

# **BETWEEN THE HEDGES**

**Hiding Places for God's People**

**by**

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Placed near the end of the book of Joshua is a fascinating comment. The writer has been recounting, for almost eight chapters, how the newly conquered Canaanite territory was to be divided among the tribes of Israel. He described their complete success, their total domination of the land. Then the Holy Spirit inspired the author to write, "Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (Joshua 21:45).

Years later Joshua gave his farewell address to the people. He declared, "You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Joshua 23:14).

Peter pointed out that God "has given us his very great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4). Paul told the Corinthian Christians "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The writer of Psalm 119 stated, "Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises" (vs. 140, 148).

And yet that is not always the case with God's people. Psalm 106 recounts God's deliverance of His people from Egyptian bondage and their escape through the Red Sea. The author of the Psalm recalls, "The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them survived. Then they believed his promises and sang his praise. But they soon forgot what he had done..." (Psalm 106:11-13).

Dwight L. Moody said, "If you would spend a month feeding on the precious promises of God you wouldn't be going about complaining how poor you are. You would lift up your head and proclaim the riches of His Grace, because you couldn't help doing it!"

*Between the Hedges* is a study of selected promise areas from God's Word. His promises are publicly recorded. He boldly invites us to sample them and see if they are true. He wants us to live in them, to hide in them. His reputation is on the line each time one of His children dares to personally appropriate those promises. The Bible is full of promises for those who seek after God, and each of them tells a little more about Him and His love for us. God gave us His Word of honor.

## Chapter One

### AN INVISIBLE PROTECTIVE SHIELD

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

We've heard that old saying countless times, so much, in fact, that we accept it as an axiom. But, when they get going, where do the tough go?

Arnie arrived home just ahead of a thunderstorm. Big drops of rain were already splattering on the ground as he parked his car in front of his house and dashed for the front door. The skies were dark, the wind had picked up and low, rolling thunder echoed through the coming storm. Sharon, his six-year-old daughter was at her customary place, her nose pressed into the picture window, watching for her daddy to come home. The strain of the day washed away, like it did every evening as Arnie gathered his little girl into his arms and nuzzled her face. His beard was more like a five o'clock eclipse than a five o'clock shadow and it tickled Sharon's face as he rubbed it

against her. Sharon laughed with genuine pleasure and then wriggled out of her daddy's arms.

Sharon ran down the hall and into her bedroom while Arnie's wife, Natalie, welcomed her husband home. Arnie and Natalie walked into the living room and the comfortable evening ritual continued, each partner telling the other about their day, catching each other up on happenings at home and at work. Outside the skies were now almost black and the rain was falling in earnest. Without warning a bolt of lightening crackled through the storm and struck a transformer on an electrical pole outside. The wet air sizzled with electrical discharges and exploded with the fury of the unleashed power. All the lights immediately went out on the entire block.

A blood curdling scream pierced the momentary silence and Sharon ran, terrified, into the living room. She crossed the room in large leaps and hurled herself into her father's arms, sobbing hysterically. Panting with fear, Sharon cried, "Daddy, I lied to you yesterday when you asked if I had eaten more cookies than Mommy said I could. And I took the bottle away from my baby brother and made him cry. And I broke Mommy's favorite glass. And I spilled finger paint in kindergarten last week." And for several moments a torrent of confessions poured out.

Arnie and Natalie held their little girl as close as they could, repeating over and over, "It's okay, honey. You're safe. Nothing can hurt you. It's okay."

Although the storm did not calm down, gradually Sharon's racing heart did. Within a few minutes she hugged her parents, slipped out of their embrace and went back to her room.

"What brought on all of that confession?" Arnie asked.

“I think it was our Bible story this morning,” Natalie answered. “We were talking about the Flood and God’s judgment on unrepentant sinners. I think Sharon was clearing things up so she could get aboard the next Ark!”

“Well, I’m glad that she found a place to hide in our arms,” Arnie laughed, “until the storm inside of her blew over.”

When the going gets tough, we all need a place to hide.

People hide everywhere and anywhere.

Dan is a high school senior. Three years ago his grade point average was 3.8, and he was the star shortstop on his high school baseball team. Even as a sophomore, pro scouts were watching him play. He had great range and soft hands. At the plate he was awesome. Everyone knew, that with two more years of eligibility, he would break every state record for offensive production. He was what is known as a “can’t miss” prospect, a certain big league ball player. Today Dan’s GPA is 2.3 and he no longer plays baseball. Dan is hiding — in a marijuana habit. His big brother regularly used weed and Dan wanted to be just like him. The fact that his brother was arrested for possession with the intent to distribute did not deter Dan. Because of his exposure to marijuana, and the people who sell it, Dan has also tried LSD. He knows people who do crack, and he is thinking about trying to score.

Mary is the president of the garden club, heads the Women’s League, and supports the local hospital’s fund-raising drives. She drives an imported luxury car, wears the latest fashions and is always tastefully adorned with gold and diamonds. But Mary is hiding — in alcohol. She doesn’t really like vodka, but it leaves no tell-tale scent on her breath and so she liberally laces all of her drinks, from coffee to iced tea, with it. Mary was always a social drinker, but when her husband hired a striking young secretary, half Mary’s age, and when he started wearing the lingering scent of another

woman's perfume, the drinking began in earnest. Her husband says her drinking has driven him into the willing arms of his young paramour, and she says she drinks to numb the pain. Who is right and who is wrong no longer matters. It has become a self-destructive cycle. Mary is in a maze of hopelessness and in her alcoholic stupor she could not see the way out if she were standing right in front of it.

Sandy is in law enforcement, a plain clothes detective. He began as a beat cop, but the detective's shield was always his goal. He landed a prime assignment in vice, a sure way to a Lieutenant's badge and success within the force. His arrest record is exemplary, his conviction record is the envy of the precinct. The Chief of Police is known to have his eye on this up-and-coming cop. Unfortunately, Sandy is hiding — hiding in the same underworld of pornography and prostitution he tries to police. Sandy is smart enough not to do anything in his hometown, but his addiction is fueled by porn's easy access through his personal computer. He is a member of dozens of adult sites and user groups. When he goes out of town, and it seems lately, that his investigations take him out of town a lot, he has several regular girls he visits. He knows the kinky sex gets wilder and more dangerous all the time, but he can no longer control himself.

