

MARION D. OWENS

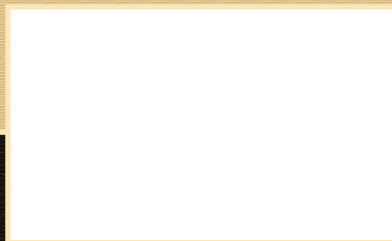
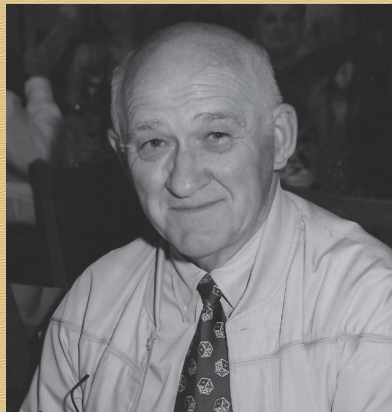
Brothers and sisters, think about the things that are good and worthy of praise. Think about the things that are true and honorable and right and pure and beautiful and respected.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

Marion Owens has been a Bible teacher for all of his adult life. A graduate of Harding University (B.A, M.A), he retired in 2004 after 50 years of public school teaching. He currently resides in Lancaster, CA, with his wife Tommie.

For a number of years Marion has specialized in training teens and pre-teens to speak publicly, primarily in church settings, but also for a variety of other occasions. His students have spoken for such events such as Fourth of July celebrations, Memorial Day observances, Veterans Day events, and others, including presentations before meetings of the Lancaster City Council.

Marion has said that he prepares messages for “youth to present—but for adults to hear.” Through the years hundreds of people have been impacted by these presentations. Believing that others can be impacted for good by these messages, Marion decided to collect a number of them into one volume, making them available to a wider audience.



WORDS of INSPIRATION and ENCOURAGEMENT

MARION D. OWENS



WORDS of
INSPIRATION *and*
ENCOURAGEMENT

Short Devotional Messages

WORDS *of*
INSPIRATION *and*
ENCOURAGEMENT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very special thanks to my dear talented granddaughter, “Katie Beth” (Katharine Elizabeth) Owens, for the many hours she spent typing and arranging my manuscript. Thanks also to my friend, Steve Hutson, for his patient steering me through the steps leading to final publication. But also thanks and appreciation are due to the many teens and pre-teens—along with their supportive parents—who spent countless hours memorizing and presenting the messages to appreciative audiences.

Finally, thanks are due to the audiences who have been so encouraging and supportive to the young people who, braving the challenges of stage fright, learned to speak boldly and forcefully delivering their messages. Most of these messages were presented to the Antelope Valley Church, but several were delivered before public meetings of the Lancaster, CA City Council in response to their invitation, as well as other public gatherings.

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INTRODUCTION



Everyone likes to be inspired and encouraged. Christians have learned that the Bible is a great source of such comforts. The messages in this book draw upon some of the most vital Bible teachings and attempt to make them useful for the reader. They were originally written for oral delivery by youths for the purpose of inspiring adults.

Basically, these messages are designed to be frequent reminders of God's love, of his power, of his patience, of his grace, of his protection, of his dependability, of his forgiveness, and of his desire to pour out blessings on those who are faithful to him. Frequent reminders of these attributes of God tend to draw people to the Lord and lead to a closer walk with him. And what goal in life can be greater than to have a close walk with God! If the entries in this book serve to draw people closer to God...its purpose will be accomplished!

Hopefully this book will be used in a variety of ways, especially for personal and family devotionals. It can be used in Sunday School classes or in youth groups. There may be ideas which can suggest sermon material. It is the hope—and prayer—of the author that as many people as possible may receive benefits from these messages.

(As mentioned, these messages were written for delivery by teens and pre-teens. Perhaps the reader would be interested in viewing actual delivery of these messages. Glenn and Jill Wibowo, parents of Kobe and Wesley, have graciously consented to allow readers to view some of their videos of the boys presenting their talks. These can be viewed at the following sites:

2010: youtu.be/TWf_u6Q9dMU

2015: youtu.be/Kpk8LWxOzHw and
youtu.be/nw9GUimm508

(In order to provide added encouragement, selected inspirational scriptures have been dispersed throughout the book.)

THE INVISIBLE ARMY



The history of Israel includes many wars with neighboring countries. Because of so much idolatry by the Israelites God often punished them by sending attacking armies against them.

2 Kings 6, records one such war with Aram. But this time the Lord helped the Israelites. The prophet Elisha helped Israel by telling them the various things that the Arameans were planning. The king of Aram was furious when he realized that someone was telling the Israelites what his plans were. He thought there was a traitor among his men, but he was told that it was the prophet Elisha who was revealing all his secrets to the king of Israel.

*Those who are
with us are more
than those who
are with them.*

The king of Aram learned that Elisha was in the city of Dothan. He sent many men with horses and chariots to take Elisha captive. When Elisha's servant arose the next morning he saw the army of the Arameans surrounding the city. Greatly alarmed, he asked Elisha, "Oh my lord, what shall we do?"

Then Elisha answered, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed that God would open the servant's eyes. He then was able to see what had been invisible before: the hills were full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha!

The God who protected Elisha is the same God who protects his people today. We may not be able to see his army of protectors who work for us, but we can be assured that they are there. What a source of comfort and assurance!

As for the Aramean army—God struck them all blind. They were captured, fed, and sent back home...ending the raids of Aram into Israel's territory.

THE YOUNG SLAVE GIRL



The Bible describes her as a “young girl.” We don’t know just how old she was or what her name was, or what town she was from. What we do know is that a band of raiders from Aram snatched her away from her home and family. She was taken to a foreign country and made a slave, serving in the home of an important army officer.

We can only imagine what a terrifying experience this must have been. What would her attitude be toward the family which enslaved her? Would she be angry and vengeful, or would she react with kindness toward her captors?

The officer’s name was Naaman. The story is in 2 Kings 5. Naaman was afflicted with the terrible disease leprosy, which had no known cure. The girl had been taught about God and knew about the prophet, Elisha, through whom God did wonderful things. Wanting to help her master, she recommended that he go to Israel and be healed by the prophet.

The details of Naaman’s healing can be found later in the chapter. But none of this would have been accomplished if a young girl had not learned at an early age about God and his people. But she also had been taught to be kind and helpful, returning good for evil. Surely an important lesson for us is the importance of training children at a very early age to know about God and to become the kind of people he wants them to be.

*The Lord hears good people when they cry out to him,
and he saves them from all their troubles. (Psalm 34:17)*

A BASIN AND A TOWEL



In Bible times, people commonly traveled by foot. The roads were usually dusty and often rough. People usually wore sandals or even walked barefoot. As a result of this kind of travel, people's feet became very dirty or dusty. It was the custom that when a traveler came into a house there would be water provided for washing his feet. Servants often washed the feet of the guests as a sign of hospitality. It was not the kind of job that important people were likely to do for someone.

In John 13, we have the account of Jesus sharing a meal with his apostles. It was a short time before his crucifixion. As the meal was being served, Jesus got up, took off his outer garment, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured a basin of water, and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel.

We can imagine how the disciples must have been amazed at seeing their master doing the job of a lowly servant. Peter found it hard to believe. In amazement he asked, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" When Jesus replied that he would understand later, Peter said, "No, you shall never wash my feet!" Jesus explained that Peter must allow him to wash his feet in order to be a part of his work, so Peter allowed it. Jesus later explained why he had washed their feet. He wanted them to be servants just as he was and this is the important lesson for us.

We see two things: humility and service. God does not want us to see ourselves as too high or too proud to render humble service to others. There may not be a need to wash the feet of others in our society, but there are plenty of opportunities to serve others, often in ways that require humility on our parts.

Jesus came to Earth to serve, and if we are going to be his people we must dedicate ourselves to serving others.

*God does not
want us to see
ourselves as too
high or too proud
to render humble
service to others.*

CHRISTIAN ARMOR



In ancient times, warfare mainly involved foot soldiers using swords, spears, and bows and arrows. For protection soldiers usually wore body armor. A heavy helmet protected the head and a breastplate protected the vital organs. Footgear was designed for marching.

In addition, the soldier carried a shield in one hand to ward off attacks. In the other hand he carried his sword or spear.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians from his prison cell, he probably had a Roman soldier nearby. Seeing the soldier's armor probably inspired him to compare the soldier's armor to the spiritual armor needed in Christian warfare.

And the Bible clearly teaches that we who serve God are very much at war with forces of evil against us. Paul says in Ephesians 6:11, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." If we are

going to succeed in our Christian life we must be fully aware of the presence of our enemy—and we must equip ourselves for battle.

*The Christian's
breastplate is
righteousness—
which simply
means doing
what is right in
God's sight.*

The soldier's equipment was both defensive and offensive. The same is true for the Christian.

The Christian's breastplate is righteousness—which simply means doing what is right in God's sight. A belt of truth secures the mid-section. The Christian's feet are fitted with readiness—ready to go and spread the gospel, the good news of salvation.

The Christian's helmet is salvation. Being saved and safely in God's care provides maximum protection.

The Christian's shield is faith, allowing us to ward off all attacks by people and ideas which might destroy our loyalty to God. Our solid confidence in our Lord helps us resist all the world's enticements.

THE INFLUENCE OF A GODLY WOMAN



It is impossible to measure the influence of a godly woman, within her own lifetime or in the years after she is gone. The Bible tells us much about such women.

We all know the story of David, the greatest king in the history of Israel. We know that he was the son of Jesse, the son of Obed. But do we know that there would have been no Obed except for the influence of a godly woman?

During a famine this Israelite woman moved with her husband to the land of Moab. Her two sons met and married women from Moab. But when her husband and both sons died, the grieving woman decided to return to her home country.

*Your people will
be my people
and your God
will be my God.*

We might never know of this woman, if not for what happened next. She had become so loved and admired by her daughters-in-law that one of them insisted on going with her—even though it meant going to a strange country and strange people with a strange culture. She told her mother-in-law, “Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.”

We recognize this as the story of Ruth and Naomi. We know that Ruth met a good man named Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. Boaz was so impressed with Ruth that he decided to marry her. They had a son named Obed. This was the same Obed who was the grandfather of King David, making the loyal Moabite woman the great grandmother of that great ruler.

There is no guarantee that every godly woman will have such an impact on history, but there can be no doubt that such women can have wonderful influence on all who know them, and that this influence is likely to be seen for generations after they are gone. This should inspire every woman to let God lead and shape her life into godliness.

JOSHUA'S FAREWELL



After the death of Moses, Joshua, his military leader and right-hand man, took over the leadership of the Israelites. It was under his direction that the successful conquest of Canaan was accomplished. In the midst of an often-rebellious people Joshua had, time and time again, demonstrated his solid commitment to God, including the minority report he and Caleb brought back from their spying trip to Canaan.

At the age of 110, Joshua knew that the end of his life was near. He was well aware of the weaknesses of his people and of their troubling tendency to forget the God of heaven and worship the false gods of the pagan nations around them. It was in this context that he delivered his emotional farewell statement:

*Throw away
the gods your
forefathers
worshipped beyond
the River and in
Egypt, and serve
the Lord.*

“Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:14-15)

We are told that for some time after Joshua's death the people did in fact follow his advice, remaining faithful to God. The leaders who had served with him and outlived him were able to keep the people in God's service.

Not only the parting words of Joshua, but indeed his life of faithfulness inspires us and serves as an encouraging example for our lives. May we always determine that regardless of what course others may choose, as for us and our houses—we will serve the Lord!

THE GLORY OF FORGIVENESS



Jacob, great patriarch of the Old Testament, was terribly afraid—and with good reason! Some twenty years earlier, at the urging of his worried mother, he had fled to a distant country to avoid being killed by his angry brother, Esau. Jacob had cheated his brother dreadfully, deceiving his aged father in the process.

Now, after all these years, Jacob was going back. He now had a large family and had been blessed with large flocks and herds. Worried about what Esau might do, Jacob sent messengers on ahead with a message seeking peace.

But the messengers returned with word that Esau was coming toward them with four hundred men. In great distress Jacob divided his people and livestock into two groups. If Esau destroyed one group, perhaps that other group could escape.

In an effort to pacify Esau, Jacob sent servants with three waves of livestock as gifts, hoping this would cool his anger. He prayed to God earnestly for protection. He put Rachel and Joseph in the rear of the group.

Finally the moment arrived. Seeing his brother approach, Jacob bowed seven times, no doubt terror-stricken.

But then an amazing thing happened:

“But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.” (Genesis 33:4)

Clearly Esau had forgiven his brother. There was no ill will in his heart.

Esau was a man who had serious character flaws. Despite this fact, his forgiving heart is a great inspiration to us all, and we love him for it.

The burden of guilt can be great (as it was with Jacob). But the burden of harboring anger and ill will can be just as destructive.

Learning to forgive is learning to unburden your soul.

*The burden of guilt
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just as destructive.*

GRATITUDE



Leprosy is a terrible disease. It was even worse in the ancient times when there was no cure available. The disease causes the body to slowly rot away. Fingers and toes may drop off. Faces may become horribly disfigured.

So great was the fear of leprosy that those who had the disease were forbidden to come near those not afflicted. In some places they were required to call out, “Unclean, unclean!” if another person approached them.

*Was no one
found to return
and give praise
to God except
this foreigner?*

Lepers often stayed around other lepers as that was their only chance for social contact. They would do what they could to help each other.

Luke 17 tells us of an occasion when Jesus met 10 men with leprosy. Somehow they knew who Jesus was. Standing at a distance, they cried out, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.” (verse 13)

And that is what Jesus did. “Go show yourselves to the priest,” he told them. But before they got to the priest, their leprosy was healed.

One of the lepers returned to Jesus, falling at his feet and thanking him. Jesus asked him, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the 9? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

As we consider Jesus’ words, we should be reminded of what God has done for US, including our salvation through which we have been cleansed of the leprosy of sin. Let us make sure that we are like the one who thanked and praised God—not the other 9. May God know that we are people of gratitude!

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. (Psalm. 23:1)

HOW STRONG IS YOUR FAITH?



How is your service to the Lord? Are you a “fair weather” friend to God, or do you stay faithful when things are not going well?

The boy was only 17 years old. His older brothers grabbed him, tied him up and threw him into a hole in the ground.

Later they took him and sold him to a band of strangers, to be taken to a far country to be sold as a slave.

This was a boy who had been obedient to his father and to God, but now things were going terribly for him. It would have been easy to think, “Why should I serve God—look at the bad things he has let happen to me.”

But he did not do this. He stayed faithful even when he was sent to prison when he was not guilty of doing anything wrong.

God had not forgotten him. In fact, He had great plans for this young man. By now you know who I am talking about. Who was it?

Yes it was Joseph. We know the end of the story. God used this man to save the lives of a whole country—and indeed his own family, including the very brothers who hated him.

There is a lesson here for us. God wants to know if we are going to be solid in our faith when things look dark for us. He has things he wants done by people who are completely his.

2 Chronicles 16:9 reads: “For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”

*God wants to
know if we are
going to be solid
in our faith
when things look
dark for us.*

CONSIDER THE LILIES



There is no more important message in the Bible than the assurance of God's love for his people. The Old Testament is one long series of examples of how God poured out blessings upon those who were faithful to him.

*Consider the
lilies of the
field, how they
grow; they toil
not, neither "do
they spin..."*

Despite all the evidence of God's care, there has always been the persistent problem of man's doubts—or forgetfulness—about God's graciousness.

When Jesus came to the earth he faced the same problem. Why was it so difficult for people to put complete trust in God?

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus spoke some of the most marvelous reassuring words in the Bible. Included are these statements:

"Behold the birds of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feedeth them. Are ye not better than they?" (verse 26)

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, Shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Vs. 28-30) KJV

Jesus' very appearance on the earth was a supreme illustration of God's great care for people. The promises issued in the Old Testament—of blessings on God's people—were renewed by Jesus. They are equally applicable in our time.

How many blessings do we deny ourselves by our unbelief? May we finally learn the lesson so elusive in past ages and develop a faith that will open the doors of the storehouses of God's blessings!

DEATH POSTPONED



Shortly after the end of Solomon's reign the kingdom of Israel split into two parts, Judah and Israel. As one traces the history of these two kingdoms he notes that the people—and the rulers—become increasingly rebellious against God. Idolatry is rampant. Each succeeding king seems to be more wicked than those before him.

In the land of Judah there is occasionally a king who makes an effort to do what is right in God's sight. Perhaps the best of these is a king named Hezekiah.

During a period of severe illness God sent the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to tell him that he was about to die and needed to be making final arrangements. Hezekiah was overwhelmed with grief. He offered the following prayer to God, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes."

Immediately, before Isaiah had left the middle court, God sent him back with a message to Hezekiah:

"This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says, 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life.'" (2 Kings 20:5-6)

These passages confirm what God's people have always known: the Lord responds to the prayers of righteous people—even to the point of changing his mind. God took note of the faith and earnest pleadings of Hezekiah and had mercy on him. It is comforting to know that the God of Hezekiah is the same God whom we serve today. Surely he is as attentive to the earnest prayers of his faithful servants today as he was in Hezekiah's day.

*The Lord responds
to the prayers of
righteous people—
even to the point of
changing his mind.*

A LITTLE-KNOWN HERO



We are all delighted to hear stories of courage and bravery involving people who have risked their lives to save the lives of others. A number of such stories have come to us from Nazi Germany where Jews were hidden to spare them from Hitler's gas chambers.

Long before Hitler's time there was a wicked queen named Jezebel. She rejected God and worshipped an idolatrous god, Baal.

Jezebel determined to kill all the prophets of the Lord. As she was doing so, a brave man named Obadiah, who was in charge of the king's palace, risked his job—and his life—to intervene:

“While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.” (I Kings 18:4)

Obadiah was a confidant of King Ahab and had a very responsible job. He could have played it safe and done nothing to oppose Jezebel's activities. But being a “devout believer” in the Lord he was determined to do what he could to preserve the lives of the Lord's prophets, even though he risked not only his high position, but indeed his own life.

