His rule on the earth (Dan. 9:25; Psa. 2:2; Isa. 53; Zech. 9:9). In Psalm 2 the Anointed One of God is also "My King," and "My Son." He is at the very center of God's redemptive-kingdom plan.

Jesus was Israel's King, the Son of David. One of David's descendants would establish his kingdom and would rule forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16). If David is to have an eternal throne, house, and kingdom, then his descendant must be an eternal person. This Son of David would be the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6-7). Take notice of this "United Nations." Matthew also emphasizes Jesus' legal right to the throne of David (Matt. 1:11, 12; Jer. 22:30). Jesus was no imposter. The legal right to the throne of David is passed through Solomon and Jehoiakim to Joseph's legal son, Christ.

Jesus made possible the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:7; 22:18; Gal. 3:16). All nations are to be blessed through Jesus Christ. Personal promises to Abraham, national promises (Israel was made a great nation, Deut. 31:7, 8; 32:45-52), and universal promises which will affect all the peoples of the world are bound up in the Abrahamic covenant. If you would like to look on the political horizon, take note of the fact that Israel's hope of future restoration is rooted in the birth of the Christ-child (Ezek. 37:25). The nation of Israel and the ongoing conflict over a proposed two-state solution is to be ultimately resolved by Israel's Messiah and coming King.

Jesus birth is the triumph of the grace of God. Matthew's genealogy contains the message of God's grace in the many names included. Judah is singled out of the twelve sons of Jacob. His tribe bears the scepter, the symbol of royal power (Gen. 49:10; Heb. 7:14). Peace, prosperity, and abundance in the land will result from the presence of the Messiah. Rehoboam (Matt. 1:7) was the father of wicked Abijah, the father of a good king, Asa. Asa was the father of the good king Jehoshaphat (1:8), and so forth. Good or evil, they were part of Messiah's line, "for though grace does not run in the blood, God's providence cannot be deceived or outmaneuvered." Matthew's genealogy reveals the grace of God in the four women who are mentioned in the genealogy. Tamar (Matt. 1:3) enticed her father-in-law into an incestuous relationship (Gen. 38). Bathsheba (Matt. 1:6) was taken into an adulterous union with David, who committed murder to cover it up. Connect all this with the purpose of the coming of Jesus to "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Rahab (a prostitute) and Ruth are stories of the enormity of God's mercy in Jesus' family tree. Names evoke associations and memories. The story of God's free grace in Jesus Christ is written large in His genealogy.

In the words of D.A. Carson, "Matthew's genealogy is given to show that Jesus Messiah is truly in the kingly line of David, heir to the messianic promises, the one who brings divine blessings to all nations." There are no identity politics in the placement of Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords. He deserves the crown rights of the Messiah. He earned this by His atoning sacrifice on the cross and the glory of His resurrection from the dead.