Roger is one of the most well-respected men in town. He pastors the leading church in the community. Always in demand at community events, he is close to being the city's pastor. When he took his current assignment, the church was closed, a "For Sale" sign driven into the front lawn of the property. With only two or three solid contacts, Roger began to work, and work hard. He visited day and night. He was always on call. Both local hospitals list his name in the emergency room as the person to call when a seriously injured person wants spiritual counsel. Roger does not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, shoot up on illegal drugs, or use pornography. But

Roger is hiding — in prescription medicine. The long hours, the constant demand have worn the 35-year-old pastor to the breaking point. So his doctor prescribed some medication. But at night, Roger takes increasing numbers of over-the-counter sleeping pills. The first thing in the morning, every morning, Roger puts on a pot of coffee and swallows a handful of capsules. As certainly as any addict, Roger is hooked and out of control.

But those aren't the only hiding places.

Sharon hides in religion. At break she reads a Christian book or listens to a praise tape. She is very generous with unwanted “spiritual” advice. Quick with a scripture for any occasion, Sharon is censorious, demanding perfection of everyone, constantly pointing out the faults of her friends and co-workers. They are all worldly, and, in Sharon’s words, “Will split hell wide open.”

Bob and his wife have two babies, one 14 months old, the other has been in the family for only two months. The dirty diapers, 2 a.m. feedings, the colic, the constant demand for attention is more than this college graduate can cope with. And to top it off, his wife never has any time for him. So Bob hides in his work, he never turns down overtime, and constantly takes extra projects. “It is,” he says, “the only place he can find peace and quiet.”

There are so many places to hide. Some of them are destructive, some just convenient, but for many of us they are shelters from difficulties and problems which, if they do not increase, at least never let up.

### **HIDING IN THE HEART OF LOVE**

Job was a man who was unaccustomed to hiding places. If the legends about a man who had a golden touch had originated in his neighborhood, Job’s name would probably spring to our minds instead of King Midas. A patriarch of the Old

Testament, he was a lover of God, a devoted family man, a leader in his community, and incredibly wealthy. The record of his life begins simply. His unnamed biographer says, “In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). Now a good writer of biographies is careful to identify his sources when he shares intimate details and Job’s biographer is a good one. The source of that incredible statement is none other than the Lord God Almighty. In an unusual setting and under almost unbelievable circumstances, God holds this man up for approval and says, “There is no one like him in the earth” (Job 1:8). God was proud of his servant Job. “He is an upright man,” God said, “a mature man. He fears me,” God said, “he shuns evil” (The King James Version uses the word “escheweth.” Step into a crowded elevator and stay that real loud. I’ll bet you, somebody says, “God bless you!” or “Gezhundheit!” Neither of those responses are a translation of the Hebrew word, but it will give you a rough picture of what Job thought about evil).

His biographer records, “[Job] was the greatest man among all the people of the east” (Job 1:3). But the biography has barely started his account when he points to a storm that will be devastating, but now it is barely visible on the horizon: “now there was a day.” And what a day it was! Job was a man under attack, but he did not know it yet. “Job was an actor,” the devil said, “a hypocrite, a wearer of masks.”

“The only reason Job was serving God, the devil said, “was because God was blessing his life.”

“Without those blessings, Job would not bless God,” the devil said.

This is the ultimate slander, and it touches God before it touches Job. In defense of his own honor and the honor of his servant, God allows Satan to attempt to prove his charge. Satan accused that Job was in God’s protection, but when the



Adversary left the presence of the Almighty that day, he was operating in God's limitation. God permitted the adversity – in fact, it could not come without his permission. And Satan went to the full extent of his rope.

It took the writer of Job's story barely 200 words to describe what happened next. If you inhale sharply, you can read it out loud using only four breaths:

*One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" (Job 1:13-19).*

A few days later, it happened again. Satan said, “Sure Job still holds onto his integrity because you haven’t let me touch him. It’s been tough losing his children, his grandchildren (some commentators think the meaning of the word ‘messenger’ in the paragraph above means just that), and all of his wealth, but he is still untouched. Let me at him and he’ll sing a different tune!”

And God, mysteriously, without explanation, agrees. This time you don’t even need a deep breath. The attack, devastatingly thorough, was over quickly: “So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head” (Job 2:7).

What is the reason behind this unprecedented attack on one single truster of God? What provoked Satan so much, what stirred him to unleash a hellish attack unlike anything ever sanctioned on the life of one individual in all of recorded history? Satan was furious because Job had a hiding place, a place where he was safe from all that hell or the world or calamity or illness could do to him. It is that simple.

Here is what Satan said to God about Job. Read it and weep:

*“Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land” (Job 1:9-10)*

To better understand Job’s place of protection and safety (and ultimately our own) it is necessary to understand what the Bible means by the word “hedge.” The Hebrew word means to protect, as in defending a house or a farm that is enclosed with palisades (long, strong stakes pointed at the end and set close with the others). The idea as it is expressed in Job 1:10 is that of making a fence around Job and his possessions to guard them from danger. The Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old

Testament) describes Job's protection as a fortified encampment in a war. The Syrian and Arabian versions of the Old Testament ask, "Hast thou not protected him with thy hand?" The Chaldee states, "Hast thou not protected him with thy word?" The sense of the whole passage is, that Job was eminently under divine protection, and that God had kept Job, his family, and his property from plunderers.

When my brother, Kyle, and I were boys, we frequently played with imaginary toys — ray guns, fire bursts, and other weapons of attack. Kyle always had a defense. He would call out, "Invisible protective shield, and you can't have one!" That was the end of the game. This shield covered him completely. It went higher than any weapon I could use against him. I could not get deep enough to come up underneath of him. And as far to the right or the left as I could imagine, my little brother's invisible protective shield protected him. Thinking back on it now, I realize that as many times as we played that game, I never called "invisible protective shield" first. He always had it, and he always won. I never figured it out.

Well, when it came time to attack Job, Satan figured it out, but God had already called "invisible protective shield." No matter where Satan looked, there was no way through the defensive screen which God had established around this solitary man who trusted the Almighty. Are you looking for a place to hide? Do you ever wish you had Kyle's invisible protective shield? Do you wish there was a hedge that you could run to and know that you, like Sharon, when she jumped into her Daddy's arms during a fierce thunderstorm, were safe? Have you ever held a child whose heart was racing because of a nightmare and you comforted that little one by say, "Honey, I won't let anything happen to you"? Do you ever long for someone to make that promise to you?

Great news! God has made that promise. There are many hedges in the Bible. There are many places to hide. Let me tell you about a handful.