*Being a “devout
believer” in
the Lord he was
determined to do
what he could to
preserve the lives of
the Lord's prophets,*

Few of us will have occasion to risk our lives for the Lord in situations as dramatic as Obadiah experienced. But for each of us there are occasions when there is some price to pay for our allegiance to the Lord. May we always be as ready and willing as was Obadiah!

THE MAN WHO CLIMBED A TREE



In Luke 19, we find the story of a man named Zacchaeus. He was a wealthy tax collector in the city of Jericho. Tax collectors were often guilty of cheating people, so he did not have a good reputation.

One day he learned that Jesus was coming through his city. Crowds would be gathering to see him. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus too—but he had a problem. He was very short and would not be able to see over the crowd.

So he got an idea. He ran ahead and climbed into a sycamore-fig tree in order to get a good look. Then, when Jesus came by, he stopped, called Zacchaeus to come down, and then went to his house for a visit.

Zacchaeus was very excited. He promised to make big changes in his life, becoming more generous and honest.

There is a lesson in this for today. Jesus does not walk our streets for us to see him in person, but we can see him through reading our Bibles and he still wants to come to our house and change our lives for the better. Let us all be as anxious to see Jesus as Zacchaeus was and to let him make our lives better.

*Jesus does not walk
our streets for
us to see him in
person, but we can
see him through
reading our Bibles*

*Enjoy serving the Lord, and he will give
you what you want. (Psalm. 37:4)*

MELCHIZEDEK



The Bible shows God working out plans over many centuries, making connections that men could never have arranged—or, in many cases, even understood.

This principle is clearly illustrated with regard to a mysterious and intriguing man named Melchizedek. In Genesis 14:18 we learn that he was both king and priest of Salem. He blessed Abraham, and Abraham paid tithes to him. He also brought out bread and wine for Abraham.

Who was Melchizedek? Where did he come from? How did he become priest (the first priest mentioned in the Bible)? Many kings are mentioned in the Old Testament, but *never* one who was also a priest.

Genesis provides no explanations; we are left wondering. Then hundreds of years later, the name comes up again. In Psalms 110:4 David, prophesying about the coming Messiah, says of him, “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” David lived under the Mosaic law which provided for a well-defined priesthood limited to the tribe of Levi. The order of Melchizedek would not fit Mosaic law.

Again, no explanation. What was David talking about? Clearly the coming Messiah could not operate as priest under the Law of Moses because he was to be of the tribe of Judah—not Levi!

Many centuries pass with no more answers. Then in Hebrews 7 we find Melchizedek mentioned one more time, clearing up part (but not all) of the mystery. We see that God—as he so often did—had set up an ancient counterpart for something he planned to establish later. In an interesting discussion Hebrews 7 shows how Jesus was like Melchizedek *and* the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood over that of the Mosaic system.

And how was Jesus like Melchizedek? Melchizedek was both king and priest—and Jesus is OUR king and our high priest. It is unlikely that David really understood what he was saying about Christ...but God knew. And now WE know.

When one understands the entire Melchizedek connection he cannot escape the conclusion that God was working out his own plans—and that there is no way in which these things can be explained through purely human authorship. With God as its author, the Bible is definitely deserving of our trust!

NOAH—MAN OF FAITH



We have all heard of Noah. We know that he and his sons spent many years—probably more than 100—in building a huge boat called an ark. We know that God sent animals of all kinds to him to be placed in the ark in order to escape the waters of the great flood (the story is in Genesis 6-8).

But surely the most amazing thing about Noah was not the building of the ark, but rather the great faith which he had. It is hard to believe in something when everyone you know disagrees with you. Noah was a man who not only kept a strong faith in God, but he lived a righteous life when everyone around him (except for his immediate family) was living a very sinful life.

We can only imagine how much ridicule and scorn that Noah had to endure all those years. The very idea of building this huge boat on dry land! Imagine how the people poked fun at the three sons as they helped their dad build the ark!

People loyal to God have always been in the minority. Today—as always—the ungodly are scornful of the righteous. This is difficult for adults, but it can be even harder for young people who try to serve God, but find themselves being laughed at by their peers.

It is encouraging to see the victorious outcome of Noah's faith—and realize that this is the same God who has promised to reward our faithfulness also!

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ridicule and scorn
that Noah had to
endure all those
years. The very
idea of building
this huge boat
on dry land!*

THE OTHER QUEEN



Most of us are familiar with the story of Esther, the courageous young woman who became queen and who saved her people from destruction. But perhaps we have forgotten that there was another queen in the book of Esther. Her name was Vashti.

The Bible describes Vashti as a woman of great beauty and “lovely to look at.” Her husband, King Xerxes arranged for a great banquet for all the nobles, officials, and military leaders in his kingdom. Near the end of a seven-day period of feasting and heavy drinking, the king sent for Vashti to come and show off her beauty to all the men who were at the feast, but Vashti refused to come.

*Perhaps more,
however, admire
her for refusing to
be put on display
to be stared at
by a crowd of
drunken men.*

The Bible does not tell us the reason for Vashti’s refusal. Some are critical of her for refusing to obey her husband.

Perhaps more, however, admire her for refusing to be put on display to be stared at by a crowd of drunken men. Surely some of the women would have been happy to show off for such a crowd, but Vashti appears to have had enough modesty and self-respect to refuse—even if standing by her principles might cost her and the position she had as queen...and indeed it did cost her that position.

We all admire beauty, but sometimes physical beauty brings extra problems such as vanity and pride. There is no question that the kind of beauty God admires is the inner beauty of modesty and holiness. Do we not all need to be challenged to be more concerned by what we are *inside* than what we look like *outside*?

Lord, you bless those who do what is right; you protect them like a soldier’s shield. (Psalm. 5:12)

A REMARKABLE WOMAN



Before kings ruled in the land of Israel, the people were led by a series of judges—15 in all. The judges were all men—except for one. Judges 4 tells us about a woman named Deborah who became the fourth judge of Israel.

We do not know much about Deborah's background. We know that she was a prophetess. It was a time in Israel when the people were unfaithful to God and continued to worship the false gods of the nations around them.

Because of the idolatry of the people, God allowed them to be attacked by their enemies. Jabin, a king in Canaan, sent an army led by Sisera to attack the Israelites. Deborah assigned to a man named Barak the task of leading the armies of Israel against Sisera. She promised that he would be successful.

But the cowardly Barak refused to go into battle unless Deborah went with him, so she agreed to go. Chapter four tells the story of how Sisera was killed (not by Barak, but by a woman) and the Israelites won.

The story of Deborah is another illustration of how through the ages the Lord has used godly women to do great things for him. We must always stay faithful to God and stay ready to be used in any way He may call us to do his work.

*Because of the
idolatry of the
people, God
allowed them to
be attacked by
their enemies.*

*Those who know the Lord trust him, because he will
not leave those who come to him. (Psalm 9:10)*

STARTING EARLY FOR GOD



Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity." These are words from the apostle Paul to the young man Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12).

Many times through the ages when God wanted a great work done he began very early in a person's life. We remember the great leader Moses. His life was

*David learned
to trust God and
to rely on him
for strength and
guidance. God
raised him up to
be a mighty king.*

spared when other baby boys were killed because of the Egyptians. God used Moses to lead his people out of Egyptian bondage.

The great prophet Samuel was dedicated to God before he was born. When he was very young his mother took him to be raised and trained by the prophet Eli.

When he was just a shepherd boy, David learned to trust God and to rely on him for strength and guidance. God raised him up to be a mighty king.

When he was just 12 years old the boy Jesus was dedicated to God's business. He had already learned enough to amaze the older teachers in the temple.

It is never too early to begin training young people to serve the Lord.

We know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him. They are the people he called, because that was his plan. (Rom 8:28)

SUCH A TIME



It was one of the lowest, most desperate times in Jewish history. Jerusalem was destroyed. Thousands of captives were forced to go to faraway Babylon. Even worse, a royal decree was issued by which all the Jews were to be killed.

The queen at the time was a woman named Esther. She had kept secret the fact that she was a Jew. Her cousin, Mordecai, warned her that she must intervene with the king to save the Jews—including herself!

But Esther was afraid. To go into the presence of the king without being summoned could mean death. In trying to persuade Esther, Mordecai made the following statement:

“...and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14..)

Ironically, Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God. But in few books is God’s presence more evident.

Mordecai’s question has implications for us. It reflects the belief that God chooses the time for our existence and that He has a purpose for each of us. Jesus taught that each of us has been given talents

or abilities and that He expects us to find ways to use them in our generation.

The biblical account is fascinating. Relying on God, Esther acted very courageously. Her intervention led to the rescue of her people. In how many lives can our intervention lead to rescues?

Jesus taught that each of us has been given talents or abilities and that He expects us to find ways to use them in our generation.

WALKING WITH GOD



In Genesis we read a brief mention of a remarkable man. His name was Enoch. The father of Methuselah, he was the seventh generation from Adam.

And what made this man so remarkable? The Bible says, “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.”

How amazing! What kind of man was this? Hebrews 11:5 tells us that before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. According to this

*Wouldn't it be
wonderful if
each of us could
have that kind
of relationship
with God!*

passage, “He could not be found.” It seems as though Enoch just disappeared one day, and when friends and family went out to look for him they could not find him. We do not know whether his generation ever learned what happened to him.

What does it mean that he “walked with God?” Did God personally come to earth and physically walk with Enoch? That does not at all seem likely.

When two people choose to walk together, they usually enjoy each other’s company. They like each other. They are comfortable together. They like the same things, and often share the same values. This was surely true of Enoch and the Lord.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if each of us could have that kind of relationship with God! Is it possible for people today to “walk with God?”

Surely the answer is *yes!* God’s love for his people is as strong today as it was in Enoch’s time. There is a constant message in the Bible that God wants a close relationship with his children. If it is on our hearts to walk with God, we know how to do it. Let us all make it our chief purpose in life to enjoy the most delightful walk imaginable—a walk with our loving heavenly father.

THE BELOVED SEAMSTRESS



In Acts 9, we find Peter in a town named Lydda, where he healed a man who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. The man's name was Aeneas.

In the nearby town of Joppa some disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda. They sent an urgent message asking Peter to come to Joppa. A dear sister named Dorcas had just died.

When Peter and the men with him arrived, the disciples told them what had happened. Then they were shown a number of items of clothing which Dorcas had made. It seems that she had been a skilled seamstress, probably generous in giving clothes to others.

It is interesting to consider what the disciples expected from Peter. It was probably well known that Peter had miraculous power to heal the sick—but Dorcas was not sick—she was dead!

In the previous record of Peter's activities there is no mention of any occasion when he raised anyone from the dead. Is this what the disciples expected Peter to do—or were they just looking for consolation? We do know that Peter had been with Jesus on occasions when the Lord had raised the dead.

Peter sent everyone out of the room, got down on his knees, and prayed. Then he turned to the dead woman, called her by her other name, Tabitha, and told her to get up. She opened her eyes and, with Peter's help, got to her feet and was presented to the other disciples.

She opened her eyes and, with Peter's help, got to her feet and was presented to the other disciples.

We can all imagine the amazement and rejoicing that took place that day. And we can all rejoice today that the God whose power raised Dorcas is our God also—and He has plenty of power to do great things in our own lives.

THE CONSCIENTIOUS LEPERS



The situation was desperate in the city of Samaria. The armies of Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, surrounded the city. During the siege the people ran out of food, even to the point of cannibalism (2 Kings 6).

Four lepers, living outside the city because of their disease, were also near starvation. They decided that they had three choices: if they went into the city they would die (because of the famine); if they stayed where they were they would starve; or, thirdly, if they went to the camp of the Arameans they might be killed—but they might possibly receive food.

Leprosy is often considered to be symbolic of sin. In that sense all of us have been afflicted with “spiritual leprosy.”

What they did not know was that the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear sounds as of a great army advancing. In panic they had run for their lives, leaving everything behind.

When the lepers arrived they helped themselves to the abundance of food and drink as well as numerous other objects of value. But these men—though outcasts of society who might have carried a grudge because of their ill treatment—were conscience-stricken.

“Then they said to each other, ‘We’re not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let’s go at once and report this to the royal palace.’” (2 Kings 7:9)

The city was saved by the news from the lepers. They found an abundance of food in the abandoned camp of the Arameans.

Leprosy is often considered to be symbolic of sin. In that sense all of us have been afflicted with “spiritual leprosy.” But we have also been given the “good news” of God’s cure—and we have been given the chance to share this good news with others who share our affliction. May we be as conscientious in sharing our good news as were those ancient lepers!

THE 23RD PSALM



It is easily the best recognized and most loved passage in the Bible. There is no way to estimate the millions to whom it has brought comfort, inspiration, consolation, and peace through many centuries.

The author of the psalm is generally thought to be David. If so, we cannot be sure at what stage of his life he wrote it. It seems pretty clear that it was written in response to deliverance by the Lord from a serious danger.

Could it have been the deliverance from the bear and the lion that threatened him in the field when he was watching his father's sheep? Or perhaps the threat of Goliath, the champion of the Philistines?

Maybe he had in mind the narrow escape from Saul when in his dark foul moods he repeatedly tried to kill David. Then, most distressing of all, there was the flight from his own renegade son, Absalom, as he tried to wrest control of the kingdom from his father. Or maybe it was some combination of the above which inspired the following words:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever

The Psalmist wrote of his own deliverance by the Lord. But into every life there come dangers and other times of distress when deliverance is desperately needed. How wonderful it is to know that the Shepherd who rescued David is also *our* Shepherd and has promised to come to our rescue also! May our trust in him—and our appreciation of him—never fail!

THE LORD'S EYES



Throughout the history of Israel we find countless examples of God's blessings on his people. No enemy, regardless of how numerous or well-armed, could harm the Israelites when they served the Lord and relied upon him as their defender.

Sadly, however, the people turned away from God over and over again. King Asa, like so many of his predecessors, tried to secure his nation through treaties with idolatrous neighbors rather than trust God. Hanani, the Seer (or prophet) came to the king and said words that have continued to thrill the hearts of those who serve the Lord:

“For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9)

*It is not unusual
for people to feel
that God is remote,
distant, and
only marginally
involved in
what goes on
in their lives.*

It is not unusual for people to feel that God is remote, distant, and only marginally involved in what goes on in their lives. But this scripture inspires the Lord's people to keep their hearts pure and in tune with him. It assures us that there is no reluctance or hesitation with God to bless those whose hearts are committed to him. This is the kind of assurance that gives us strength to persist in walking the paths of righteousness, successfully resisting Satan's enticements to join those who, like King Asa, prefer to seek security in the material things of this world.

*The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord
blesses his people with strength. (Psalm 29:11)*

HEAVEN I



We are having a series of talks today on the subject of heaven, and especially how heaven helps us now. Heaven is not just something to think about in the distant future. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:1-2).

We all know how easy it is to become so involved with things in this life that we tend to forget about what God has in store for us in heaven. But having our minds on things in heaven can be a great help in dealing with the troubles of this life.

From ancient times men of God have endured difficult times because of their hope of what God has in store for them. Abraham wandered from place to place, but we are told in Hebrews 11, that he was looking forward to the city whose builder is God. In the same chapter we learn that Moses was willing to give up all the riches and honor he had as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter because he looked forward to the reward he would receive. This made him willing to suffer disgrace for the sake of Christ.

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troubles of this life.*

God never meant for this life to be the end of things for us. Sometimes we feel that life is not fair, or that we have worse problems or worse suffering than others around us. And that may be true. So how do we deal with that?

It can be very helpful to read through Hebrews 11, and be reminded of those who were tortured, or who received jeers and flogging, or who were imprisoned or stoned...or sawed in two. What did they have in common? They all had a great faith that God had such great things in store for them that it was well worth all they had endured.

And these are the same promises God has made for us. Let us make sure that we let this great hope control the way we live.

HEAVEN II



One of the ways in which heaven helps us is in getting our priorities right. Every person has his own set of goals and priorities, even if he hasn't taken time to think about it.

We all know the common top priorities in life: making money, getting the material things that money can buy, gaining power or popularity, or perhaps seeking fame in sports or other activities.

“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

The Bible does not teach us that it is wrong to have wealth. The most important question concerns our attitude toward our wealth. In Luke 12, Jesus illustrated this by a story about a rich man who produced such a good crop that he did not have space to store it.

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods, and I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.’”

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”

Jesus showed us how to get our priorities right. We find these words in Matthew 6:19-21:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”

Surely we see the lesson for us: let us make sure that our number one goal is to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven.

HEAVEN III



In John 14, verses 2-3, we find these words of Jesus:

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

The Lord wants people to have peace in their lives, believing that whatever happens, they can look forward to a wonderful future in the wonderful home Jesus is preparing for us.

But we live in a world where many people struggle with the worries and cares of this life. We are told that half of all prescriptions written by doctors are for stress or stress-related ailments.

In the parable of the sower Jesus talked about the people who let the Lord’s word be choked out by life’s worries and by the search for riches and pleasures. That is certainly not what the Lord wants for our lives.

We live in a “right now” world. People want what they want . . . and they want it “right now.” If they don’t get it right now, they often get uptight and stressed out. But the ways of God in our lives bring us peace—not stress—as we look forward to what God has in store for us.

We all know about the great sufferings of the Apostle Paul—the beatings, the imprisonments, the shipwreck, and all the other terrible things he endured. Before he went through these things, God gave him a little glimpse of heaven, as he explained in 2 Corinthians 12. Surely that encouraged Paul to write the following in Romans 8:18:

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

May we all let the wonders of our life in heaven show us how insignificant are all the problems which this life offers. This hope can relieve stress far better than any doctor’s prescription.