### **Hiding Place Number One: A Landing Place.**

Scientists have discovered an interesting phenomenon in the birth cycle of rats which shows God providing extra care for one of his simpler creatures. Sixteen days before the mother rat has her baby, her threshold of pain, her ability to withstand pain, is raised. Two days before her baby is born, it is raised again. Now, to paraphrase Jesus, you are of more value than many rats! In the same majestic manner God provides an extra threshold of pain for a rat that is going to have a baby, he provides for the threshold of pain in our lives so we can take whatever comes. God promises he will not allow circumstances to exceed our personal ability to resist. He promises he will always provide an escape route.

### **Hiding Place Number Two: Bugs On My Christmas Tree.**

How could a loving God possibly allow tragedy? What possible virtue could there be in such occurrences? If he is God, could he not have intervened? Of course he could. Then, why does he let them happen? Why does a God who is omnipotent, and therefore able to prevent suffering, allow suffering? Why does a God who is merciful, and therefore willing to prevent suffering, allow suffering? Why does he allow suffering in the lives of those who have done nothing to deserve it? If the different situations we face are tests, why does God have to choose such difficult questions? Those are basic questions, woven from the fabric of life. Let me suggest one possible answer and then let us explore it together: God allows tragedy and trouble because he loves us.

### **Hiding Place Number Three: Home.**

Would it seem strange if you heard Jesus say, "Do not let your heart be troubled," and your heart, at that moment was not troubled?

Jesus did not promise an untroubled life, but He did offer the possibility of an untroubled heart. “Let not your hearts any longer be troubled,” Jesus said. “Don’t let your inner life roll like a storm tossed sea,” Jesus said. Life is full of difficulties. There are burdens to be carried, obstacles to overcome, foes to be conquered, battles to be won. “But,” Jesus said, “you can do it in confidence and with inner peace.” The battlefield may be enveloped with noise, but our souls can be fortified in peace. The message is, “Let not your hearts be troubled,” and the Speaker is the Author and Finisher of our faith. With the peace of God in our hearts, the weakest of us is more than a conqueror.

#### **Hiding Place Number Four: Grace Enough.**

You are sick. You know God can heal you. You have prayed for God to heal you. You are not healed. Your friends tell you, “Have faith!” A preacher says, “It is God’s will for you to be healed. Confess it!” You do. You are still sick. Now you are told it is your fault – too much sin, not enough faith. What do you do? You can’t just skim this chapter. It demands that you slow down and trust God.

#### **Hiding Place Number Five: The Greatest Fairy Tale of All Time.**

J. R. R. Tolkien, one of the great modern masters of the fairy tale, writes that the fairy tale “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat..., giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Dorothy. A tornado picked up her house in Kansas and dropped it on a wicked witch in the merry old land of Oz.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Cinderella. Her foot fit the glass slipper and she lived happily ever after.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Lucy. She played hide-and-seek in a wardrobe and had great adventures with a lion and a witch.

Today we've updated once upon a time. It now begins, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."

Jesus told an incredible story one day. He must have winked at someone in the audience as he began the tale of the slave who owed \$10,000,000, and had his debt forgiven.

What is the greatest fairy tale of all time?

It is about a king no one recognizes. He sleeps out in the open and depends on the kindness of others for his daily bread. He so scandalizes the people of his day that they ask, "Are you he who is to come?" With the world's greatest attempt at humor his enemies write down the joke. In fact, they wrote it in three languages so no one would miss out on the laugh.

### **Hiding Place Number Six: Allie, Allie, Oxen Free.**

Songs like "Anticipation," "You're So Vain," and "Nobody Does It Better" put Carly Simon on the pop charts. Carly said she saw her first "shrink" at age 11. By her own admission she's had a number of gurus, psychics, and an astrologer. "I even did carpentry," she said. When questioned about doing carpentry she replied, "If you go in any store and look under 'Self Help,' you will find carpentry listed. I found that of more help than telling the truth about my life to a room full of people with full bladders. I've been into hypnosis. It's habitual, and it's kind of like the song, 'I keep looking for the cure, but I don't know what it's for.'"

The cure Carly is looking for is Psalm 139. It is a beautiful song which has four promises. First, God's knowledge of my every thought and my every action is my greatest source of security. Second, there is no place I can go where he is not.

Third, he knows me intimately because he formed me in my mother's womb, and He is still working toward my completion. Fourth, God can keep me from becoming like the evil men I see all around.

### **Hiding Place Number Seven: It's Okay to be Gray.**

I smiled 30 years ago when the Beatles asked, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" Today I am not laughing. In 1970 there were 12 senior citizen day care facilities where busy working people dropped off their parents during the day, just like their infants and preschoolers. In 1990 there were more than 2,000 such facilities that provided supervision and company for aging adults. The number of senior citizens who live at the poverty level is 40 percent higher than the national average. Nursing home care can run as high as \$60,000 a year with the average cost over \$20,000.

As the sheer number of elderly citizens increases, so will health care problems and health care costs. We are living longer, but medical science has yet to successfully combat many of the disabling conditions of old age. Arthritis, stroke and other ailments continue to make it difficult to enjoy the so-called golden years. In 1990, six million Americans 65 or older required assistance with such basic life functions as dressing, eating, bathing, and going to the bathroom. In 50 years that figure will increase to almost 14 million. In 1990, 2.5 million Americans suffered from Alzheimer's disease. That figure could triple in the next 50 years.

As bad as all of that is, and it is bad, do not despair. Wait until you hear the great news!

### **Hiding Place Number Eight: Take a Deep Breath.**

In an atmosphere of celebration the disciples borrowed a colt that no one had ever ridden. They just walked up to the animal and untied it. When the owner of

the colt saw them, he asked, rather in amazement I would suppose, “Why are you untying the colt?” And he jerked the rope out of their hands.

Twelve men were stealing his animal. In broad day light and in full view of witnesses, they were about to lead it away. To his question they simply answered, “The Lord needs it.” The look of surprise and disbelief on his face faded and was replaced with a look of wonder and a smile. That was the password he had chosen with Jesus months, or perhaps years, before. It was the signal for which he had been waiting. As he handed the rope back to them he said, “Hosanna. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The mistaken idea that Christians should be gloomy and long-faced is broken on the solid rock of the praises of Palm Sunday. No one has as much a right to be happy and rejoice as does a Christian. The praise of God is a fundamental factor in the life of faith.

### **Hiding Place Number Nine: Never and Always.**

Charlie Brown was awakened in the middle of the night by someone banging on his front door. It was Snoopy.

“Are you feeling lonely again?” Charlie Brown asked. “It’s a terrible feeling isn’t it?” he continued. “You wake up in the middle of the night and everything seems hopeless. You’re all alone. You wonder what life is all about. And why you’re here and does anyone really care, and you just stare into the dark and you feel all alone.”

Snoopy, who by this time was in bed with Charlie Brown and under the covers asked, “Do we have any night cookies?”

Many people understand what Charles Schulz was talking about in that Peanuts comic strip. They feel there is no one who cares, no one who understands.



The God who said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), also said, “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). Actually, what he said was, “I will never, never, never, never never leave you or forsake you.” A God like that understands the feelings of loneliness.

### **Hiding Place Number Ten: But I Don’t Feel Like Cal Ripken.**

June 1, 1925 seemed like another day in baseball for the New York Yankees. Popular first baseman Wally Pipp had a headache, so they took him out of the lineup that day and gave another player a start. The new kid did so well that he remained in the lineup the next day, and the next. In fact he stayed in the lineup for fourteen years. Not many people noticed the beginning of Lou Gehrig's career, but many said the record of 2,130 consecutive games played by the “Iron Horse” would never be equaled. But on September 6, 1995, Cal Ripken circled the grounds at Camden Yards, celebrating consecutive game number 2,131.

There is nothing as glorious as a good beginning, and nothing as tragic as a bad ending. And yet as we consider these all too familiar occurrences, it should become obvious that the qualities which make a good start possible are not identical with the qualities which see life through to the end. Starting power and finishing power are not the same in any realm.

What does it take to start? More importantly, what does it take to finish?

## Chapter Two

### A LANDING PLACE

Walter Cronkite took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. Four words flashed on the screen: “We’re On The Moon!” The nation, and the world, held its breath as Neil Armstrong crawled out onto the porch of the Lunar Module and awkwardly backed down the ladder. The black-and-white camera had been focused on one spot for so long that a permanent image had almost burned into the lens. The television set flickered with the ghost-like images as a human being stepped for the first time onto the surface of the moon. It was July 20, 1969, 10:56 p.m. From a quarter of a million miles away, Neil Armstrong’s voice was a little scratchy, but we listened with anticipation to his first words as stepped onto the powdery surface of another world: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Neil later said that the poor quality of the transmission distorted his message – what he really said was, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” And when a later crew journeyed to the moon, another astronaut said, “That may be a small step for Neil, but it’s a long drop for me.”

Listening to the tapes of that day more than three decades ago, we now know that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were in trouble. The historic landing at the Sea of Tranquility six and one-half hours earlier came close to being a crash landing from which there would have been no survivors. Low on fuel and with a computer urging abort, Armstrong took the controls and manually flew the descent. Flying over boulders in an area more hazardous than mission planners had anticipated, he searched desperately for a safe place to touch down. When he shut off the descent engines and radioed, “Houston, Tranquility base here. The ‘Eagle’ has landed,” they had only seconds of fuel remaining. He had found a safe landing site.

A safe landing place is a good hiding place.

Probably nothing will ever equal the drama of that July evening, and only a handful of men and women have ever been hurtled into the void of outer space. But most of us know what it is like to be looking for a safe place to land, an escape from the boulders that are rapidly sweeping into view, threatening us, and to know instinctively, “I am in trouble.”

The places for potential crash landings come in many varieties, from many sources, and for many reasons. At the moment when we are looking for a safe place to land, “why” does not matter. “Where” is the question we must solve, and solve as soon as possible. When the devil complained about God’s protection of Job he said, “I see thou hast made a hedge about him, round about” (Job 1:10 – KJV). It is as if the enemy had walked in a circle around Job, his family and all of his possessions to see if

he could spy a single gap in the wall, one break in the hedge where he could get through the divine defenses and hurt Job. But he was disappointed: it was a complete hedge, there was no way in from the outside.

When the landing place is nowhere in sight that is when we need to know there is a place of safety. When the weight we are carrying becomes crushing and we cry out, “God, I can’t take any more of this!” that’s when we need to know that a hiding place has been promised to every beleaguered believer.

“No trial has come to you,” the Apostle Paul wrote, “that is beyond human resistance and that is not adjusted and adapted ... such as man can bear. But God is faithful to his Word and to his compassionate nature, and he can be trusted not to let you be tempted and tried and assayed beyond your ability and strength of resistance and power to endure, but with the temptation he will always also provide the way out – the means of escape to a landing place – that you may be capable and strong and powerful patiently to bear up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13 – Amplified).

Sometimes we make our own trouble – we know the rules, we choose to disobey them, and trouble starts. Sometimes divine permission is given for a time of testing so that we will trust God to lead us into overcoming victory. You are not asked to face the testing time of any other individual. I am not asked to walk a mile in your shoes. I couldn’t make it, and you could not make it in mine. The testing time is adjusted and adapted. You can rely on God not to allow you to face a test that will crush you. The tests won’t kill us. They won’t destroy us. They will only make us stronger and prove to us that the Lord Jesus Christ inside of us is our hedge of safety and victory.

1 Corinthians 10:13 was originally written to overconfident believers. It has become a source of strength to besieged believers who are totally lacking in confidence.

When Israel left Egypt and 400 years of slavery behind them, God led and protected them with a pillar of cloud during the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. When both the Red Sea and Pharaoh's advancing army cut off their escape, God separated the water and they advanced on dry land. God fed them by constant miracles. They woke up to manna six days a week, and it was enough for seven days. When the people complained of thirst, Moses struck a rock and they drank water which gushed out. Rabbinic tradition said the rock followed them as they traveled.

In spite of their extensive privileges, they failed miserably. Twelve spies brought back news of the Promised Land, and it was a richer land than they had imagined. But ten of the spies gave a report so discouraging that the people did not trust the plain evidence of the land or their memory of God's protection. For the next forty years they staggered around outside the Promised Land when they might have been standing inside of it. The special privileges Israel enjoyed – perhaps the loftiest birthrights God ever granted to any nation – were no automatic guarantees of success. With that scenario in mind, Paul reminded the Corinthians, and us, that believers in Jesus Christ are not exempt from temptations and testings. "If you think you are standing firm," Paul warned, "be careful, that you don't fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

But wait! Sometimes we fail the tests, regardless of God's design. God promised there would be a landing place, and we did not find it! What do we do with our failures? What shall we say about those times when we miss the escape route? If there is supposed to be a door of escape, a landing place, what happened?