HEAVEN IV



What will heaven be like? No one knows for sure. We sing songs about heaven, songs like “When We All Get to Heaven”, “No Tears in Heaven”, “Home of the Soul”, “Mansion Over the Hilltop”, and others. These songs are based upon various promises in the Bible about what we can expect in heaven: promises like “God shall wipe away all tears” (Revelation 7:17).

In I Corinthians 2:9 we have this promise:

“No eye has seen,
No ear has heard,
No mind conceived
What God has prepared for those who love him.”

*If God has
provided all this for
a planet that is only
here temporarily,
imagine what he
has in mind for the
home in which we
will spend eternity!*

As we look at the world around us we see all the great beauty God has created for our enjoyment—the mountains, the seashore, and the sunsets, for example. If God has provided all this for a planet that is only here temporarily, imagine what he has in mind for the home in which we will spend eternity!

The book of Hebrews talks about the Israelites who left Egypt to go to the land that was promised to them,—the land of Canaan. But they never got there, because their hearts turned against God. Referring to this, here is the sobering warning to us found in Hebrews 3:12:

“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ *if* we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”

Let every one of us make VERY sure that we persevere to the end so we can ALL enjoy heaven together.

PROTECT YOUR BIRTHRIGHT



Genesis 25 records the birth of twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau, the older twin, was entitled to what was called the birthright. In those days the person who owned the birthright would inherit a double portion of the father's property. He would also have other benefits, including being the head of that family.

In some cases the patriarchs could also give special blessings in foretelling future good things in the life of the person.

We remember what happened in the lives of these boys. Esau came home hungry one day and agreed to give up his birthright to his brother Jacob...for a bowl of soup!

We are amazed that Esau would care so little for something that was so important and valuable. In Hebrews 12 Esau is referred to as a profane (or godless) person, showing how little he cared for good things.

*We are amazed
that Esau would
care so little for
something that
was so important
and valuable.*

Surely there is a message for us in this story. Those of us who are children of God also have a "birthright." We have a promised inheritance from God, one which is far greater than anything Esau would have inherited.

But, like Esau, we can give up our birthright. In fact, we often see people who are drawn away by the temptations of the world. They leave the Lord in order to taste the "bowl of soup" which Satan offers.

Let us all learn from this story. Let us treasure the hope of our future inheritance—which is part of our God-given birthright.

A GRATEFUL FAITHFUL MOTHER



In 1 Samuel 1, we learn the story of a woman named Hannah. For years she kept hoping she would have a child, but she had none. She prayed to God, requesting a son, promising that she would give him to the Lord and that no razor would be used to cut his hair.

One day, Eli the priest saw Hannah praying silently, only moving her lips, and he thought she was drunk. When he scolded her she explained that she was not drunk but begging God for a son. Eli's answer was, "Go in peace and may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him."

*It must have been
very hard for
Hannah to give up
her beloved baby,
but she had made
a promise to God*

Hannah went home feeling much better. Sure enough, in the due course of time she had a son whom she named Samuel.

As much as she loved her son, Hannah had promised him to the Lord. So when he was weaned he was taken to be raised and trained by the prophet Eli. He went on to become one of the greatest leaders in the history of Israel.

It must have been very hard for Hannah to give up her beloved baby, but she had made a promise to God and she was faithful in keeping that promise (she later had more sons and daughters).

Do we ever make promises to God, especially if we want something really badly? Let us always be faithful, like Hannah, in keeping all promises we make to God.

BRAVE YOUNG MEN



After many years of following fake gods and disobeying the God of heaven, the Israelites finally received severe punishment from the Lord as he allowed them to be invaded and taken captive to Babylon, many miles away.

In Babylon the people were very sad. They were like slaves in a strange land with strange customs and languages. Nebuchadnezzar, their king, decided to choose some of the most handsome and bright young men from the Israelite royal family to be trained to serve in special ways in the king's palace. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These young men were trained very thoroughly in literature and all kinds of learning. Because these men were totally devoted to God, the Lord blessed them with additional learning. When they finally entered the king's service they were found to be far better trained than the other magicians and enchanters who served the king.

Most of us remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The king made an image of gold 90 feet high and ordered everyone to bow down and worship the image. But these three knew that as servants of God they could not worship an image made by a man.

The angry king had the young men thrown into a fiery furnace, only to see them escape unharmed—because of God's protection.

The God who protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is the same God whom we serve today. We have not been ordered to worship a gold image or been threatened with a fiery furnace. But it becomes very easy for us to worship the material things of this world, thereby not giving full service to our God. Let us be as dedicated to serving God as these brave young men were.

*But these three
knew that as
servants of God
they could not
worship an image
made by a man.*

THE FATHER'S BUSINESS



In Luke 2, we find the story of a trip made by Jesus and his family. It was the custom of the Jews to make the annual trip to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.

Jesus was 12 years of age. You may remember the story: for some reason, on the way home Joseph and Mary did not check on Jesus' whereabouts, thinking he was traveling with others of their company. At the end of a day of travel they realized that he was not with them. They traveled back to Jerusalem to look for him.

It was the third day before they found him. He was in the temple talking with—and amazing—the teachers there. When his parents scolded him, he

asked them if they did not know that he must be about the Father's business (as recorded in the King James translation).

*What does it mean
to be about the*

Father's business?

*Is there a lesson
here for us?*

What does it mean to be about the Father's business? Is there a lesson here for us? Can people begin very young in being about the Father's business?

There is an important lesson here for parents. Children become the people they are trained to be. Every parent who wants his children to grow up as servants of God needs to begin early in training them about the "Father's business."

Oh yes, there is one more lesson here for parents—keep track of your kids!

*Wicked people have many troubles, but the Lord's love
surrounds those who trust him. (Psalm 32:10)*

KNOCK AT THE DOOR



What do you do when you hear a knock at the door? Most people want to check and see who is there. It might be someone whom they are pleased to readily invite to come inside. Or it might be someone they really do not care to welcome into their homes. It all depends on who is there and what the circumstances are.

Did you know that there is someone knocking at your door of everyone? It is true. These words are in Revelation 3:20:

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

You know whose words those are, don't you? Those are the words of Jesus. We need to understand that Jesus is more than our Lord, our King, and our Savior. He is all of these—and more. He wants to be more than someone we honor and serve from afar. He wants to come directly into our lives and have a loving intimate relationship with us—if we will let him do so. Can you imagine the joyful blessings we would experience if we had the Lord of the universe sitting at our table?

What about you? Are you answering the knock at your door? Is your life such that you would be pleased to have Jesus associate with you—or do you quickly close the door when you see who is there?

It is a question that we all answer in one way or another. Let us all take advantage of the offer and welcome into our lives the most important guest we could ever have.

*Can you imagine
the joyful blessings
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had the Lord of the
universe sitting
at our table?*

OIL CRISIS



Everyone here has heard about the oil crisis in this country. It has caused many hardships, especially with the higher price of gasoline.

Did you know that the Bible speaks of an oil shortage? It really does. In Matthew 25, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom as they were waiting for the wedding banquet. Five of the virgins took jars of oil to keep their lamps burn-

ing, but the other five virgins foolishly made no preparations to have enough oil for their lamps.

*Before the foolish
virgins returned
it was too late.*

*The door to the
wedding banquet
was closed tightly.*

At midnight the cry rang out that the bridegroom was coming. The ones with no oil tried to get some from the five who had brought extra. But those five were afraid they would not have enough and told the others to go buy some oil.

We remember the end of the story. Before the foolish virgins returned it was too late. The door to the wedding banquet was closed tightly.

This is really a lesson about preparation. The bridegroom represents Jesus who is going to return some day to take those who are ready to his great banquet—which is heaven. Those who have foolishly neglected to live a life of preparation for the Lord will find it too late when he makes his appearance.

It may be too late for us to make adequate preparation for the oil shortage in our country, but there is still time to get ready for the Lord's return. Don't wait any longer!

SPECIAL MEN



We don't know their names. We don't know where they came from, how far they traveled, or where they finally went. We don't know how many there were—although we think there may have been three.

What we do know is that they were very special—so much that God selected them for a very special honor. We find their story in Matthew 2.

We are not sure just how God let these men know the meaning of the star which they followed to the place where the baby Jesus was lying. Perhaps they were prophets and knew of God's promise to bless his people through a coming savior. But they knew Jesus was very special. They bowed down and worshipped the baby, also presenting him expensive gifts.

*They bowed down
and worshipped
the baby, also
presenting him
expensive gifts*

You may have seen the bumper sticker saying “Wise men still seek him”, and that is so very true!

Today we do not have to see a special star or make a long difficult journey to see Jesus. He is here—today—and if *we* are wise we will welcome him into our own lives.

*Examine and see how good the Lord is.
Happy is the person who trusts him. (Psalm 34:8)*

RUTH AND NAOMI



The book of Ruth centers around two love stories. One is the love between a man and a woman. The other, a less likely but better-known story, is about this woman's love for her mother-in-law.

Devastated by the deaths of her two sons and her husband, Naomi felt that she needed to leave the land of Moab and return to her home country and her own people. She advised her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to remain in their own country.

Orpah decided to stay, but Ruth cared so deeply for Naomi that she insisted on staying with her. Following are the famous touching words which she spoke:

“Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God: where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.” (Ruth 1:16-17 KJV)

It is not uncommon for in-laws to be less than each other's favorite people. The fact of Ruth's devotion to Naomi is a testament to the wonderful character of the older woman. It is also a testament to the heart of Ruth in being able to recognize and appreciate the kind of person that Naomi was.

In discouraging Ruth at first from going with her, Naomi probably felt that she had nothing to offer her daughter-in-law and that she might not adapt well in a new and strange culture. As it turned out, they both had a great deal to offer each other.

For Naomi, surely the love and companionship of Ruth provided some relief from the emotional distress resulting from the tragic deaths in her family. There can be no doubt that God was working in both their lives. Eventually Ruth found a good husband among Naomi's relatives. In a final crowning honor to her, her son, Obed, became the grandfather of King David himself. God always finds ways to honor those who honor him!

THE GIRL AT THE DOOR



Persecution was a common occurrence in the early church. This was especially true for the apostles. They were repeatedly imprisoned and beaten, but their great faith kept them going, constantly telling the good news about Jesus.

In Acts 12, we find the account of the wicked King Herod putting to death James, brother of John the Apostle. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he decided to arrest Peter also, probably meaning to have him killed too. Several soldiers were assigned to guard him. He was chained to two soldiers to be sure he was secure.

When the church heard that Peter was in prison, they began to pray earnestly, clearly believing that God would hear them and release Peter.

And that is exactly what God did. The night before Peter's trial was to begin an angel appeared in Peter's cell, awakened him, and told him to follow him. The chains fell off miraculously and Peter was escorted past all the guards and through all the gates until they were safely out in the street. It took a while for Peter to realize what was going on.

What happened next was very exciting. Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark. Many were there praying for him. When he knocked on the door, a servant girl named Rhoda came to see who was there. When she realized that it was Peter she became so excited that she forgot to open the door. She ran back and told the others that Peter was at the door—but they did not believe her—and said that she was crazy. Peter had to keep knocking before they let him in.

*When she realized
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We can only imagine all the things that happened at this time. Rhoda probably was glad to prove that she was not crazy. Peter may have kidded them for their lack of faith; they prayed for his release and when it happened they did not believe it! But the encouraging thing for us is the assurance that prayer *does* work, and that the God who rescued Peter is the God who has power to rescue us!

THE WEAK STRONG MAN



There are many heroes in the Bible. Unlike human authors who glorify their heroes, the Bible reveals the weaknesses as well as the strengths of those we consider to be heroes.

In the book of Judges, chapter, 13-16, we find the story of just such a person. The book of Judges is a rather dismal history of the Israelites as time after time they forgot God and worshipped the idols of the pagan nations around them. Each time God punished them by sending invading armies against them.

The pattern was always the same. Suffering at the hands of their enemies, the people cried out to God for deliverance, promising to turn back to him. Each time God raised up a judge who successfully led the Israelite forces to victory.

*Each time God
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forces to victory.*

One such judge was a man named Samson. We all remember his story and the great strength God gave him. While he was successful in fighting the Philistines in battles, he was not successful in resisting the enticements of a Philistine woman. She got him to reveal the secret of his strength, which was his hair, which had never been cut as he was a Nazarite (part of the Nazarite vow was to never have one's hair cut).

The weakness of the man—who was never supposed to become involved with a foreign woman—led to his capture, the loss of his eyes, and later his death. The Bible teaches us that friendship with the world is enmity against God. Any time a believer becomes involved romantically with an unbeliever, he is inviting spiritual disaster.

If we are true servants of God, our lives will be dedicated to walking in his ways. Why would we want to tie our lives to those who are walking in a different direction?

SPIRITUAL OLYMPICS



More than a hundred thousand spectators filled the huge stadium to watch the athletes from dozens of countries as they competed for the coveted gold medals. Hundred of millions of others watched on television all around the world. Most of them cheered on their favorites as they competed in the mighty Olympic contests.

The history of Olympic-type events goes back to ancient times. We find references in the New Testament to just such competition. In fact, the Christian life is compared to a great race.

One of these references is in the book of Hebrews. Chapter 11 recounts the examples of many who in past ages were victorious in their contests against the forces of evil. Beginning in chapter 12 we find the following words (verses 1-3):

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The reference to a “cloud of witnesses” is very intriguing. It sounds as though all those departed heroes of past ages are sitting on the sidelines pulling for us! We learn from Luke 15:10 that the angels are watching...and want us to win!

Unlike the Olympics, in our spiritual race we can ALL win the gold medal. For us the gold medal is all about staying in the race and doing our best. The one big hindrance—the only thing that can defeat us—is sin. We are told that we should keep our eyes on Jesus all the way. This is the key to throwing off the sin that can easily entangle us. Let us encourage each other as we run the great race together!

EBED-MELECH



Ever heard of Ebed-Melech? Probably not. He has an interesting story. The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah, the prophet of God warned the people to leave the city. The wicked King Zedekiah was angry at Jeremiah and ordered that he be put into a deep hole in the ground, called a cistern. Poor Jeremiah sank deep into the mud.

Then a man named Ebed-Melech, a Cushite (or Ethiopian), an official in the court, had compassion on Jeremiah. He risked the wrath of the king by asking for Jeremiah to be freed. The king gave in and sent some men to use ropes and pull Jeremiah out of the cistern.

But look further at the heart of Ebed-Melech as revealed in this passage from Jeremiah 38:11-12:

“He took some old rags and worn out clothes...and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. Ebed-Melech, the Cushite, said to Jeremiah, ‘Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.’ Jeremiah did so and they pulled him out of the cistern.”

Here was a man with a wonderful heart who risked his life for a helpless man who had nothing to offer in return.

Or did he? There is a little more to the story. Just as terrible death and destruction faced the city of Jerusalem, God sent this message to Jeremiah:

“Go tell Ebed-Melech, the Cushite, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: I am about to fulfill my work against this city through disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. But I will rescue you on that day, declares the Lord; you will not be handed over to those you fear. I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust me’...” (Jeremiah 39:16-18)

Let us realize that in any age the Lord takes notice of good hearts!

SALT AND LIGHT



Salt and light are two of the most important things in our lives. We are so used to having both of them that we probably take them for granted. We know that salt is very important for preserving food—to keep it from spoiling—but salt also gives food flavor and taste. Without it our food would not taste good to us.

In Matthew 5, verses 13-16, Jesus compared his disciples to both salt and light:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

How are Christians like salt? They give good flavor and taste to human life. They also preserve quality of life in our society.

In a world of spiritual darkness God’s people provide light to show the kind of life the Lord wants people to live. This light makes clear the path to eternal life in heaven after this earthly life is over. And as spiritual salt they both preserve spiritual values and provide a delightful flavor to an often unsavory sin-laden world.

Each person should take stock of his own life to see if he is having the influence on those around him that would match the Lord’s expectations. How many people can we think of whose lives have been directly pointed in the direction of the Lord’s ways by our being salt or light?

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THE PILE OF STONES



After 40 years in the desert it was finally time for the Israelites to enter Canaan, the long-awaited Promised Land. They would need to cross the Jordan River to enter the land. Some 40 years earlier they had seen the Red Sea parted by the Lord to allow them to escape from Egyptian bondage—that is, some of them had seen it. All but two of the adults who had left Egypt were now dead.

Once again God demonstrated his great power in the view of all the people. Priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into the river and immediately the river stopped flowing. The water piled up in a great heap and the people walked across on dry land.

Then Joshua called 12 men, one from each tribe, and told them to pick up 12 stones from the middle of the river bed and make a pile. He explained:

“In the future when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” (Joshua 4:6-7)

Time and time again throughout history God’s people have been plagued with the problem of forgetfulness. It would seem that having seen the awesome display of God’s power they would never abandon him to worship pagan idols. But that is exactly what they did—even with all the special reminders such as the stones from the river bed.

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What about us? We have all the reminders recorded in the scriptures. The image of the cross is a reminder. The Lord’s Supper is a reminder. We have brothers and sisters who continually remind us of God’s love and promises. Let us make sure that WE do not go off after the material gods that are worshipped by the people of our age!

THE CURSE OF GREED



The man was very important. He was commander of the army of Aram and was a favorite of the king. But he had an awful problem—he had leprosy.

In one of the raids into Israel's territory the Arameans took captive a young girl who became a servant of Naaman's wife. The girl knew about the prophet Elisha and the miraculous powers he had from God. At her suggestion Naaman, with the king's permission, went to Samaria to try to find a cure for his disease.

Not knowing where to go, Naaman went to the king of Israel, asking him to heal his leprosy. Of course the king could not heal leprosy and was greatly angered and offended, thinking the Arameans were trying to stir up a war. But Elisha heard about the what happened and had Naaman sent to him.

Naaman approached Elisha's house with a large amount of gold, silver, and clothing to be used for gifts, but Elisha did not even come out of his house to meet this important general. He simply sent word by his servant, Gehazi, for Naaman to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River.

This is not at all what Naaman expected. He angrily refused to do what seemed so foolish to him. However, his servants talked him into doing what Elisha had said to do. He dipped seven times in the Jordan River and the leprosy was gone.

Naaman wanted to give gifts to Elisha, but the prophet refused to accept anything. As the men left, Elisha's servant, Gehazi, followed them. Greedy for some of the treasure the Arameans had offered, Gehazi caught up with Naaman and made up a lie. He said that some prophets had come to visit Elisha and that the prophet had asked for silver and clothes for the prophets. Naaman was more than happy to give even more than Gehazi asked for.

Then comes the really sad part of the story. When Gehazi got home Elisha told him that he knew everything that he had done and for his greed and dishonesty—he would now have the leprosy that had been Naaman's.

In our lives the punishment for greed may not come as swiftly or dramatically as it did to Gehazi, but it is still wrong and we all need to guard against it.

SETTLING ACCOUNTS



A non-religious farmer wrote to a farm publication expressing scorn for a devout neighboring farmer. The neighbor set aside Sundays to worship and honor God, not working in his fields on those days.

The unbelieving farmer wrote, “I planted my crops on Sunday, I plowed the crops on Sundays, and I harvested crops on Sundays. In October my yield was just as good as my neighbor who did not go into the fields on Sunday.”

The editor wrote this brief reply, “The Lord does not settle all his accounts in October.”

This calls to mind these words from 2 Peter 3:

“...You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation’

...With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise... He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

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Those of us who live by faith in the Lord must always remember that our Christian race is a marathon, not a sprint. We must also remember that the Lord’s response to our wickedness as well as to our righteousness is not always immediate. In most cases it is not.

It is not uncommon for Christians to feel dismay when they see the wicked prosper—or *appear* to prosper—while the righteous do not appear to fare nearly as well. But that is what faith is all about—being able to see beyond the present situations, knowing that God will work things out for the good of his people.

Every person has an account with the Lord. When final settlement comes the faithful will be fully satisfied with the results.

SPEWING TIME



One of the major themes of the Bible is the great patience and longsuffering of the Lord. We see it in all the years when Noah preached to his wicked generation. We see it as God dealt with the rebellious Israelites, beginning almost as soon as they left Egypt.

In the book of Judges we see God's patience as more than a dozen times his own people left him to serve the pagan gods of the nations around them. When they were punished by invading armies they repeatedly cried out to God for help—and every time God patiently sent a deliverer.

Perhaps the most impressive example of God's patience was during the dismal period of the divided kingdom as king after king became increasingly evil and idolatrous, leading the people away from God. If one checks the time line he will note that the major portion of Old Testament prophecy was delivered during this period. God sent prophet after prophet to warn the Israelites of impending disaster if they did not repent and turn back to God...but all in vain.

*The rebels in
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but two adults.*

But God's patience has limits. In Noah's time, the flood came. The rebels in the wilderness were condemned to 40 years wandering in the desert, plus the deaths of all but two adults. In later years ignoring the pleas of the prophets led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, followed by Babylonian captivity and, for some, Assyrian captivity.

What about the Christian era? In Revelation 2 and 3, we have some direct messages from the Lord to the churches in Asia. He makes it clear that being cold toward him is not acceptable. Even being lukewarm toward him will mean being spewed "out of his mouth." When will that be? The Lord is coming back. It will be the final *end* of patience. Let us all make VERY sure that we learn from history and are not among those who are "spewed out of his mouth" when "spewing time" comes.

“IDLE” WORSHIP



As we read the history of the Israelites after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt, we see that they had a serious problem. Despite having seen God’s great power, they continually kept being drawn to the idol worship of the nations around them. Although God punished them time and time again, they continued to become involved with pagan idols.

Even today God’s people have the problem of being drawn away from God’s plans by being attracted to what others do. It is commonly believed that one can be a fully acceptable Christian by just being regular in church attendance; this

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must not be idle.*

has been the standard for “faithfulness.” This idea is that so long as one has faith, works are not important. This is basically “idle” (I-D-L-E) worship, instead of I-D-O-L worship.

The truth is that Jesus made it clear that his followers must *not* be idle. He worked, the Father works, and we must also work if we are going to please him.

Among many passages that show this is John 15:1-2 where he said, “I am the vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...”

In verse 5 he said, “If a man remains in me and I in him, he *will* bear much fruit...”

If we are not bearing fruit for the Lord—if we are the *idle* ones—we need to wake up and change our lives before it is too late. Let us not be the branches which are cut off and thrown into the fire!

*When a person’s steps follow the Lord,
God is pleased with his ways. (Psalm 37:23)*

FAITH



There is no message in the Bible more essential than the importance of faith. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. This includes believing not only that God exists, but that He rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Many people will say that they believe in God, but their lives show clearly that they are making no effort to “earnestly seek him.”

How does a person acquire faith? According to Romans 10:17, faith comes by hearing God’s message. In other words, one needs to be a dedicated student of the Bible. It is the source of our information about God. It contains the evidence upon which faith is built. A person who does not study his Bible is not likely to have much faith.

The faith that God rewards is much more than passive belief. Unless one’s faith leads him to action, it is not real faith. The book of James makes this clear. According to chapter 2, verse 26, “. . .faith without deeds (or works) is *dead*.”

Much of the Bible was written to illustrate this principle. Hebrews 11, summarizes many of these examples, showing how true faith motivates the lives of those who possess it. The writer mentions such people as Abel, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and many others, all of whom showed that their lives were controlled by their faith in God. For some this faith cost them their lives, but clearly they were convinced that God’s rewards far outweighed the price they paid.

A person who does not study his Bible is not likely to have much faith.

The need for an active faith is just as important today as it was in ancient times. Let each of us dedicate ourselves to a life of faith.

THE DAMASCUS ROAD



Christianity is about the heart. What a person does—or does not do—is important, of course, but only as these things relate to the heart.

Becoming a Christian is all about changing one's heart. Some hearts are soft and open, gladly receiving the Lord's message of salvation. Other, however, are much harder to reach. Sometimes a great deal of time—and work—is required in order to make such hearts ready to turn to God.

Acts 9, records the story of a man who, though very sincere, had a heart that was violently opposed to Jesus. With great zeal he persecuted the followers of Jesus, even to the point of death sometimes. After persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem, he decided to go to Damascus to imprison the ones he could find there.

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death sometimes.*

You may remember the story. On the road to Damascus Jesus himself spoke to Saul as he was struck blind by an exceedingly bright light. We can only imagine what went through Saul's mind as he realized that Jesus really WAS God, and not the imposter he had imagined him to be.

As we all know, this was the man who became known as the great Apostle Paul—the man who worked as hard to serve Jesus as he had earlier worked against him.

And what changed? It was his heart. None of us is likely to be blinded by a great light—or to have Jesus speak to us from heaven—but we need to have hearts that respond to the Lord readily.

Let us all examine our hearts and see to it that they are wholly dedicated to the Lord's service.

CONTRIBUTION



It is more blessed to give than to receive.” These are the words of Jesus as related to us by the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:35. God has always required his people to give but has always promised much more in return than has been given.

Giving to God has always been a matter of faith—truly believing that God will provide the promised blessings. In the Old Testament the people were required to give a tithe, or a tenth, of their income. It was also to be their “first-fruits” meaning to provide God with his portion before providing for themselves. In those days people’s income was mainly from crops and livestock. At harvest time the first grain from the fields was to be the Lord’s. Likewise, the best of the newborn livestock was to be the Lord’s.

*At harvest time
the first grain
from the fields was
to be the Lord’s.*

In the Old Testament we find abundant evidence of how God works. We see that He always blessed his people greatly when they were faithfully obedient to him. But we also see how He brought hard times when they became selfish and disobedient. Through the prophet Malachi, God delivered this message to his people, “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me” (Malachi 3:8).

Then he said, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse... Test me in this... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”

While God has not set any certain amount for us to give, He has made it clear that He wants us to give generously, trusting him to see to it that we are blessed. We must decide—do we want to give generously and receive great blessings—or give selfishly and receive little.

THE TONGUE



Most everyone wants to have good days—not bad days. Most everyone wants to love his life—not hate it. How can a person help assure that he has these things?

The Bible is very specific on this subject. Note these words found in 1 Peter 3, verse 10:

“...whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.” These are not just Peter’s thoughts. He was quoting words of David found in Psalms 34.

Sometimes we fail to realize how much trouble we can get ourselves into by the words that we speak. All of us can think back and see the truth of this in our own lives.

*The tongue says
only what it is told
to say—by our
hearts and minds.*

James used some very strong words in describing tongue. He wrote, “No man can tame the tongue. It is a relentless evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3:8)

As strong as these words are, these things are really *not* the fault of the tongue itself. The tongue says only what it is *told* to say—by our hearts and minds. So if we want to love life and see good days, we must get control of our hearts—so that they send good messages to our tongues! If we get our thoughts right, our tongues will be just fine!

*The Lord sees the good people and listens
to their prayers. (Psalm 34:15)*

THE FULL LIFE



Whoever would love life and see good day must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech, he must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are in the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord us against those who do evil.”

One of Satan’s biggest lies is that if one leaves his sinful life and becomes a Christian he will be doomed to a burdensome and unhappy existence. The words we have just quotes are from 1 Peter 3:10-12. It is a quotation by Peter from Psalms 34. These words provide the secret to loving life and seeing good days.

In John 10:10 Jesus said, “. . .I have come that they may have life, and have it to the *full*.” There are many other scriptures which show that a life lived for God is the happiest, most fulfilling life that one can live. Many of you hearing this can testify that your lives are much better now than when you lived without the Lord.

Unfortunately there are many people who cannot resist the temptation to find out for themselves about the pleasures of sin. Some, like the prodigal son, find out the hard way and have the good sense to leave that life. Others never come to their senses enough to come back. . .and are forever lost.

Happy is the young person who turns to the Creator early—and never turns away to the empty life of sin!

*Some, like the
prodigal son, find
out the hard
way and have
the good sense to
leave that life.*

*Depend on the Lord; trust him,
and he will take care of you. (Psalm 37:5)*

DISCIPLINE



None of us gets very excited when we hear the word “discipline.” It is a bit like getting a flu shot—we may be sure that we need it, but we do not look forward to the event!

We all have had experiences with discipline. We can all remember times when we were disciplined by our parents. We may even remember our skepticism when we heard the line, “It hurts me more than it hurts you.”

Those who are parents have learned that it is absolutely necessary to exercise discipline with their children. The word refers to training which is meant to correct and mold behavior. An undisciplined person is basically one who is out of control and unable to get along well with other people.

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.”

The Bible teaches us that God also disciplines his children. For those of us who are children of God—this includes us! According to Hebrews 12:6, “. . . The Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Verse 11 says, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” Later, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Let us all appreciate the fact that God wants to do whatever is needed in our lives—painful as it may be—to make us pleasing to him!

*The Lord watches over the lives of the innocent,
and their reward will last forever. (Psalm 37:18)*

WALKING OR SINKING?



In Matthew 16, we find the account of Jesus feeding a crowd of over 5,000. Afterwards he sent his disciples across the Sea of Galilee while he remained behind.

But strong winds and waves made it difficult for the disciples to make headway. Late in the night they were still on the water when they saw someone walking on the water. At first they were very frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!

But Jesus told them that he was the one they were seeing...and not to be afraid. Then Peter asked Jesus to let him come to him on the water. Jesus told Peter to come—and he did—walking on the water to Jesus.

But when Peter saw the wind and the waves he became afraid—and started to sink. He cried out to Jesus to save him. Jesus reached out his hand and saved him, scolding him for having so little faith.

There is a lesson in this story for us. Jesus has promised to be with his people—to protect them and rescue them from the troubles and dangers of life. But he wants us to *trust* him to take care of us.

The question for us is how we will react to the winds and the waves of troubles that sometimes come into the lives of all of us. Will we keep our faith strong and let Jesus see us through our struggles...or will we lose faith and sink into unbelief, denying ourselves the protection the Lord offers?

Let us all learn from Peter's mistake.

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REMEMBER LOT'S WIFE



When Jesus tells us to remember something, we need to pay attention. In Luke 17:32 Jesus told his followers to remember Lot's wife. What is there about Lot's wife that we should remember—and why?

We may remember the story in Genesis 19. Lot lived in the city of Sodom, a place of terrible immorality. Angry at the sins of the city, God decided to destroy it by raining down fire upon it. Two angels led the righteous man Lot, along with his wife and two daughters, out of the city to save them.

*But Lot's wife
looked back and
was immediately
turned into salt.*

The angels gave clear orders that they were *not* to look back at the city. But Lot's wife looked back and was immediately turned into salt.

Why did she look back? We really do not know. Did she miss her old life in that sinful city? Did she have relatives there?

Those who are Christians have been delivered from their old lives of sin. But often there are temptations to look back longingly at the old sinful pleasures and perhaps yearn to go back to them.

The Lord wants us to put our old lives behind us—once and for all. He provides us with far better things than the sinful world offers. When we are tempted to look back...let us remember Lot's wife.

*The Lord saves good people; he is their strength
in times of trouble. (Psalm 37:39)*

GOD'S MILITARY STRATEGY



Throughout history God has offered protection for his people. During the history of Israel there were frequent military conflicts. God not only gave Israel many victories, but He frequently did so in a way that made it clear that it *was* God who gave the victory, and not the military skills of the people. In this way the Lord provided unmistakable evidence that He was God and that only He deserved to be worshipped.

As the Israelites were leaving Egypt they were terrified as the Egyptian army pursued them—and they had no military force to resist them. But God provided the strategy. The Egyptians were killed by a collapsing wall of water.

As the Israelites were ready to enter Canaan they faced the challenge of the walled city of Jericho. What was God's strategy? It was to have the people march around the city 13 times over a 7-day period, blowing trumpets and shouting...and down came the walls. Clearly it was God!

With Gideon the force was limited to 300 men to cause confusion and self-destruction among the mighty Midianite army.

When the Israelites were terrified by a Philistine army and its boastful champion, the giant Goliath, God provided a shepherd lad with only a sling and a few stones. We know the outcome of that encounter. It was the Philistines' turn to be terrified as they quickly tried to turn and run away. The result was another victory for the Israelites.

God wants his people to have confidence in him. He has always provided abundant evidence that indeed He is trustworthy and is always ready to use his power to bless his people. Let us be among those who believe this...and live our lives accordingly.

With Gideon the force was limited to 300 men to cause confusion and selfdestruction among the mighty Midianite army.

MAKE A DECISION



The people of Israel were God's children—his own special people. He called them out from all the other nations and continually poured out blessings on them.

Despite all that the Lord did for his people, we find them, time after time, leaving God and worshipping the false gods of the nations around them, engaging in the sins of these ungodly people. Many times God would punish the Israelites for their unfaithfulness. For a while they would repent and turn back to God. But then it would be the same old story—they would turn back to idol worship.

Joshua became leader of Israel after the death of Moses. He knew very well the history of Israel's unfaithfulness. Near the end of his life he issued a challenge

*There is still a
need for a decision
on the part of
God's children.*

to the Israelites. It was for them to make a decision. They had two choices: to serve the true God—or to serve the pagan gods of their neighbors. In Joshua 24:15 we find these words, "...Choose for yourselves *this day* whom you will serve..." As usual, the Israelites promised to serve God—and, as usual, it was not long before they were back into idolatry.

There is still a need for a decision on the part of God's children. It is common for those who have come to Christ to be tempted to go back to the sinful pleasures of the world. The "decision" they made to follow Christ was not all that final.

We should all examine our hearts and make sure that our decision to serve God is *final* and *unchangeable*.

Give your worries to the Lord, and he will take care of you. He will never let good people down. (Psalm 55:22)

THINGS THAT GOD HATES



People who want to live for God will naturally want to know what God likes—and what he does *not* like! In Proverbs 6, we are told of seven things that God hates. It would be good for us to take a good look at this list...and make sure that we are not guilty of these things!

The things listed are: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises evil schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

As one considers this list he realizes that all seven spring from the heart. From an evil heart come evil actions. From a good heart come good actions. This fact leads us to take a good look at our own hearts to see what is really there.

We also note that three of these involve the tongue—words that are spoken. Of course the words we speak reveal what is in our hearts.

The following prayer of David should also be our prayer. In Psalms 51:10 we find this plea to God:

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me.”

Let us all make sure that we guard our hearts!

The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear God, and he saves them. (Psalm 34:7)

*From a good heart
come good actions.
This fact leads
us to take a good
look at our own
hearts to see what
is really there.*

EYE AND EAR PROBLEMS



As one studies the ministry of Jesus he notices that the Lord was often saddened and disappointed when so many people would not listen to his message of salvation. Not only would they not accept his message, but they often became angry and hostile. In Matthew 13:14-15 the Lord

*While some have
listened to the
Lord's message
and received it
gladly, many others
have refused to
listen and accept.*

quotes from the prophet Isaiah who faced the same type of people in his day, "...For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and turn, and I would heal them."

As we read about the ministry of Paul we often see the same problem. While some have listened to the Lord's message and received it gladly, many others have refused to listen and accept.

Nothing has changed today. As followers of Jesus we have been given the task of telling the Lord's message at every opportunity. Jesus and the apostles never stopped preaching just because some would not listen—and we must not stop either.

We know, of course, that the *real* problem is not with the eyes or ears, but with hearts—then and now. Every one of us who has come to the Lord did so through a change of heart. We must all do everything we can to open eyes—and ears—and hearts!

*People who do what is right may have many problems,
but the Lord will solve them all. (Psalm 34:19)*

TASTE CHANGE



A young couple hosted a party for friends from church. Among the guests was a new Christian, a recent convert. During the party he approached the host and said, “I never realized that I could have so much fun at a party where there is no drinking.”