I would not be honest if I suggested that overcoming in testing situations is easy or automatic. But God does promise there is not a single event in your life or mine that he will allow to be beyond our ability to overcome.

Being a Christian, however, does not mean that the influences of Satan are weakened to any degree. Being a Christian does not mean that I automatically recognize that an attack has been mounted against me and so I rush into a phone booth, pull off my glasses and suit and jump out with a red cape billowing in the wind and the words “Super Christian” emblazoned on my chest. No, sometimes I fail, and fail miserably. The liberating truth is, God has put his strength at my disposal. If I do not use it, he does not withdraw it. He promises a landing place.

### **ONCE, TWICE, THREE TIMES FORGIVEN**

Simon Peter knew what it was like to miss the landing place. He gave tremendous counsel to Christians who face overwhelming circumstances: “Control yourselves and be careful! The devil is your enemy. And he goes around like a roaring lion looking for someone to eat. Refuse to give in to the devil. Stand strong in your faith. You know that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are having the same sufferings you have” (1 Peter 5:8-9 – TEB). Peter could write those words with compassion and understanding because he had personally been mauled by that roaring lion.

Peter was one of only three men to witness the transfiguration, one of only two men to ever walk on water, and the only man to whom Jesus said, “This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times” (Matthew 26:34). When Jesus was arrested, Peter followed at a discrete distance. Three times he was identified as a disciple of Jesus and each time he denied it. Peter had told Jesus, “All

the other followers may lose their faith. But I will not” (Mark 14:29 – TEB). At the moment of the third denial, the rooster crowed. At the moment of the rooster’s crow, Peter wept.

One morning after the resurrection, seven of Jesus’ disciples went fishing. They fished all night, but had no success. Early the next morning, as their boat came close to shore, a man cried out to them, “Did you catch any fish?” Not knowing that the stranger was Jesus, they just said, “No.” Then Jesus said, “Try fishing off the other side of the boat.”

Perhaps the seven looked at each other with skepticism, shrugged their shoulders, and said, “Why not!” They caught so many fish – 153 to be exact – that they could not pull the net back into the boat. At that moment, John cried out, “It is the Lord!”

Six of them rowed for shore while Peter swam in. When they reached the beach, Jesus invited them to breakfast. He had built a fire and prepared fish and bread. After they had finished eating, Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Simon, son of John do you truly love me more than these?” (John 21:16). If you read the whole story, it sounds so repetitious, because Jesus asked the same question three times and Peter gave the same answer three times.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

While it seems Jesus was giving Peter three chances to affirm his love for his Lord – one for each of his previous denials – there is more to this passage than a cross examination.

Our English versions do not reveal the depth of the conversation. The first two times Jesus asked, “Do you love me?” He was using a word for love which means to love with a devotion that is due only to God. The word with which Simon Peter replied is a lower level of affection than Jesus’ word. Peter’s word describes a person’s feelings for a close friend, a brotherly type of love.

So, the conversation went something like this:

“Peter, son of John, you said you loved me more than any of my other disciples. Do you love me with the devotion that is due to God?”

Peter, who had continually overestimated himself, now honestly replied, “Jesus, I am your friend.”

“Peter, do you love me with the devotion due to God?”

“Jesus, I am your friend.”

Then Jesus switched to Peter’s word. “Peter, are you sure you are my friend?”

And Peter said, “Lord, you know all things. You know I am your friend.”

“Then,” said Jesus, “feed my sheep. A close friend can do that for me!”

Jesus met Peter at the point that his disciple had reached in his walk with his Lord. Jesus restored him on that basis, and used him on that basis! Peter had missed his landing place. The Bible does not say what it was, but according to Paul, Peter had an escape route to a landing place. There was a way out of the temptation to deny Jesus, but Peter missed it. Regardless, Jesus forgave Peter and restored Peter.



Simon Peter left that post-Easter breakfast and began to fulfill Jesus' promise that he would be a solid rock in the Lord's Church.

### THE GREAT GETAWAY

Flying over threatening terrain, looking for a landing place, there is an incident in the life of Jesus and his disciples that we need to examine. It directly proclaims the promise that we can trust God not to allow us to suffer any temptation beyond our powers of endurance. It shows Jesus directing His disciples toward a landing place, and they didn't even know they were in trouble!

A crowd that numbered over 5,000 followed Jesus to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. They had seen him heal the sick and wanted to be close to this miracle worker. Knowing that they were hungry, Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (John 6:5). His question was answered when Andrew brought to him a boy's lunch. Jesus then called food into existence that did not exist before.

After everyone had eaten to satisfaction, each disciple gathered up a basket full of leftovers. That was when the potential for a crash landing appeared. - "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again into the hills by himself" (John 6:14-15). Mark's account of this incident adds a revealing sentence: "Immediately Jesus *made* his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd" (6:45 – *emphasis added*). The Amplified Bible says, "He *insisted* that the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him" (*emphasis added*). But even that may not give the sense of urgency with which Jesus moved his disciples into the little boat. They would have known from his words and actions that he was more than a little distressed. He would have physically moved them towards the little

boat, pulling at their sleeves, grasping their arms, forcing them on board. His whole demeanor would have communicated one message: "Get out of here! It is dangerous for you to be here!"

Did the sense of urgency carry over once the disciples had pushed out into the lake. Evidentially, because Jesus turned his back on those who were left and immediately "went into the hills to pray" (Mark 6:46). Jesus got his disciples away from the danger as quickly as he could, and then with expedience in his own movements, he put distance between himself and the danger. It was as if a ticking bomb had been thrown into their midst with only Jesus recognizing the peril. What was going on?

When Satan came to Jesus in the wilderness, he tempted Jesus with the offer of all of the kingdoms of the world. Now Satan repeated the offer. A temptation once conquered can return in a different, often more subtle, even more dangerous form. Think back to the ambitions and attitudes of the disciples. James and John asked for favored positions in the kingdom (Mark 10:37). Peter carried a sword and was prepared to use it (John 18:10). Imagine how these three, and the other disciples, would have reacted if the crowd had tried to make Jesus king. The mob would have swallowed them up and swept them along.