His statement illustrates an important fact: when one dedicates his life to God, the Lord changes his tastes. Every person seeks to find things to do which he enjoys. For the non-Christian the pleasures of the world often involve sin. But when one comes to God he renounces the sinful pleasures of the world.

Does this mean that one who becomes a Christian is in some sort of “pleasure vacuum” and has only a life of somber self-denial to look forward to? Absolutely not! The Lord provides a whole new set of pleasures to enjoy. There is no joy greater than loving and being loved. In Christ one acquires a whole new family of brothers and sisters whose love and fellowship bring endless delights. Being at peace with God and being able to approach him confidently in prayer—with a clear conscience—is a delight that defies description. Having the burden of sin lifted through the complete forgiveness provided by Jesus is immensely liberating, providing the most refreshing relief.

The sinful people of the world are not able to understand the new pleasures of those in Christ. They think it strange that those who used to indulge in sinful pleasures with them no longer do such things.

A life of sin has no brightness in its future. Those who submit to the Lord live in joyful hope of not only a better life here on earth, but of an eternity of bliss in heaven.

One could go on and on about the joys of a life lived for God. This new set of tastes is satisfied far more fully than anything the world has to offer in satisfying sinful tastes.

*Those who submit
to the Lord live in
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only a better life
here on earth, but
of an eternity of
bliss in heaven.*

COMMUNION



We are all familiar with the practice of communion. It is a word we use for what is also called the Lord's Supper. Various religious groups have different ideas of how often and in what manner a communion service should be observed—and some even have restrictions concerning who is allowed to participate.

Our observance of the Lord's Supper—or communion—is based on the events of what is sometimes referred to as the “Last Supper.” Accounts of this event are found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22. The occasion was the Jewish Passover Feast, a tradition that dates back to the time of Moses, when the death angel “passed over” the homes of the Israelites.

*He explained
that the bread
represented his
broken body
and the wine
represented his
shed blood.*

Jesus knew that the time of his crucifixion was near. He understood far more than the others who were present the benefits to all men that would result from his broken body and shed blood. It would mean that forgiveness of sins would be available to all men through his sacrifice.

Of course he also knew that people tend to forget and would need continual reminding in order to maintain full appreciation for the price Jesus paid for us. So after the meal he took bread, broke it, blessed it, and passed it around to his apostles. He also passed around a cup of wine for them to drink. He explained that the bread represented his broken body and the wine represented his shed blood. They were told that this was to be done in remembrance of him.

The need to remember and appreciate is as real today as it was in the first century. May these words serve to remind us of the Lord's love and his suffering—and may our full appreciation be renewed as we partake of the bread and the cup.

THANKSGIVING



Thanksgiving! What comes to mind when one hears that word? Roast turkey? Pumpkin pie? Family gathering? Dinner at Grandmother's house? Perhaps all of these things. Thanksgiving is one of the oldest of American traditions. We may remember pictures of the early American colonists sharing a Thanksgiving meal with some of the Native Americans who befriended them.

But thanksgiving is a tradition much older than the official declaration of the holiday—and even much older than the early colonists.

Through the years there have been various proclamations by the government concerning Thanksgiving, beginning with George Washington, finally settling on our current system of setting the date.

In fact, for those who are the Lord's people, thanksgiving is not just a holiday—it is a way of life. From the earliest of Bible times we find those who expressed thanks to God for their blessings.

In the New Testament we find frequent references to giving thanks. Jesus set an example of offering thanks for food. The Apostle Paul often offered thanks to God and instructed others to do the same. In Colossians 2:7 he urged his readers to "...overflow with thankfulness."

While there is a certain day legally designated as "Thanksgiving Day" for the nation, for those who serve the Lord *every* day is Thanksgiving Day as we continually express our appreciation to our Father and God.

*In fact, for those
who are the
Lord's people,
thanksgiving is not
just a holiday—it
is a way of life.*

*People, trust God all the time. Tell him all your problems,
because God is our protection. (Psalm 62:8)*

MARTHA, MARTHA



The four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell us only a very few things that occurred during the 3 ½ years of Jesus' ministry. The parts that have been recorded for us are designed to teach us the most basic principles that the Lord wants us to know.

Jesus was not saying that housework is not important, but he WAS saying that spiritual matters are much more important.

In Luke 10, verses 38-42, we read of events that occurred at the house of Mary and Martha, good friends of Jesus. Mary, along with other disciples, sat at Jesus' feet in order to hear the things he was saying. Her sister, Martha, was busy about the house, perhaps feeling the need to be a good hostess. Maybe she was preparing food for the group—we don't know.

Whatever she was doing, she felt that Mary should be helping her. She complained to Jesus, asking him to tell Mary to help. Jesus' answer was as follows:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

This passage is designed to teach us a very important lesson. It is all about priorities. Jesus was not saying that housework is not important, but he WAS saying that spiritual matters are much *more* important.

We can all make applications of this message in our own lives. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus said plainly that we should seek his kingdom *first* in our lives.

If we are going to *really* be followers of Christ, we must learn what is *really* important—and live lives that show where our hearts are.

THE SECOND COMING I



One of the most important aspects of Christianity is the belief that Jesus will some day return to the earth. The Bible provides us with a great deal of information about this coming event. We will collect and summarize this information in a series of presentations.

The Second Coming relates directly to the belief that there is an after-life for all of us, and that what we experience in that after-life is directly related to the way in which we live our lives here on earth. We are taught that the chief purpose of Christ's return is to judge the world, determining the fate of everyone who ever lived. It is the object of every Christian to live in such a way as to receive Christ's approval—and a welcome into heaven.

Jesus was very specific in his promise to his disciples. We have these words in John 14:2:

“In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am.”

In Acts 1, we find the record of Jesus' departure from the earth, as he ascended into the clouds while his apostles stood watching. Two angels spoke the following words to the men there:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

In Revelation 1:7 we find these words about this event: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him....” This passage relates to another aspect of the Second Coming—the resurrection of the dead, a subject to be discussed in a later presentation.

The Second Coming of Jesus is a matter of utmost concern to all of us. May we look forward to learning as much about it as possible.

THE SECOND COMING II



It is fascinating to examine the Old Testament in order to see how much was known in ancient times about Jesus, his work on earth, and specifically about his Second Coming.

Very early in Genesis (chapter 5) we read of a godly man named Enoch. But it is not until we get to the book of Jude that we learn that Enoch was a prophet, having spoken the following (verses 14-15): "...See that the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." Clearly this refers to the Second Coming and to judgment.

"He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of a greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."

How much did Enoch really understand about this event? In Hebrews 11:10 says this about Abraham: "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." This almost certainly refers to heaven. But what did God reveal to Abraham that caused him to look forward to this city?

Also in Hebrews 11 we find this remarkable statement about Moses, "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of a greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." For the sake of Christ? How did Moses know about Christ—and how much did he know?

We have these words from Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth" (19:25). Acts 2 quotes David's statement in Psalms 110:1 in which Jesus is referred to as "my lord." But how much did these ancients *really* understand?

Consider these words from 1 Peter 1:10-12: "Consider this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of

Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things which have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you. . . .”

Amazing! The prophets sometimes spoke of future events which they did not understand—and actually wanted God to explain it all to them—but God would not do so. Their words were for *our* benefit. Now *we* can get the full picture of what God had in mind. What a great faith builder for us!

*Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruling spirits,
nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing
above us, nothing below us, nor anything else in the whole
world will ever be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)*

ALIENS



Everyone has heard of aliens. Sometimes the word is used to refer to beings who supposedly came to earth from somewhere in outer space. Often we hear the word “alien” associated with the term “illegal.”

How many of us consider ourselves to be aliens? By definition an alien is a person residing in a country in which he is not a citizen. Did you know that the Bible refers to God’s people as aliens? It does indeed!

*Do we feel very
much at home and
content with our
lives on this earth?*

Hebrews 11 is the famous chapter on faith. It speaks of many of the heroes of faith in the Old Testament. We find the following description of those who, so many centuries ago, put their devotion to God above everything in life: “...And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth” (Hebrews 11:13). Verse 16 tells us, “...they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” Then we find these words, “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

Each of us needs to ask ourselves a serious question: do we feel very much at home and content with our lives on this earth? Is the idea of going to a new country to be with the Lord very seldom a part of our thinking?

Most of us need frequent reminders of what our lives are all about. If we are not careful we can forget that we are aliens on this earth. If we do not value our citizenship in heaven—we may find ourselves losing it! Let us make sure that we do not make that mistake!

Good people will be happy in the Lord and will find protection in him. Let everyone who is honest praise the Lord. (Psalm 64:10)

THE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME



On August 23rd, 1973, a bank in Stockholm, Sweden was robbed. Several people were seized as hostages during the bank takeover. Something strange happened during the six days of their captivity. Some of them came to sympathize with the robbers and actively defended them.

This type of behavior has come to be known as the Stockholm Syndrome. Some will remember the names Patty Hearst and Elizabeth Smart, both of whom became sympathetic with their kidnappers.

As strange as this type of behavior may seem to us, the truth is that we see it all the time. In fact, we may have acted much the same way ourselves. We tend to forget that the greatest taker of hostages of all time is Satan. We all know how evil he is and how he never works for our good. And yet he is too often able to convince us that he offers us much more than does the Lord.

*We tend to forget
that the greatest
taker of hostages of
all time is Satan.*

While we might not openly speak out in defense of Satan, our actions often speak louder than words. The way we live reveals very clearly whether we sympathize with Satan's ways—or whether we refuse to give in to him. Those of us who have decided to serve the Lord must leave no doubt that our loyalty is to God.

Maybe we could call this the “Heaven Syndrome”!

Because your love is better than life, I will praise you. (Psalm 63:3)

CHRISTMAS



Christmas is no doubt the favorite holiday of the year for most Americans. We remember fondly the experiences of our childhood with the brightly decorated tree, the pile of unopened gifts, the great anticipation, and probably the delightful smell of holiday treats being prepared in the kitchen.

Each person has his own unique set of experiences. For some the activities were all secular in nature. For others the spiritual aspects were important—perhaps with a nativity scene, or with decorations featuring angel figures, or with the singing of songs celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Many have opposed such observances as not being consistent with Christianity, sometimes feeling that pagan origins are involved.

Some have trouble separating fact from fiction regarding Christmas. The Bible, of course, says nothing about such a holiday, nor are there any instructions to celebrate in any way the birth of Christ.

Our modern traditions represent many centuries of evolution from feasts, celebrations, and observances and similar practices, beginning very early in the history of Christianity. Many have opposed such observances as not being consistent with Christianity, sometimes feeling that pagan origins are involved. Different cultures in different parts of the world have developed their own unique brands of observance.

The truth is that we do not know the exact time when Jesus was born. While we have no instructions to celebrate the birth of Jesus, those who love and honor him are delighted to see the people of the world take some time and remember this blessed event. May we all add our voices in praise and celebration as those around us recognize—even if briefly—the one we call Lord.

THE GOSPEL



We have all heard of the “gospel”, but what is it? In Romans 1:16 Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” In verse 17 he continues, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...”

There are other quotations. In 1 Corinthians 9:16 we have these words from Paul, “Woe to me if I preach not the gospel.” In 2 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul spoke of the punishment in store “for those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel.”

If we look up the meaning of the word “gospel” we find that it means “good news.” So what is the good news? As we study the Bible we come to understand that the wages of sin is death. Since all sin, all fall under the curse of death. The “good news” is that Jesus has provided a way for us to escape the curse of death... and have eternal life instead! How can there be any better news than that?

When people get good news they like to share it. And that is exactly what God wants us to do with the good news—the gospel—which he has provided for us. Do we consider it to be good enough news to share it with others? This is a question which each of us should consider.

*The “good news”
is that Jesus has
provided a way
for us to escape the
curse of death.*

*Those who do right should be glad and should rejoice before
God; they should be happy and glad. (Psalm 68:3)*

WHICH CHURCH IS RIGHT?



Countless people, seeking to serve God, wrestle with the question of which church is the right one—or whether or not it really matters. Knowledge of a few Bible facts can make this choice much easier.

Speaking to Peter in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “...I will build my church...”—NOT churches (plural), but CHURCH (singular).

Jesus never gave his church a name—and neither did any of his apostles. The practice of giving a name to the Lord’s church does not come from the Bible.

From many passages we learn that the church—which means a “called out” people—consists of those who have been saved. Therefore every person who fulfills the Lord’s requirements for being saved *automatically* becomes a part of the Lord’s church. (He would never put a person in the wrong group!)

A number of terms are used to refer to the same group of people, each one emphasizing a certain aspect of the relationship. Examples are “family of God”, “kingdom”, “church of God”, “household of God”, et cetera. NONE of these, however, are ever used as formal names.

It is most important that one checks the scriptures in order to see exactly how people are told to be saved! The answer must come from the Bible...and not from men...because many groups offer instructions that do *not* fit the scriptures. *Becoming saved is far too important to trust the teachings of men instead of the teachings of God!*

Once a person has fulfilled the Lord’s instructions for being saved, how does he decide which of the hundreds of religious groups to become a part of? THIS is the key question?

The only way to answer this question wisely is to make a diligent search of the scriptures to see what the Lord really wants. There are countless false teachers in the religious world—which means that those ignorant of the scriptures can be dangerously influenced to do wrong.

May we all make it a top priority of our lives to keep searching the scriptures in order to make choices that please the Lord.

MASTER OF DISGUISE



We all know that a disguise is supposed to make one appear as some thing—or someone—other than who he really is. There are various reasons why one might wear a disguise. Sometimes it is just for fun—but sometimes the reason is far more serious—even dangerous, as when a bank robber wears a ski mask to hide his identity.

Surely the greatest—and most dangerous—master of disguise of all time is mentioned in the Bible. That would be Satan. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11:14, tells us that Satan “masquerades as an angel of light”—and he is certainly anything but that!

As we know, Satan—or the Devil—always wants to deceive God’s people and lead them into sin and destruction. In Ephesians 6:11 Paul speaks of the devil’s “schemes” and our need to use the armor of God to resist them. In 1 Timothy 3:7 Paul warns against falling into the devil’s trap.

We are not left defenseless against Satan. Since we have been sufficiently warned, we are able to be alert and not allow ourselves to be destroyed by Satan’s devices. While Satan is powerful, our God is much *more* powerful! James 4, verse 7, provides us with a powerful answer:

“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Then he says, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.”

We want to do our best to live lives pleasing to God—and to help others to do the same. For this reason we must always remain alert to Satan’s purpose—and never to allow ourselves to be deceived by his disguises.

*As we know,
Satan—or the
Devil—always
wants to deceive
God’s people and
lead them into sin
and destruction.*

HAPPY PEOPLE



The book of Psalms has been enjoyed by countless people through the years. The following words from the first psalm, as found in the New Century translation, are part of the encouraging message of this book.

“Happy are those people who do not listen to the wicked, who don’t go where sinners go, who don’t do what evil people do.

They love the Lord’s teachings day and night. They are strong like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don’t die.

*The tree produces
fruit in season, and
its leaves don’t die.*

*Everything they
do will succeed.*

Everything they do will succeed.

The wicked people are not like that. They are like chaff which the wind drives away.

So the wicked will not escape God’s punishment. Sinners will not worship with God’s people.

This is because the Lord takes care of his people, but the wicked will be destroyed.”

*God, how wonderful you are! You are more splendid
than the hills full of animals... (Psalm 76:4)*

EASTER



Easter is the most celebrated day in the Christian religion—with the possible exception of Christmas. It is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

No one knows the date of the resurrection. The actual date of observance varies from year to year. In 325 A.D. the First Council of Nicea decreed that Easter was to be observed on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. Depending on the calendar being used, the dates vary between March twenty-second and April twenty-fifth.

There is no clear historical evidence for when Easter was first observed. But some forms of it seem to be traceable back to the second century.

*There is no clear
historical evidence
for when Easter
was first observed.*

As we know, Easter is not just a religious holiday. It has strong secular significance, commonly associated with Easter eggs—and, of course, the Easter bunny.

However we choose to observe Easter—or not to observe it at all—it is a well-established part of our culture—and is likely to be around for a long while.

*My body and my mind may become weak, but God is
my strength. He is mine forever. (Psalm 73:26)*

THE WIDOW AND THE PROPHET



The story is in 1 Kings 17. A terrible drought had brought a great famine to the land of Israel. A poor widow had just enough flour and oil for one more meal for herself and her son. She expected that after that meal they would have no more food...and would die.

Then the prophet Elijah came to her and asked her for a piece of bread.

*She trusted him
and did as he had
requested and,
sure enough, the
flour and oil did
not run out.*

The widow explained her situation. But Elijah made a promise to her. If she would bring him a small cake of bread, her jar of flour and jug of oil would last until the end of the drought. She trusted him and did as he had requested and, sure enough, the flour and oil did not run out.

The Bible is full of examples of God taking care of his people. Providing food for Elijah, the widow, and her son is just one of these examples.

*He will take all power away from the wicked, but the
power of good people will grow. (Psalm 75:10)*

A FATHER'S ADVICE



Some of the most important lessons in the Bible come from the book of Proverbs. The following words from Proverbs 6:20-23 are addressed to a son, but they are just as important for a daughter:

“My son, keep your father’s commands and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.

Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck.

When you walk they will guide you; when you sleep they will watch over you;

When you awake they will speak to you.

For these commands are a lamp, this teaching a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life.”

These are words of advice from thousands of years ago, but they are just as true today as they were then. Happy is the son or daughter who listens...and learns!

*These are words
of advice from
thousands of years
ago, but they are
just as true today
as they were then.*

*You are the God who does miracles; you have
shown people your power. (Psalm 77: 14)*

THE MUSTARD SEED



Jesus told many parables about what his kingdom was like. As most know, a parable is a short story that is told in order to illustrate an important point. In one parable Jesus said that his kingdom was like a mustard seed. This is a tiny seed that grows into a very large plant.

So what is the lesson Jesus is trying to get across. We may think that we are only one person and cannot make any important contribution to growing the Lord's kingdom. But we should realize that one person can tell another person about the Lord and that person can tell another person...who can tell even more.

One person can tell another person about the Lord and that person can tell another person...

Let us all see that every single person is important in the Lord's kingdom.

Good people will grow like palm trees; they will be tall like the cedars of Lebanon. Like trees planted in the temple of the Lord, they will grow strong in the courtyards of our God. When they are old, they will still produce fruit; they will be healthy and fresh. (Psalm 92:12-14)

A GOOD NAME



A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed as better than silver or gold.” These are the words of Proverbs 22:1.
Everyone wants to have a good name.

And how does one get a good name? It depends on a person’s words, actions, and attitudes. It is desirable to have a good name before both God and man.

When we hear the names Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, or Job we think of people who have a good name. We know that this is because they were faithful to God.

*All of us have
the opportunity
to have a good
name also.*

All of us have the opportunity to have a good name also. It will happen for us if we live the kind of life that God has told us to live. Let us all make up our minds that we will live our lives so as to have a good name for ourselves.

Jesus said, 'Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me. There are many rooms in my father's house; I would not tell you this if it were not true. I am going there to prepare a place for you. After I go and prepare a place, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you can be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

THE LOST SHEEP



Jesus told many stories to help people understand what God wants and what his kingdom is all about. These stories are called parables.

In Luke 15 we read one of these parables referring to a man who owned 100 sheep. But one day he realized that one of his sheep was missing. He left the flock of 99 sheep and went off to search for the one that was missing.

*When one of God's
children goes off
into sin—if he
repents and comes
back to God—
there is great
rejoicing in heaven.*

When he finally found the missing sheep he put it on his shoulders, went home, and called his friends and neighbors to share the good news with them.

And what was Jesus teaching in this story? It was to make the point that when one of God's children goes off into sin—if he repents and comes back to God—there is great rejoicing in heaven. That tells us that not only are our own lives important to God... but that he wants each of us to encourage those who have left the Lord to come back...before it is too late!

The people who trust the Lord will become strong again. They will rise up as an eagle in the sky; they will run and not need rest; they will walk and not become tired. (Isaiah 40:31)

“TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?”



Crowds often came to hear Jesus as he went from place to place, teaching and preaching. They came for different reasons. Surely some came out of curiosity. Many came to be healed of all kinds of diseases and other physical problems. There were those who came for the food after hearing about Jesus feeding the crowds with free fish and bread.

But there were those who came for spiritual nourishment. Jesus spoke of wonderful blessings for those who would accept his message of the Kingdom—so long awaited by the Jewish people. Now a captive people under Roman domination, they were most anxious to see a renewal of the glory days of David and Solomon.

But their vision of what the new kingdom would be like was not at all the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. As it turned out, Jesus brought a message of self-denial, sacrifice, and changed hearts and lives.

Certainly it would all be very worthwhile, but the requirements were more than many people wanted to accept. As this became more apparent, multitudes of disciples turned away and followed Jesus no more.

In John 6:67, Jesus, seeing the crowds leave, turned to his 12 apostles and asked, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Peter gave a very thoughtful answer: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Now, some 2,000 years later, much the same situation still exists. We see people come to the church looking for a comfortable, non-demanding way of life. However, when they learn that true service to God requires some self-sacrifice and some cross-carrying, they decide to leave. But to whom do they go? All of us should make the decision to cling to Jesus and accept his message as he is the only one that has the words which provide eternal life.

*Jesus brought a
message of self-
denial, sacrifice,
and changed
hearts and lives*

REFRESHING THE SAINTS



The apostle Paul wrote a short letter to a Christian brother named Philemon. Among the things he wrote was a particular commendation of which we should take note. In Philemon, verse 7, he wrote these words, “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.”

*Every person needs
to feel that he is
doing something
worthwhile.*

One of the greatest joys of Christianity is the loving fellowship with others who share our faith in God. Everyone needs to have his heart refreshed from time to time. Everyone has opportunity from time to time to refresh the hearts of others. In fact, the very act of refreshing the heart of someone else is in itself refreshing!

Every person needs to feel that he is doing something worthwhile. And while it may not seem to be a big thing to encourage another brother or sister—it was a big enough for the apostle Paul to issue a special commendation for it!

Let us all look for ways to refresh the hearts of those around us!

“I know what I am planning for you”, says the Lord. “I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

MOTHERS AND GRANDMOTHERS



In Acts 16 we find a record of the Apostle Paul visiting the city of Lystra. There he met a young disciple named Timothy. He was a remarkable young man. Brothers in both Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul was so impressed with him that he wanted to take him along with him as he made his journey from city to city.

As we know, Timothy proved to be a faithful and valuable companion of Paul's, one whom Paul trained to be a preacher of God's message. We have two books, 1 and 2 Timothy, which contain messages from Paul to Timothy.

In 2 Timothy 1:5 we find these words, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and I am persuaded now lives in you also." These words give us an important clue as to why Timothy had become the godly person that he was. It was the faith that was in the hearts of both his mother and grandmother.

Seldom does anyone have more influence over a person than the mother—and sometimes the grandmother too. When both mother and grandmother focus on teaching a child godly principles, the chances are great that the child will have his life shaped in such a way as to be pleasing to God.

It is easy for parents—and grandparents—to become so caught up with other matters that they neglect the most important thing in a child's life—training to become godly. Mothers and grandmothers, consider this carefully! You only have one chance to train that child!

Seldom does anyone have more influence over a person than the mother—and sometimes the grandmother too.

THE GOLDEN TEXT



For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

We are all familiar with these famous words from John 3:16. They make it very clear that nothing is more important to God than saving those who are lost.

*If we are people
of God—and if
we have the mind
of Christ—we
will share their
concern for the lost.*

In another passage, Luke 19:10, we are told that Jesus came to earth “to seek and save” the lost.

As people of God we are deeply grateful that we benefit from God’s love and Jesus’ sacrifice for us.

But in considering the benefit to ourselves, we must not overlook another very important consideration. If we are people of God—and if we have the mind of Christ—we will *share* their concern for the lost. Is that a real priority for us...or do we feel content to accept salvation for ourselves...with little

effort to share it with others?

May we all show the Lord our appreciation by *sharing* his incredible gift!

If God is with us, no one can defeat us. (Romans 8:31)

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?



Being a Christian is more than what a person does...or does not do. Just as important is what one thinks. After all, our actions begin as thoughts. In order to control our actions, we must get control of our thoughts.

The Apostle Paul understood this very clearly. We find these words from him in Philippians 4:8:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

How can we focus our thoughts on these good things? Many of our thoughts are formed by what we see, what we hear, what we read, and by the people who are in our lives. One of the reasons to read the Bible daily is to focus our thoughts on what God wants. One of the reasons to have regular fellowship with others who honor the Lord is to have the influence of those who share our values.

We all know places to go, movies to watch, magazines to read, and people to associate with which will lead our thoughts away from what God wants. The choice is ours. Let us all make up our minds to devote our thoughts to what the Lord wants...so that we can be pleasing to him...not a disappointment to him.

*Many of our
thoughts are
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see, what we hear,
what we read, and
by the people who
are in our lives.*

WOOD, FIRE, AND SMOKE



Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts" (Proverbs 26:20-21). We must watch our tongue, and let our words be seasoned with salt.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

James stated it this way, "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

The Bible declares, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26).

We can conclude from these passages that God's wrath will be poured out on those persons who have evil tongues,.....and we need to take seriously the Lord's warnings.

THE WIDOW'S MITE



In Luke 21, we find a lesson from Jesus about giving. It is a lesson that shows us the kind of heart that pleases God.

One day Jesus was watching as people placed their contributions in the temple treasury. Some were wealthy and put in large amounts.

But one poor widow came by and put in two very small copper coins—certainly not worth very much. But Jesus pointed out that this was all she had to live on. For her it was a great sacrifice.

We need to ask ourselves this question: Is our giving to God a sacrifice—or do we only give him our leftovers.

*Is our giving to
God a sacrifice—
or do we only give
him our leftovers.*

Give yourselves completely to God. Stand against the devil, and the devil will run from you. Come near to God, and God will come near to you. (James 4:7-8)

MINISTERING SPIRITS



The role of angels in the Bible is a most interesting topic for study. They are mentioned over 200 times, from Genesis to Revelation.

The basic role of angels was as messengers. They often had other very specific assignments. For example, God sent an angel to guide the Israelites as they moved from Egypt. An angel blocked the path of Balaam's donkey.

Angels also were sometimes assigned the task of punishing the enemies of God—and even God's people when they turned to evil ways.

The question arises as to what angels do during our time. Does God have them working here on earth?

*God has this
invisible army of
spirits set to work
for our good!*

An intriguing answer to the question is found in Hebrews 1:14, which reads, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

To "minister" means to provide needed aid or help. "Those who will inherit salvation" refers to those faithful to God—true Christians. That means if we are part of God's people, we are among those who receive help from angels.

In our prayers we make many requests of God. Wouldn't it be fascinating to know how many times the Lord has assigned angels to come and provide the things we have asked for!

Do you suppose that when we get to heaven an angel might come up to us and ask, "Do you remember when you prayed for—whatever it might be—. Well, God sent me to take care of it for you."

It should be a source of comfort and delight to all of us to know that God has this invisible army of spirits set to work for our good!

LEARN IT...DO IT...TEACH IT



There is a passage in the Old Testament which uniquely sums up what God wants from those who would be his people. These words are found in Ezra 7:10:

For Ezra had devoted himself to the *study* and *observance* of the Law of the Lord, and to *teaching* it to Israel.”

Note three words in this verse: study, observance, and teaching. Ezra’s goal was to learn what God wanted, practice it in his own life, and then teach others what he had learned.

This is exactly what God wants today. No one can please God unless he makes it a point to find out what God wants! There is only one way to do this: read the Bible. Many depend upon the teachings of men which, sadly, often contain dangerously misleading information.

Knowing God’s will—important as this is—is not enough to please God unless a person *obeys* God’s instructions. Many know what is right, but fail to exercise the self-discipline which is necessary to live in compliance with God’s instructions.

For those who learn the commands of the Lord and dedicate themselves to their observance, there is one more step to be taken. God has one plan for his kingdom to spread: it is for his people to tell others what God wants.

Jesus’ purpose in coming to the earth was to “seek and save the lost.” He expects his people to “have the mind of Christ” and to “walk in his steps.” May all who read or hear this resolve to *learn* God’s will, *obey* it, and do our best to *teach* it to others.

Knowing God’s will—important as this is—is not enough to please God unless a person obeys God’s instructions.

THE MAN AT THE WINDOW



It was a terrible time for the Israelites. For many years the prophets had warned them to serve God rather than worship the idols of the pagan nations around them. The people, led by a succession of idolatrous kings, paid no attention to the prophets, but finally time ran out for them. The Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar, invaded the nation. The city of Jerusalem, including the temple, was destroyed. Many Jewish leaders were killed along with many others. Thousands were forced to walk hundreds of miles to far-off Babylon where they were to live as a captive people...for seventy years.

But there were a few Israelites who remained loyal to God despite all the terrible things that had happened. And, as he always does, God blessed those who were loyal to him. Some were even given important positions in the Babylonian government.

As we might guess, this led to a great deal of jealousy on the part of other Babylonian leaders. They tricked the king into issuing a decree that for 30 days no one could pray to anyone except the king. They knew that those loyal to God would disobey this order, and if they could catch a person praying to God they would report this person and see that he received the king's penalty—which was to be thrown in a den of lions!

One man continued to go to his room with windows facing the direction of Jerusalem. Three times daily he got down on his knees to pray to God. Perhaps looking in the window, his enemies saw him and reported him to the king, insisting that the king was required by law to carry out the sentence...although the king liked this man and did *not* want to have him killed, but the law was unchangeable and had to be carried out.

By now we all know who the man was. It was Daniel. We know that God sent an angel to protect him from the lions.

As we hear this story we should remember that the God of Daniel is the same God whom we serve—and that he *still* sends his angels to serve those who are faithful to him!

TIMOTHY



We first read about the remarkable young man Timothy in Acts 16. He had been trained in the scriptures by his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. He was converted by Paul on his first visit to the city of Lystra.

When Paul returned to Lystra, people began to tell him about Timothy. Paul was so impressed that he asked the young man to accompany him on his missionary journeys. In this way Paul trained Timothy to become an evangelist himself.

As we know, Paul suffered severely several times in his work for God. Timothy saw this and came to realize that as a minister of God he would also have to face suffering. We learn from Hebrews 13, verse 3, that he spent time in prison.

In the New Testament we have two letters which Paul wrote to Timothy—the books of First and Second Timothy. These letters reveal how dear Timothy was to Paul and how earnestly he urged him to carefully carry out the mission which the Lord had assigned to him.

The life of Timothy provides many important lessons for us, both from the standpoint of training by parents, as well as for learning by dedicated young people.

Paul was so impressed that he asked the young man to accompany him on his missionary journeys.

God, your ways are holy. No god is as great as our God. (Psalm 77:13)

TITUS



Timothy and Titus were two young men who worked with Paul and were trained by him. We know more about Timothy than about Titus. We have no information about the details of the conversion of Titus, but Paul refers to him as “my true son” in Titus 1:4. Paul entrusted him with a

*The faithful service
of Titus should
be an example
and inspiration
for all of us.*

number of important assignments, so we can see that he was knowledgeable and reliable.

One particular skill of Titus was the ability to deal with troublesome situations. Clearly he was forceful and was a man who commanded respect. Two examples are his dealing with the church in Corinth, and especially the church in Crete, where the presence of false teachers complicated his problems.

On important assignment of Titus was to appoint qualified men to be elders. In the book of Titus, Paul specified the kind of men who should be made leaders.

The faithful service of Titus should be an example and inspiration for all of us, and especially for the young men who may have a desire to make their lives count for the Lord.

*Those who are far from God will die;
you destroy those who are unfaithful. (Psalm 73:27)*

FRUITFUL BRANCHES



Jesus used many examples and illustrations to teach his people the lessons he wanted them to learn. For example, he compared his people to such things as workers in a vineyard—or as citizens of a kingdom—or as members of a family. His goal was always to help people to understand their relationship to God—and what God expects from them.

For as long as man has been upon the earth God has offered him a choice: obey his commands and be blessed...or disobey his commands and be punished. Surely there is no more important message in the Bible!

In John 5, Jesus compares himself to a vine. His followers are compared to branches. God the Father is the gardener. The main point of this illustration is to show that the branches are expected to bear fruit. In fact, Jesus said that the man (or branch) who remains in him “will bear *much* fruit.”

But then he warns:

“If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

Each person who considers himself a part of the Lord's church should examine his life. What fruit is he bearing?

Sometimes people think that as long as they are members of a church and attend services they are in a satisfactory relationship with God. NOT SO! There can be a beautiful leafy branch on a vine, but if it bears no fruit—of what value is it?

Each person who considers himself a part of the Lord's church should examine his life. What fruit is he bearing? Who is he helping to come to the Lord? What is he doing to advance the Lord's work?

There are many ways to bear fruit for the Lord. May we all dedicate ourselves to this purpose!

SLAVERY...OR FREEDOM?



Which do you prefer—being a slave, or being free? Freedom is better—right? Are you sure? What about both?

The Bible has a great deal to say about freedom and slavery. Not surprisingly, the biblical view is quite unlike the worldly view.

A person is a slave to whomever—or whatever—has mastery or control over him. We usually think that one who has become enslaved has done so against his will. But, as we shall see, that is not always the case.

Ordinarily we think of slavery as being one person enslaved to another person, but much of biblical teaching is about another kind of slavery—spiritual slavery. Jesus said (John 8:34) that “everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” As Paul said (Romans 3:23), *all* have sinned. Therefore *all* are slaves to sin.

*Unlike our old
slavery to sin, our
new slavery to
righteousness is
voluntary—and
provides only joy
and happiness.*

Paul also explained that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Unless one is freed from this sin-slavery, he is doomed to eternal death. And this is exactly the freedom which Jesus provides, as Paul explained in Romans 6:15-18. But notice that there is a new slavery. In verse 18 Paul wrote: “You have been set *free* from sin—and have become *slaves* of righteousness.”

Unlike our old slavery to sin, our new slavery to righteousness is voluntary—and provides only joy and happiness.

Those who belong to the Lord are *both* free...and a slave: free from the curse of eternal death—and slaves to a way of life which leads to eternity in heaven!

CONTINUAL PRAYER



In Thessalonians 5:17 Paul wrote “...pray continually...” (one translation reads “pray without ceasing”).

How can one pray “continually?” Did Paul mean for us to spend literally every waking moment in prayer? Obviously not—so what *did* he mean?

Paul understood one very important principle: a person gives the *most* thought to the things which are *most* important to him. As for Paul, there was no question concerning what was always on his mind—the Lord...and his work.

But that was Paul. What about us? How much attention does the Lord expect *us* to give to kingdom matters? Does the Lord not know that we need to work and earn money for food, clothing, and other necessities?

Indeed he does. But in Matthew 6:33 Jesus told us to “...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...” If we do this we are promised that our other needs will be met—just as the Lord met the needs of Paul.

We have no trouble engaging in frequent communication with people who are near and dear to us. If the Lord is near and dear to us we will have no trouble remaining in frequent communication with him.

How much do you pray? Do you pray “continually?” If not, surely it is time to take a close look at your relationship with the Lord—and make things right before it is too late!

*What about
us? How much
attention does the
Lord expect us to
give to kingdom
matters?*

BE AMONG THE FEW



For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it, but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it,” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Those who are true servants of God have always been in the minority. That was true in Noah’s day...and throughout Jewish history. It was true in the time of Jesus...and it is true today.

*“Lord, Lord, did
we not prophesy
in your name, and
in your name
drive out demons
and perform
many miracles?”*

We would like to think that everybody is okay—that most everyone will go to heaven. But the words of Jesus just quoted from Matthew 7 tell a far different story.