Jesus had already faced that temptation. The disciples had not. To protect them from something they were not ready to face, Jesus sent them away. They were not at that time exposed to that particular temptation. Jesus protected them. Their escape route was a fishing boat. Ours may be an unanswered prayer, a promotion that does not come through, a missed travel connection, or a life-threatening illness. The disciples did not appreciate what Jesus had done for them when, later that night, they were battling a stormy sea. We may not immediately recognize our landing

place, but it is our way out. It is not the way of surrender or retreat, but the way of victory through God's grace.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE INVISIBLE**

Let's look one more time at Paul's promise to the Corinthians:

*"No temptation has come your way that is too hard for flesh and blood to bear. But God can be trusted not to allow you to suffer any temptation beyond your powers of endurance. He will see to it that every temptation has a way out, so that it will never be impossible for you to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13 – Phillips).*

Look at those promises! Count 'em off!

First, we are not alone. Ours are not the only footprints along the way. What we are facing, others of God's children have already faced. Others have conquered what is ahead of us, and by the power of the same Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. Jesus has been victorious – both for himself and for us. He can sympathize with our weaknesses, because he was "tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:18).

Second, God is faithful. He is true to his promises. The world may shake under the oppressing hand of Satan, but the Rock of Ages stands secure forever. Solomon wrote, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). Trials and temptations may come against us, but God is faithful. Friends may forsake us, but God is faithful. Enemies may conspire against us, but God is faithful. Circumstances may upset us, but God is faithful. Demons may oppress us, but God is faithful. God is faithful!

Scientists have discovered an interesting phenomenon in the birth cycle of rats which shows God providing extra care for one of his simpler creatures. Sixteen days before the mother rat has her baby, her threshold of pain, her ability to withstand pain, is raised. Two days before her baby is born, it is raised again. Now, to paraphrase Jesus, you are of more value than many rats! In the same majestic manner in which God provides an extra threshold of pain for a rat that is going to have a baby, he provides for the threshold of pain in our lives so we can take whatever comes. God promises he will not allow circumstances to exceed our personal ability to resist. He promises he will always provide an escape route.

Third, God puts restraints on temptations. God is the master of every situation, so he can keep his promise. Who besides God knows how much we can bear? We have no idea of our own limitations. Have you ever said, "If that ever happened to me, I couldn't take it." When it happened, did you survive? Have you ever said, "I just can't take any more?" When more came, did you find God's grace to be sufficient?

Sandra discovered a grace greater than her limitations when a man driving under the influence of cocaine struck her car broadside. Police estimated he was traveling 60 miles an hour at the moment of the impact. Sandra's two small children, who were riding in the back seat were frightened, but otherwise unhurt. Sandra suffered a shattered pelvis, a broken hip and nerve damage in her left leg. Police found the hit-and-run driver an hour later, but he never went to trial.

Sandra said, "I live in pain every day because of this accident, but I have really learned to love. I am so excited about what Jesus has done in my life. I have forgiven the man who hit us, and I pray for him. If I had a chance to take this car accident back, I would say, 'No,' because Jesus has taught me so much."

God carefully limits our trials. He directed the disciples into the boat so they would escape the temptation to join the crowd in forcing kingship upon him. Just so, he limits what comes to us. Can you imagine a young woman who says, “Despite the daily pain, I would not give up the experience of my accident, because before the accident, I did not know God loved me that much?” God sends the trials at just the right time. God’s perfect timing will allow the tests to come when we are best able to receive a passing grade!

Fourth, God promises a landing place. The Amplified Bible promises “the way out – the means of escape to a landing place.” The writer used a vivid word picture. It suggests an army which is in a mountain pass, surrounded on all sides, facing certain destruction. Then suddenly they discover an escape route to safety. It is important to understand, the landing place might come only through enduring the trial. There are times when retreating is out of the question and advancing is impossible. David acknowledged that God had prepared a table for him in the very presence of his enemies (Psalm 23:5). Sometimes the only way out of the fire is to go through the fire. The refiner’s fire will destroy only what needs to be removed from your life. It will not destroy you.

When Jesus compelled his disciples to get into the boat, they were soon struggling against the wind, on a storm tossed sea. Jesus had sent them away for their own good, and because they were following the Lord’s direction they were in trouble! Mark says, “He went out to them walking on the lake. He was about to pass them by” (6:48). They were struggling and Jesus did not intend to stop. Why? He had his hand on that storm – and on every storm that has ever arisen in your life or mine. He knew that they were safe. Sometimes he intends for us to ride out the storm.

Jesus did get into the boat, however. They did not need him to do so, but they firmly believed that was exactly what was necessary. With graciousness, and without a rebuke he became their landing place. It is a wondrous thing with all of our weaknesses, with all of our shortcomings, with all of our sins, that he has given us this promise: “At no time, under no circumstances, nowhere on the face of the earth, will I allow any temptation, test or trial to confront you which is beyond your strength. I will, when that trial comes, provide an escape route to safety. I will give you a landing place!”

## Chapter Three

### BUGS ON MY CHRISTMAS TREE

The Sisler family's first Christmas Season in South Carolina had a good beginning. We planned to celebrate at home first and then travel to Maryland to enjoy the remainder of the holidays with the rest of the clan. We decided to keep our plastic Christmas tree in storage and cut a live tree for the occasion. After rejecting several possible trees we chose a five-foot tall, long-needle pine. I have always been partial to spruce trees, but they are rare in the area where we were then living.

While my wife, Bonnie, supervised the JAMM Kids (Jennifer, Amy, Michael and Matthew — our four offspring) making home-made decorations, I put lights on the tree. Moving the furniture around the living room to accommodate the placement of the tree almost destroyed the spirit of the season. When we finished

trimming the tree, we put some presents under it, in anticipation of opening them, of course.

Later that evening, after the kids were in bed, Bonnie looked at a package that we had wrapped in white paper. There were small black spots all over it. When I tapped the side of the package, the little dots moved, or rather they ran. This unexpected decoration was alive! A quick inspection revealed that not only that one package, but all the packages, and the tree, and my favorite chair, and one-fourth of the living room were similarly decorated.

You have to understand Bonnie's almost hysterical aversion to "bugs" to appreciate what happened next. We bundled four sleeping youngsters off to a neighbor's house. Then in a frenzied hurry, we tore the wrapping off all the packages and sprayed two cans of insecticide in the living room. I threw the "perfect tree" outside, with all the decorations still in place.