Certainly there are many who *think* they are going to heaven who will be greatly disappointed. In the same chapter Jesus said the following in verses 22-23: “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will say to them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers.’”

The lesson in this is clear: one should never take for granted that he is going to heaven! According to verse 21, *only* those who do the will of the Father in heaven will be saved eternally. The stakes are too high to ignore! No one can leisurely drift into heaven. Let us *all* be totally dedicated to knowing—and *doing*—the Father’s will. Then we will be among the “few.”

THE MEANING OF LOVE



Countless people have spoken and written on the subject of love, trying to define and explain it. But no one has done a better job of explaining love than the apostle Paul when he wrote the following words as recorded in 1 Corinthians 13.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

We know from the scriptures that God *is* love. We know that the greatest command we have from God is to love the Lord with all our hearts, minds, and strength. We are to love our brethren, our neighbors... and even our enemies.

Those of us who have made the decision to follow the Lord surely understand that it is impossible to please God unless we dedicate ourselves fully to the ways of love. We must make sure that our love is genuine and not just a matter of saying the right things.

How can we make sure that our love is genuine? There is no better test than to look back at Paul’s definition of love—and see if our love measures up to the biblical standard.

*We know that the
greatest command
we have from
God is to love
the Lord with all
our hearts, minds,
and strength.*

My whole being wants to be with the living God. (Psalm 84:2)

THE BIBLE



Everyone knows what a marvelous book the Bible is. The following words of wisdom by an anonymous writer provide a marvelous summary of the Bible's most outstanding benefits.

“This book contains...the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation and the doom of sinners. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions unchangeable.

*Read it to be wise,
believe it to be
safe, and practice
it to be holy.*

Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter.

“Here Paradise is restored, Heaven is opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand object, our good its design and the glory of God its end.

“It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of. Pleasure.

“It is given to you in life, will be open at the judgment, and will be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, rewards the greatest labor, and condemns all who trifle with its holy contents.”

*Praise the Lord, God our Savior, who helps
us every day. (Psalm 68:19)*

THE UNBELIEVING APOSTLES



In Mark 10:33-34 we read these words of Jesus to his twelve apostles, “‘We are going up to Jerusalem, he said. ‘And the son of man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death, and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him, and spit on him, flog him, and kill him. Three days later he will rise.’”

These apostles were the men whom Jesus had chosen to be trained to do his work after his return to heaven. They were the ones who knew Jesus best and who, we would think, would be his most reliable supporters. But, as we know, at the moment of Jesus’ arrest they scattered in fear. One of them—Peter—actually denied even knowing Jesus as he was being accused by the Jewish leaders.

After the crucifixion the dangers to the apostles seemed to be over. We would expect them to remember Jesus’ promise to rise on the third day. But... on the third day not one of the apostles believed Jesus enough to even show up at the tomb. The only ones who came to the tomb were three women...but they did not come to see a resurrected Jesus; they came to put spices on a dead body!

A most powerful, faith-building, change occurred when the risen Jesus showed himself alive to the apostles. When we see the dramatic change in these men’s lives we can have no doubt that Jesus really *did* rise from the dead and really *did* prove this fact to these doubting and disillusioned apostles...to the extent that from that time forward they became bold and courageous proclaimers of the gospel, even when it eventually cost the lives of most of them in martyrdom.

When we see the dramatic change in these men’s lives we can have no doubt that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

Today our faith in a resurrected Jesus has a solid foundation in the witness of all these men who knew Jesus too well to be deceived by an imposter. For this we can be thankful to God.

FOLLOW GOD'S WAYS



As one reads through the Bible he finds numerous examples of people who rejected the ways of God and followed their own ways. The results were always the same: they suffered for it. It is a lesson needed in every generation, including our own.

In Proverbs 3:5 we find these words: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” It is easy to obey God when it is what WE want to do—and when it makes sense to us. But God’s instructions do not always make sense to us—and are not always what we want to do.

The lesson begins early—in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of a certain fruit. Simple instructions. But the fruit looked good, and with a little encouragement from Satan they disobeyed God. We know how that turned out.

Abraham had waited many years to have a son through whom he was to have many descendants. But then God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. If Abraham had followed human reasoning, what would he have done? Would he not have at least argued with God? Did he not have a good argument? “God, how can I have descendants through Isaac...if I go and kill him?”

But Abraham did not rely on his own thoughts or feelings. He got up early in the morning to do exactly what God had told him to do...trusting all the time that God would work out things for good (in fact, we are told in the book of Hebrews that Abraham thought that God would raise Isaac from the dead!).

The Bible is full of examples of people who relied on God and did things which totally defied human reasoning. We know the stories of David against Goliath, of Gideon and his 300 men defeating massive armies, and such unreasonable things as marching around Jericho for seven days.

The question for us is whether WE trust God to take care of us when we go against human reasoning to do what God asks of us. May we always remember that God is just as faithful to bless us as he was in past ages.

SPIRITUAL NUTRITION



The Bible has been provided to us for our learning. When we find a warning in the Bible, it should certainly get our attention. Please note the following words from Hebrews 5:12-13:

“...Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.”

Each of us needs to examine himself. How long have we been Christians? How much have we advanced in our learning? Are we still sipping on spiritual milk? Does our study of God’s words go beyond listening to sermons and skimpy Bible readings?

Christianity is a teaching religion. No one becomes a Christian unless he is taught. No one is taught unless someone teaches. How many of us have trained ourselves to teach others?

We expect babies to drink milk, but after a while, we expect a child to grow into eating more solid food. If we see a 10-year-old still on a bottle, we are alarmed. But are we equally alarmed when we see one who has been a Christian for years, still on spiritual milk? What if we ourselves are such a one?

We expect babies to drink milk, but after a while, we expect a child to grow into eating more solid food.

We find these words in 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have.” Are you prepared to give an intelligent answer if someone asks you this? Try this question on one of your Christian friends this week.

Do you really have a desire to enrich your knowledge of the scriptures? Talk to someone who teaches. Help is available!

A MESSAGE FROM PSALMS



The Bible is full of teaching about what kind of people God wants us to be. Many scriptures point out how God blesses those who are faithful to him and what bad things are in store for the ungodly. Few, however do a better job in sending this message than the first Psalm, which reads as follows:

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
Or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night
He is like a tree planted by streams of water
Which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.
Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

Hopefully we will let the wonderful lessons from this Psalm sink into our hearts and inspire us to be among those who delight in the law of the Lord.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul,
all your mind, and all your strength. (Mark 12:30)*

GOD AND YOUTH



Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of your trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them.’”

These words from Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:1 express a very important message from God. The habits, attitudes, and values one develops in life begin in the earliest days of youth. Not only is this a sober message to parents, but also to young people as they reach the age when they are able to make decisions for themselves.

Church youth leaders work hard to influence young people to be dedicated to God, but these leaders are severely handicapped if parents have not started early to instill godly principles in their children. This includes not only what is taught in words, but also by models of godly living.

In the city of Lystra, Paul met a young man named Timothy who had been taught well by his mother and grandmother. Paul took Timothy under his wing and trained him to be a powerful servant of God.

Paul told Timothy, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young” (1 Timothy 4:12). Not only can young people be effective spokesmen for the Lord, but their lives of dedication can serve as powerful inspiration for other younger people—as well as tremendous encouragement for people who are older.

In both the pre-teen years and the teen years there is powerful peer pressure to be involved in things which are not spiritually beneficial. May all of us—both parents and friends of parents—be conscious of ways in which we can help direct our youth in the ways of the Lord.

In both the pre-teen years and the teen years there is powerful peer pressure to be involved in things which are not spiritually beneficial.

A FRIEND...OR A STRANGER?



In John 14, beginning in verse 2, we find these words:

“In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you with to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

With these words Jesus assured his followers that not only would he go away, but also that he would return.

Other passages tell us more about what Jesus will do when he returns. Acts 17:31 tells us about a most important assignment which he will have. The verse says, “For he (referring to God) will set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.” As we know, that man is Jesus.

*We should
welcome him in
as an honored
guest, continually
talking to him,
expressing our love
and appreciation.*

Various scriptures confirm that we will *all* stand before Jesus at the Judgment and will be required to give an account of how we have lived.

That leads us to this question: when we stand before Jesus at the Judgment, will we be facing someone whom we have taken into our lives as a close and loving friend—or will we face someone who is basically a stranger?

We find these words in Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Jesus is knocking at the door of each of our hearts. We should welcome him in as an honored guest, continually talking to him, expressing our love and appreciation. Then when our time comes to face him at the Judgment—we will be delighted to see an old friend. (If he is a stranger, there is still time to strike up a friendship!)

WHEN DO WE HELP?



In Luke 10, Jesus told a story of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers took all he had and beat him until he was half dead. Certainly he was in desperate need of help.

We know the story. A priest and a Levite, both of whom should have been men with a godly spirit, walked by on the other side of the road, leaving the poor man suffering alone.

As we know, a Samaritan—not one who was respected by the Jews—came along and took the man to an inn. There he treated and bandaged his wounds. He also made arrangements for the man to receive further care.

Jesus was teaching about having a heart of compassion. We may not meet a person who has been robbed and beaten, but we all have opportunities to help someone who is suffering in some way. Let us all have a heart of compassion like that of the Samaritan.

*Let us all have
a heart of
compassion
like that of the
Samaritan.*

*Our God is a God who saves us; the Lord God
saves us from death. (Psalm 68:20)*

HELP FROM GOD



God has always been ready to help his people. The Bible is full of examples of how God has shown his love for his people by helping out in all kinds of situations.

There are some things that we can do for ourselves. We should not expect God to do those things for us. We might not feel like washing the dishes or cleaning our room, but we can be pretty sure that God is not going to do that for us.

*If we only go to
God when we are
in trouble, but
ignore him the
rest of the time, he
may not be in a
hurry to help us.*

If we consider the lives of people like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, David, and many others, we see people who have depended on God for help—and who received the help they needed.

If we only go to God when we are in trouble, but ignore him the rest of the time, he may not be in a hurry to help us. We need to stay friends with God always, being faithful and obedient to him. Then we will see his blessings all around us.

All the angels are spirits who serve God and are sent to help those who will receive salvation. (Hebrews 1:18)

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN



In John 4, we find the account of Jesus traveling through Samaria. The Jewish people did not like the Samaritans very well and often avoided speaking to them. Jesus stopped at a well while his disciples went into town to buy food.

When a Samaritan woman came up to the well to draw water, Jesus asked her for a drink. The woman was surprised that a Jewish man would ask her this.

As we follow the story we see that the conversation led to an entire town hearing the story of Jesus, many of whom became believers.

Sometimes there are certain types of people that we might tend to avoid. But we never know who may be willing to hear the message of Jesus. The example of the Lord should remind us to be ready to share Jesus with everyone we meet.

The conversation led to an entire town hearing the story of Jesus, many of whom became believers.

Come to me all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your lives. (Matthew 11:28-30)

GOD'S PLANS



The following encouraging words are found in Jeremiah 29:11:

“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’“

*God also has plans
for those who do
not seek him with
all their hearts.*

These words, spoken many centuries ago, reflect God’s attitude to this very day toward his people. One of the most important messages in the Bible—a message demonstrated many times—is that God richly blesses those who are faithful to him.

The next two verses (12 and 13) provide a very important key to receiving God’s blessings:

“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

The key words here are “seek” and “with all your heart.” How often have we been half-hearted in our service to God, perhaps trying to get by with the minimum?

God also has plans for those who do *not* seek him with all their hearts. But we do *not* want to be part of *those* plans. Let us all give God *all* of our hearts... so we can be part of the *good* plans he has in mind.

CHASING THE DEVIL



Do you know that you can chase the devil? You can—and the Bible tells us how to do it! We find these words in James 4:7: “...RESIST the devil, and he will *flee* from you...” What does “flee” mean? It means that he will take off running!

But consider these words from 1 Peter 5:8: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” But Peter’s next words are: “Resist him, standing firm in the faith...”

So what are we to learn from this? The devil is very powerful and very dangerous...but we are not without a powerful defense...if we *choose* to use it.

And that is the big problem. The devil knows how to trap us. He knows what our weaknesses are and what the areas are where our resistance is weak. That is where he attacks.

James 4:8, the next verse after our first quotation, says this: “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” We have all seen movies or films of animals in which the young hurry to their mothers’ presence when danger approaches. They know that their mother will do their best to defend them.

We can take comfort in the knowledge that our God stands ready to defend us...IF we go to him—not just *go* to him, but *stay* near him. Staying near to God means staying in contact with him, mainly through frequent prayer and study of his message to us as revealed in the Bible. It is precisely these things that help build up our resistance to whatever the devil may choose to use to entrap us.

*We can take
comfort in the
knowledge that
our God stands
ready to defend us.*

When the devil tempted Jesus, the Lord always responded with a scripture. Our knowledge of the scriptures, especially those about God’s protection, can be a powerful defense when the devil comes after us. Are we concerned enough about our own spiritual safety to arm ourselves with God’s word? Hopefully we will all make sure that we stay close to God and his promises.

DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?



The story is in John 5. Jesus encountered a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. He was lying near a pool where a number of disabled people were gathered. Jesus asked the man “Do you want to get well?” which may seem like a strange question. Surely the man wanted to get well.

We can make a spiritual application to this situation. Just as Jesus could heal those sick physically, he is also the one who provides spiritual healing.

People who are lost in sin need spiritual healing. Do all such people really want to be made well spiritually?

*May we always
treasure the
spiritual health
that Jesus has
blessed us with!*

The man who was an invalid had probably lived all those years by receiving gifts from others. Maybe he would not want to be well and have to go to work for a living.

Many people who are living lives of sin actually like the way they are living. After all, there IS pleasure in sin—at least for a while. To be made well spiritually brings the responsibility of living a life dedicated to God, a life of self-denial. There is a cost to count.

Those of us who have come to Christ for healing have decided that the wellness which God provides is far better than the temporary pleasure of sin. May we always treasure the spiritual health that Jesus has blessed us with! May we be successful in convincing others that living for God is by far the best way to live!

*This is the day that the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad today. (Psalm 118: 24)*

WHY DID YOU DOUBT?



The story is in Matthew 14. The disciples were crossing a lake at night, fighting wind-driven waves. They saw someone walking toward them on the water. They were terrified, thinking it was a ghost.

But it was Jesus, who told them not to be afraid. Peter seemed to think it would be a neat idea to walk on water, so he asked Jesus to let him walk to him. Jesus told him to come. Peter began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But then Peter saw the wind and waves, became afraid, and started to sink. Jesus grabbed his hand and lifted him up. He then asked, “Why did you doubt?”

There is a lesson in this for all of us. While none of us is expected to walk on water, there are numerous promises of God to us which depend upon God’s power, things that we could never receive or accomplish on our own. The Bible tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. The Lord has great blessings for those who trust him—and do not doubt. May we all ignore the winds and waves of trouble which confront us and maintain a faith which opens the doors of the storehouse of God’s blessings!

*While none of us
is expected to walk
on water, there
are numerous
promises of God.*

*The Lord searches all the earth for people who
have given themselves completely to him. He wants
to make them strong. (2 Chronicles 16:9)*

BE CAREFUL



The Israelites saw God's power demonstrated many times—and in spectacular ways. They saw the ten plagues brought upon the Egyptians, including the death of all the firstborn people in each household. They saw the Red Sea opened, allowing them to pass through on dry land. Then they saw the Red Sea suddenly close, swallowing up the pursuing Egyptian army.

They also saw God provide water from a rock. They saw food, called manna, miraculously appear on the ground every morning for forty years. They saw God provide many quail to give them meat.

*We may think
that we could
never abandon
God, but just
remember these
words: be careful!*

These were only a small part of what God did to prove his power and protection for his people. And how did they respond? They continued to be rebellious people, disobedient and often turning to the worship of idols.

We know how this turned out. God's patience finally ran out. Except for Joshua and Caleb, none of the adults who left Egypt were allowed to enter the land that had been promised. Their dead bodies remained in the wilderness.

This occurred long ago. But the book of Hebrews speaks of the situation. In chapters 3 and 4 the writer reminds us of what happened to the Israelites and warns that we need to learn from the example of those people. For them the "promised land" was Canaan. But we also have a "promised land" which is heaven. In 4:11 we find these words:

Let us therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." (In verse 1 we find the words "be careful.")

We may think that we could never abandon God, but just remember these words: *be careful!*

SOWING AND REAPING



It is one of the most important principles in the Bible. Paul expressed it this way in Galatians 5:7-9: “A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

“Sowing” and “reaping” are, of course, agricultural terms. They refer to farmers who sow seed in their fields in order to raise crops to be harvested later. But we understand that Paul is referring to the way people live.

Jesus referred to this principle when he said things like, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

One principle of sowing and reaping is that, as a rule, one reaps a good deal more than he sows—whether good or bad. Many have learned—much to their regret—that what might seem like a small amount of sin can result in a large amount of guilt, regret, and misery. On the other hand, those who make it a point to do what pleases the Lord are delighted to see how generously He pours out blessings on them.

What do you want in your life—love, peace, kindness, mercy, happiness; those who want these things should see to it that they work to provide these things in the lives of others.

Above all, let us remember: if we do not want to reap it—we had better not sow it!

One principle of sowing and reaping is that, as a rule, one reaps a good deal more than he sows—whether good or bad.

THE PROMISE



Christianity is based on promises. God's children have been given many promises, such as the promise of forgiveness for our sins, the promise of God's presence in our daily lives, and the promise of God's unfailing love. But there is one big promise that always brings us joy and great anticipation. It is found in John 14:2-3:

“In my Father's house there are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

It is not possible for the human mind to comprehend how great this promise is. We measure things by time. We know that our lives here on Earth can last only so long. We see the effects of age on people as their bodies—and minds—

*We are told that
“eye has not seen”
and “ears have
not heard” what
God has in store
for his people.*

slowly deteriorate, leading to inevitable death. We also know that while there are many good things in our lives, there will also be many sad, disappointing, and even painful experiences along the way.

There are various scriptures that give us some idea of what it will be like in heaven. There will be no pain, no tears, and no disappointment. We are told that “eye has not seen” and “ears have not heard” what God has in store for his people. As one looks around at all the beauties of nature and notes the awesome magnitude of the universe he realizes what a powerful God we have. If all this beauty exists on an earth which will someday be destroyed, imagine what the Lord can prepare for a place where he lives and where he will dwell with his people for all eternity!

As children of God we must be constantly at work to be sure that we will remain faithful to God so as to share in his Great Promise—but also to encourage as many others as possible to share in it with us!

THE NEED TO LEARN



The writer of the book of Hebrews had some pretty stern words for his readers. Note these words from Hebrews 5:12:

“...though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food.”

These words were written to those who had become Christians, but had become lazy in their efforts to learn spiritual truths. They got through the First Principles study—and then stopped studying. They had enough time to learn enough to be able to teach others, but were not so equipped.

The scriptures are provided for our learning. They provide instructions for all ages, not just the first century. The expectations for those people are just as binding today.

In fact, we have far greater opportunities to learn. They did not have a New Testament as we do. We have far less excuse for failing to continue to study and learn.

The Great Commission makes it clear that Christianity is sustained only when those who have been taught, in turn teach others. When we take to heart what the Lord expects of us, we will apply ourselves diligently to a deeper study of the word.

Note these words from 1 Peter 3:15:

“...always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Are you fully prepared to do this today? If not, this is a wake-up call to get ourselves prepared.

Do you want to learn more? In this church there are qualified teachers more than ready to teach any who want to learn. Why not take advantage of this?

INVISIBLE SERVANTS



In Hebrews 1:18 we find these intriguing words: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”

The Bible contains numerous references to angels through the ages. In most cases angels served as messengers of the Lord. In other cases they were assigned to perform specific tasks. It will be remembered that angels not only warned Lot and his family to leave Sodom before that city was destroyed by fire, but that they persisted in hustling them out of the city when they seemed to be in no hurry to leave.

*The Lord is
all-powerful.
Certainly he can
accomplish his
purposes in any
way he chooses.*

The Lord is all-powerful. Certainly he can accomplish his purposes in any way he chooses. It is also clear that he has often chosen to use his innumerable host of angels to do various things which he wants done.

The passage in Hebrews makes it clear that angels continue to serve “those who will inherit salvation”—that is, those of us who have become children of God. It is both intriguing and encouraging to realize that even at this very moment there may be angels active in our individual lives providing answers to our prayers—prayers that the Lord has promised to hear and answer.

Let us all be thankful to the Lord that he has chosen to pour out his favor on us...and that he has assigned his army of assistants to come to our aid!

*God loved the world so much that he gave his one
and only son so that whoever believes in him may
not be lost, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD



As one studies the life of apostle Paul and all the suffering he went through, he is amazed that a person could keep going—always remaining faithful to God. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-26 Paul related a number of his hardships:

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been in danger from rivers, in dangers from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger in the sea, and in danger from false brothers.”

How many of us would give up if we were called upon to endure so much suffering for our faith? So how did Paul manage to remain strong and faithful? In 2 Timothy 4:16-18 Paul talks about an experience during one of his times in prison. In doing so he reveals the real secret of his strength:

“At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.”

Note that Paul said “But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.” Was the Lord actually visible to Paul...or did he speak to him audibly? We do not know, but clearly Paul was fully assured of the presence of Jesus—and that was all the encouragement he needed.

In the 23rd Psalm David rejoiced in the presence of God, protecting him in dangerous times. In the Great Commission Jesus promised to “be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

In the life of every Christian there are difficult times, whether through pain, heartbreak, or some other misery. Each of us should keep ourselves close to the Lord and take advantage of the comfort and strength which he makes available to us.

EASTER MORNING



Easter is a holiday on which, for many years, our society has celebrated the resurrection of Jesus (of course Christians celebrate the sacrifice of our Lord far more often than once a year). Perhaps it would be helpful to take a closer look at what *really* happened that morning.

Jesus had repeatedly told his apostles that he would suffer, die, and rise from the dead on the third day. Therefore we would expect the apostles to be at the tomb that morning to welcome Jesus—right? But no apostles would be showing up—only a small group of women.

The women walked along slowly, sad and broken-hearted. They were still in shock from what they had witnessed two days earlier. They had seen the most cruel and brutal treatment to a person whom they loved—one who had done only good to everyone he met.

*They were coming
with spices to be
put on a terribly
beaten corpse, as
was the custom
of the day.*

These women were not coming to see someone alive. They were coming with spices to be put on a terribly beaten corpse, as was the custom of the day.

But there would be no spices applied that day! Instead, their great sorrow would be changed to joyful excitement. The slow walk would change to great haste as they hurried to tell their friends the great news. Their beloved Jesus was alive!

That same Jesus who was their friend is also our friend. And because he is still alive today, Easter is not a day to mourn death—but rather a day to celebrate a life!

*I can do all things through Christ, because he
gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)*

HOW TO PLEASE GOD



Everyone begins the Christian life as a spiritual infant. It is God's plan for each of us to grow from spiritual infancy into full maturity. How can we go about doing that?

The apostle Peter outlined an excellent plan in Peter 1:5-9:

“For this very reason make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

For if you possess these qualities in *increasing* measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But if anyone does *not* have them he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.”

It would be good for each of us to post this list in a place where we see it often...so that we can be reminded of how we can grow in a way that pleases God.

*But if anyone does
not have them
he is nearsighted
and blind...*

Come near to God, and God will come near to you. (James 4:8)

THE DAY OF THE LORD



The Bible contains a number of very sobering passages, words which should receive our most serious attention. Sometimes we need to be reminded of some very critical events in our future.

The following words are from 2 Peter 3:10-12:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by a fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

From these facts Peter goes on to issue this important admonition:

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and the elements will melt in the heat.”

Then we find these words in verse 14: “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with him.”

It has been a long time since Peter wrote these words. Sometimes we might get a little careless thinking that the Lord will not do what he promised. May our faith *not* become weak. May we live the kind of lives that will enable us to *welcome* the Lord’s coming—and not live in terror of his destructive power!

VETERAN'S DAY



(This message was delivered by eleven-year-old Armando Carlos at a Veteran's Day memorial service in 2008 at Lancaster Cemetery in California. In attendance was a member of the Lancaster City Council who was so impressed that she asked Armando to deliver the speech before a meeting of the city council...which he did.

Also in attendance was the editor of the local newspaper. He came by after the ceremony and asked for a copy of the speech. In the next day's paper he quoted portions of the speech, calling it the "most dynamic" presentation of the day.

Other messages in this section were presented before the Lancaster City Council.)

One of the most important things in the world is gratitude. But far too often we get so busy in our day-to-day lives that we don't take the time to remember all the things for which to be grateful—or to express our gratitude to those who have done so much for us.

Thankfully this day is an exception. It is a day for both remembrance and gratitude. It is easy for us to take for granted the blessings of living in this prosperous and peaceful country—forgetting how it came to be that way.

But today we honor those who know very well how this all came about. They know what it means to go to the far corners of the world and put their lives on the line in mortal battle against enemies who would love to destroy our way of life.

*But today we honor
those who know
very well how this
all came about.*

Some of those came back...and some did not. Many lie at rest in the grounds around us here today. It is too late to express our gratitude to them. Others are alive here in our midst today. To them we say a heartfelt...*thank you!*

May each of us renew our determination to not only be more grateful people, but to freely and openly express our gratitude to the men and women who have risked *their* lives...so that we do not have to risk ours!

WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?



In 1984, Country music artist Lee Greenwood released a hit record titled *God Bless the USA*. The song seemed to stir a wave of patriotism across the country.

But what is an American? If you ask what is a German, or a Russian, or a Japanese we might have some idea what the person looks like. But when you ask “What is an American?”, there is no single answer or idea of what the appearance is. As we all know, except for the Native Americans we are a nation of immigrants. My mother is from Chile. Last month Matthew Ramirez spoke here. His mother is from Canada. Before that were Armando Carlos and Karla Chirino, both of whom have parents from El Salvador.

So, what is an American? As suggested by Lee Greenwood’s song, one has to look deeper to find the meaning of being an American. It goes far beyond skin color, cultural background, or language. We learned in school much about the beginning of our nation...about the ideals and principles which were impor-

*few things are
more attractive
to them than the
great opportunities
for a better life in
this rich, beautiful,
prosperous, land
of opportunity.*

tant enough for our forefathers to fight and die for. We learned about how important freedom was to those who knew first-hand what it was like to live *without* freedoms that we now take for granted.

There are many reasons why people come to this country. But few things are more attractive to them than the great opportunities for a better life in this rich, beautiful, prosperous, land of opportunity. Embracing the values of America is a very large part of becoming an American.

One of those values is the right of our people to have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. That is where you on this Council come in. You have been chosen by the people of this community who have entrusted to you the responsibility to continue this tradition. May God bless you as you dedicate yourselves to this end. (Delivered by David McPherson to the Lancaster City Council.)

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO AMERICA?



Our country is undergoing many changes. Some of these changes are good—but some of them are very disturbing to those of us who have a strong faith in God.

Within recent years there have been more and more attacks upon long-held traditions that many of us hold dear—such as public display of nativity scenes during the Christmas season. A small—but loud—minority has continued to oppose all kinds of public recognition of God. Some even want to remove “In God We Trust” from our money.

Our country has always supported the principle of separation of church and state. But from history we learn that this refers to the freedom of people to worship as they please without control or interference from the government. It *never* meant that the government should oppose religion or try to stop it.

Our local city council begins each meeting with a word of prayer. How long will it be before non-believers try to stop this practice? I hope that you will stand strong—and that when my age group becomes adults this right will still exist.

We depend on people like you to keep our freedom of expression alive.

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each meeting with
a word of prayer.
How long will
it be before non-
believers try to
stop this practice?*

MEMORIAL DAY



Everybody loves a holiday. It is very nice to have a day off work to spend with the family or to do a variety of fun things—even if it is just to sleep late.

But sometimes we tend to forget the real significance of the special day—why it was established in the first place.

How many of us remember the origin of Memorial Day? We might appreciate it a bit more if we are reminded of its origin and history.

What we call Memorial Day was earlier known as Decoration Day. No one is exactly sure when or where it began. The first official proclamation of Memorial Day was by General John Logan in May, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

Memorial Day is just what the name implies—it is a day to remember—and not only to remember, but also to appreciate!

By 1890 Memorial Day was recognized by all northern states, but the South did not join in until after World War I. After that the day was changed to honor not only Civil War soldiers, but soldiers who died in any war.

For some time the date for Memorial Day was to be May 30th. But in 1971 Congress set the last Monday in May as the official date.

Many people use this day to place flowers on the graves of not only fallen soldiers, but also the graves of other loved ones.

Memorial Day is just what the name implies—it is a day to *remember*—and not only to remember, but also to appreciate! Hopefully all of us will find it in our hearts to do more than relax in the backyard on this special day, but will take some time to reflect on the blessings we enjoy based on a heavy price paid by many before us.

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER



We have all heard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. But how much do we know about this highly honored national monument?

It all began in 1921 when an unidentified soldier killed in France in World War I was given a special tomb in the cemetery. Since then unknown soldiers from World War 2, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam have also been interred there.

There are very special and strict rules for the service of those who are on guard at the cemetery. They are all part of the 3rd U.S. Infantry. They must be from 5' 10" to 6' 2" in height with waistlines not to exceed 30 inches. They serve a 2-year tour of duty, living in barracks under the tomb. They are to drink no alcohol—on or off duty—for the rest of their lives. For the first six months of duty they are to speak to no one or watch television. Their off-duty hours are to be spent studying the lives of all those buried in the cemetery and they are to memorize who they are and where they are buried.

A soldier takes exactly 21 steps as he walks in front of the monument. He then pauses for 21 seconds before walking in the other direction (this is related to the 21-gun salute often given to special dignitaries). Guards are changed every 30 minutes.

The tomb has been guarded continuously, 24 hours per day, since 1930. In 2003 permission was given to suspend duty during the worst of Hurricane Isabelle, but the men refused to do so.

After finishing their two years each soldier is given a wreath pin for wearing on his lapel. He must give this up if he ever breaks the rules to which he originally agreed.

Countless of this country's soldiers have given their lives through the years in defense of our country, frequently never found or identified. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is one small way for us to express the appreciation of a grateful people.

LABOR DAY



All of us know about Labor Day. It is the last holiday of the summer—the last long weekend. In some places it signals the beginning of the new school year.

But there is much more to Labor Day. In 1894 Congress ruled that the first Monday in September would be set aside to honor the workers of America. This declaration followed a long period of struggle for countless workers who had experienced decades of mistreatment.

There was a rapid growth in the number of factories in the late 1800's as the Industrial Revolution took hold. The average worker worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to make a basic living. Child labor was common. Wealthy industrialists routinely took advantage of workers in their factories. There were repeated efforts to help the workers improve their lot through organizing into unions, which would give them some bargaining power.

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As many of us may remember from our history classes, there was fierce opposition to the efforts to unionize workers, not only from the rich manufacturers, but often from government law enforcement officers.

Slowly and painfully, workers gained more and more rights and were able to make improvements in their working conditions. Today we understand that the wonderful standard of living which we enjoy is largely the result of the great achievements of a great army of hard-working Americans.

So as we enjoy backyard barbecues or celebrate in some other way, let us take a moment to reflect and appreciate the generations of often-struggling workers who did so much to make our good life possible.

PRIDE IN AMERICA



What are your feelings about America? We know that we have enemies who hate our country, but it is not unusual to hear our own people being critical of America. Sometimes even some of our elected officials publicly speak out critically of our nation.

Those of us who are proud of our country understand that it is not perfect—just as people are not perfect. But we believe that there is a basic goodness in our people which continues to influence the development of an ever-better society.

Many of our people make no apology for their patriotism. A few years ago Lee Greenwood inspired the nation with a song with the words “I’m Proud to Be an American.” It reminded us of the advantages of being a free people.

Earlier a song by Merle Haggard expressed his respect for the American flag and for the country itself. He went so far as to say, “When you’re running down our country you’re ‘walking on the fighting side of me.’”

It is easy to be critical. But hopefully we will all be proud of our country—and dedicate ourselves to making it better.

*“When you’re
running down
our country
you’re ‘walking
on the fighting
side of me.’”*

INDEPENDENCE DAY



July 4th, 1776. It is a date learned by all American school children. They also learn the term “Declaration of Independence.”

But what does “independence” mean? It is one thing to learn the word, but something different to understand the full significance of the term.

Many American children are born into families which have lived in this country for generations—perhaps all the way back to colonial times. In these families there is a heritage of understanding and appreciating the country’s history and the good things in their lives which have resulted from the dedication and sacrifice of those who have gone before.

*We all know
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over the world*

But there are many young Americans whose heritage is different. Those of us who are of Latino background also have an independence story. For us the independence was not from an oppressive British government, but from an oppressive Spanish government. In both cases the blessings of liberty are sweet.

We all know that it is very hard to define an “American.” We are a melting pot of people from all over the world. Countless of these people came from countries in which oppression was a way of life.

So regardless of where we or our families came from, we can all join together to celebrate the wonderful blessings of liberty, freedom, and independence which are brought to our remembrance by this special day.

THE FOURTH OF JULY



The Fourth of July! What thoughts do those words bring to mind? Picnics? Backyard barbecues? Baseball games? Parades? Fireworks? A day off work?

Maybe all of these things...and more. Sometimes we become so interested in these things that we tend to forget what this special day is about.

The Fourth of July is known as Independence Day. We all learned in our history classes in school what this day is about. We learned of the long struggle with England as our country tried so hard to be free to live our lives as we chose to live—freedom from all kinds of unfair treatment from a government thousands of miles away.

We know that we finally had to go to war to get the freedoms we felt we deserved. It was called the War for Independence, also known as the Revolutionary War.

We know what the outcome was. We honor to this day names like Patrick Henry, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and others who put their lives on the line for ideas in which they believed.

It is great to have fun on the Fourth of July. But let us all take a little time on this day to remember and appreciate not only the hard-won freedoms that we enjoy, but also that brave generation whose courage and hardships helped make it possible.

*We know that
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GOD BLESS AMERICA



God bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her and guide her, through the night with the light from above. “From the mountains, to the prairie, to the ocean white with foam. God bless America, my home sweet home.”

These are words to a song we have heard and loved all our lives. But have we realized that this song is really a prayer? It is a request addressed to God—a request for blessings on our nation.

*We live in a time
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many sources.*

And certainly our nation has been wonderfully blessed. The whole world recognizes us as the greatest nation on earth. It is a dream of countless millions of people to come here and enjoy the blessings we so often take for granted.

We live in a time when not only our nation, but God himself is under attack from many sources. Now, more than ever, we need to be alert to the dangers we face—and to dedicate ourselves to resisting the forces that would destroy us.

Battles were fought in order to give our nation its start. Battles will be needed to keep it alive. May God bless us as we strive to preserve the country we hold so dear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marion Owens has been a Bible teacher for all of his adult life. A graduate of Harding University (B.A, M.A), he retired in 2004 after 50 years of public school teaching. He currently resides in Lancaster, CA, with his wife Tommie.

For a number of years Marion has specialized in training teens and pre-teens to speak publicly, primarily in church settings, but also for a variety of other occasions. His students have spoken for such events such as Fourth of July celebrations, Memorial Day observances, Veterans Day events, and others, including presentations before meetings of the Lancaster City Council.

Marion has said that he prepares messages for “youth to present—but for adults to hear.” Through the years hundreds of people have been impacted by these presentations. Believing that others can be impacted for good by these messages, Marion decided to collect a number of them into one volume, making them available to a wider audience.