When the fumes from the mass execution of several hundred small black creatures finally dissipated, we returned to the living room and started to rewrap the presents (we reclaimed our offspring the next day). My contribution to such endeavors normally consists of rolling the paper over the box and applying several yards of tape, or I just watch Bonnie do it. On this occasion, however, I joined her on the floor, determined to be the Rembrandt of all package wrappers. After all, I was the one who had insisted on "getting into the spirit with a real tree." To make matters worse, I had overruled her choice in favor of that particular tree. We had not progressed very far when Bonnie just stopped wrapping. She looked at me with tears running down her cheeks and asked, "Why did God put bugs on my Christmas tree?"

I would guess that Charlie or someone in his family asked, "Why, God?" At age 39, Charlie contracted a very rare disease. Even if he could get the right bone



marrow, he had only a 50 percent chance of survival. His cousin had the right type of bone marrow, but he refused to help. "I'm not going to let them put 100 needles in my back," he said. "How do I know I'll come out all right? How do I know that I can successfully undergo that operation?"

Charlie's cousin had a perfect right to refuse to give bone marrow. Charlie recognized that right. Still, his family went to court in an attempt to force the cousin to give Charlie bone marrow, but they lost the case. The cousin asked, "Why doesn't he die like a man?"

"I forgive my cousin, and you must, too," were the last words Charlie spoke. Does that grieving family ask, "Why, God?"

Judy was in a class of 20 other four, five, and six-year-olds who were learning to swim. Ordinarily, there were five adults supervising the children. On that day there were only two, and they did not see Judy sink to the bottom of the pool. Before the instructors discovered her, she suffered permanent brain damage. Today she makes some response to the affection of her mother, but nothing else. She will require constant care for the rest of her life — and it is a life expectancy of 70 or more years.

An out-of-court settlement awarded Judy's parents \$821,000, plus \$4,000 a month (with an 8 percent annual increase) for the rest of her life. If Judy lives those 70 years, and there is every evidence she can, the family will receive more than \$100,000,000. Judy's Mom said, "I would trade all of that money for just one of my little girl's smiles." Do Judy's parents ask, "Why, God?"

How could a loving God possibly allow these tragedies?

What possible virtue could there be in such incidents?

If he is God, could he not have intervened? Of course he could.

Then, why did he let them happen? Why does a God who is omnipotent, and therefore able to prevent suffering, allow suffering? Why does a God who is merciful, and therefore willing to prevent suffering, allow suffering? Why does he allow suffering in the lives of those who have done nothing to deserve it? If the different situations we face are tests, why does God have to choose such difficult questions?

Those are basic questions, woven from the fabric of life. Let me suggest one possible answer and then let us explore it together: *God allows tragedy and trouble because he loves us.*

He knows that difficulties will make us more like himself. In trouble we will trust him in ways we never would have trusted him otherwise. Through our suffering, we can learn it is okay to ask God, “WHY?” Or any other question for that matter.

### **BEHOLD HOW HE LOVED HIM!**

Once he began his traveling ministry, Jesus could always count on a warm welcome at one particular home in Bethany. The home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was one place the Lord could always find a moment of quiet in a noisy world. Jesus loved and trusted those three so much, he gave them his itinerary when he was traveling. That was important to the sisters because one day, when their brother became ill, they knew exactly where to find Jesus.

Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, therefore he rushed to their side as soon as he received the word of Lazarus’ illness. That is what we would expect to read. That is not what the Bible says. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. When he had heard therefore that Lazarus was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was” (John 11:5-6). *Jesus loved those three*, therefore he stayed away from them in their hour of need. *He loved them*, therefore he delayed until Lazarus was dead. *He loved them*, therefore he waited until the shadow of grief

had settled over Mary and Martha like the setting Judean sun. *He loved them*, therefore he stayed away. *He loved them*, therefore he allowed death to enter their home unhindered and unafraid.

Love sometimes allows us to suffer. And not just any love — God’s love. That is a truth we do not like to hear and a lesson we do not like to study. Because God loves us, he may allow us to be disappointed. Because God loves us, he may allow us to come under the hand of affliction. Because God loves us, he may lead us to kneel by the coffin of someone we loved more than our own life. Logic denies it. Love proclaims it.

Why was this tragedy allowed to happen? It was because Jesus loved them. It was because he loves us. And that love desires that we move into a deeper, more wonderful knowledge of God. “I am glad,” Jesus said to his disciples, “that for your sakes I was not there so that you may believe” (John 11:15). Jesus knew that some of life’s greatest lessons are learned only through pain.

Jesus wants us to learn that our suffering, aching hearts are not proof of his absence. The sisters said, “If you had been here, this would not have happened.” But in reality he was there. Nothing takes place without his knowledge. Nothing takes place without his permission.

We accuse Jesus with that statement — “If you had been here, this would not have happened.” My home would not have been wrecked, if you had been here. My child would not have died, if you had been here. My business would not have failed, if you had been here. Why weren’t you here, Jesus! But he was there. His love kept him silent.

If Jesus allows us to weep, it is not done callously or with disregard for our feelings. His face has been stained with our tears. In all of our afflictions, he is

afflicted. There is never a dark moment in our lives that would find him absent. There is never a broken heart he does not hold, or a fevered brow he does not caress. If he allows us to weep, it is only because he loves us.

### **FOR THE SAKE OF TEN?**

When we struggle to learn any lesson — from school or from life — we often gain new insight by asking questions. If our pain is greater than our understanding we can learn from God by asking him questions. One day Abraham's picture of God was shattered. He worked through his misunderstanding, perhaps even mistrust, by questioning God.

It was a momentous day when God assumed human form and visited his friend, Abraham. God, and two heavenly companions, were on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah. He had heard reports of the evil of the twin cities and was inspecting the scene. It is one of the mercies of God, that although he knew every detail about Sodom and Gomorrah, he made a personal visit, offering divine grace one last time.

When God and Abraham were alone, Abraham, horrified at the potential destruction of every human being in Sodom and Gomorrah, asked, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (see Genesis 18:23ff).

God responded, "If I find fifty righteous people I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Abraham asked if God would spare the city if he could find forty-five righteous people. God agreed. Abraham dropped the number to forty. God agreed.

Then thirty. Then twenty. Finally ten. “For the sake of ten,” God said, “I will not destroy it.”

Modern visitors to the bazaars and markets of the Middle East are expected to haggle over prices. “How much do you want for this earthenware jar?”

“\$50 American.”

“\$50! That’s outrageous! I will give you \$10.”

“\$10? Sir, you wish for my wife and children to starve! \$40 and not a penny less.”

“\$40 for a clay pot? I’ll give you \$20. That is double my original offer.”

“Twice nothing is still nothing! You insult me and every merchant in the market. \$30.”

Abraham’s question may sound like a scene from a bazaar, but Abraham was not bargaining prices with God. He was not haggling. Abraham had nothing to offer in trade to God. Abraham was desperate to understand what was happening. He was struggling to understand. He thought he knew God, but all at once the foundations on which he had built his life were shaking. It was no longer the fate of Sodom which was at issue. Abraham was asking, “*God, how could you be like this?*” He understood that God intended to destroy two cities. That is why he said, “If you find 50 righteous people will you spare everyone?”

As Abraham lowered the number and God agreed to each succeeding figure, Abraham’s heart beat slower, his breathing calmed. When he reached ten, Abraham stopped asking. Why? Because he understood that God was not acting indiscriminately. There was a purpose to God’s plan, there was a reason for his actions. Abraham had questioned God. God had answered. Everything was all right.

### **WHO IS THIS GOD?**

Our modern society believes that every problem is solvable instantly through man's ingenuity. The trouble with that thinking is, it is totally false! Unexplained and unexplainable things do happen to us. Because God is seemingly powerless, or unwilling to stop them, we often misunderstand who he really is, and what he is really like. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). So we will make no mistake about who he is and who his Father is, Jesus told three parables. Let us take a closer look at those three stories. They will show us Jesus, and by so doing, show us the Father's heart, too.

The first parable describes a shepherd who looked for one lost sheep.

*"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'"* (Luke 15:4-6).

A flock of 100 sheep was a sign of prosperity. What kind of shepherd would leave 99 sheep in an open pasture to search for one who had gone astray? A shepherd who loved all of his sheep.

I have always imagined that the one lost sheep's name was "David." He was basically a decent sort. He did not intend to get lost. There was no malice in his actions. I think he simply wandered away, or maybe stopped to rest while everyone else kept moving.

This may not have been the first time "David" got lost. His kind turns aside from the main path more than once. They conclude that their own course of

action is superior to the shepherd's. They are a long time learning to trust him. It is my guess that the shepherd knew exactly where to find his stray. "David" had found a favorite place of disobedience.

When the shepherd found the lost sheep he anointed its cuts and bruises and then carried it back to the fold. The sheep relaxed in his strong arms. That is God himself, carrying you and me home. When we were separated from him we carried the burden of being lost. Now that he has found us, he carries us — and carries us forever.

The second parable depicts a woman who looked for one lost coin.

*"Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one.*

*Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin!'"* (Luke 15:8-10).

In today's economy that coin would have been worth about 20 cents. Why would there be such a frantic and diligent search for that small amount? Two reasons. First, it represented the daily wage for one person — a loss which most families today would feel. Second, those ten coins were more than just money. They were a betrothal gift to her from her future husband. To lose one coin was symbolic of being unfaithful to him and breaking the engagement.

The search, Jesus said, would not be easy, but she must find the coin. The words "search" and "until" attract major attention in each of these stories. If a woman would do that to restore her engagement gift, to what length will God go to restore us to fellowship with himself? To what length will God go to mold us into the people he has planned us to be?

The third parable delineates a father who looked for one lost son.

*“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.’*

*“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:20-24).*

The central character in this story of “The Lost Son” is not the younger son, or his elder brother. The father is the central character. His presence dominates the story. Watch him and look for God.

Through usage, frequently incorrect usage, we have lost the meaning of the word “prodigal.” It means “extravagant, yielding in profusion, bountiful.” Add to that “lavish” and “unrestrained.” God is the prodigal. His love is prodigal. His love knows no restrictions. There are no restraints on His forgiveness. There are no limits to his joy.

What is God like? Jesus has told us. He is the shepherd who risked all for one lost sheep. He is the woman who searched diligently, and at no small cost to herself, for one lost coin. He is the father who watched every day for his wandering son, and who recognized his returning son long before the son recognizes his Dad. Prodigal love — extravagant, profuse, bountiful, lavish, unrestrained — from the Prodigal God. He is your Father. And mine.



## **DADDY!**

If something comes to us directly from his hand, or by his divine permission from another's hand, and it hurts, we have the right to ask, "Why, God?" He is our Father! Paul said, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15). Our closest English word for "Abba" is "Daddy." Think of the tenderness with which a child uses that word!

In Galatians 4:6, Paul said, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'" We cry, "Abba, Father," but it is the Holy Spirit who puts that cry into the heart and mouth of the believer. He suggests it, approves of it, and teaches us to do it. We would never have said it if he had not first taught us. God put the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is the Spirit who creates the desire for our Father. Because of his enabling, we cry, "Abba, Father."

There was a distinguished, grey-haired gentleman in Loch Lynn Heights, Maryland, with whom I used to speak every Sunday afternoon (on June 20, 1996, he won the race and finished his course, but before that we spoke by long distance, at least once a week for many years). The last words of our conversation were always "I love you, Dad," and "I love you, Son." With that same tenderness and feeling I talk to my Heavenly Father. My questions do not threaten him. I do not make him angry when I ask them. I am not afraid of his answers. He is my Father!

In a lecture to an assembly of Bible college students, Dr. Ponder Gilliland, pastor of the First Church of the Nazarene in Bethany, Oklahoma, spoke about his personal devotions. He said, "I have two chairs facing each other. I sit in one. My Heavenly Father sits in the other. We talk to each other, my Father and I. During our

private time I have coffee with my Father. I take mine black.” That is a Father of whom you can ask, “Why?”

Do you have problems? Are you overwhelmed with trouble? Has sickness, or death, or disaster broken you? Are you wondering about the reason behind them? Go ahead, ask your Father!

Charles Spurgeon said:

“The great God, the Maker of heaven and earth is my Father. The Thunderer, the ruler of the stormy sea is my Father. And I will draw near to him in love. Do what thou wilt with me, thou art my Father. Smile on me; I will smile back and say, ‘My Father.’ This shall make everything work good to me, be it never so hard to bear. If thou art my Father all is well to all eternity. Bitterness is sweet, and death itself is life, since thou art my Father.”

### **WHEN WE NEED OUR PROBLEMS**

A group of eight travelers and their local guide were searching in the Galapagos chain for the nesting sites of Pacific green sea turtles. Those little creatures, which may grow to over 300 pounds, are part of a powerful symphony from nature. The baton is raised at dusk when the first hatchling ventures out and makes a dash for the safety of the sea. The arrangement intensifies when the turtle’s siblings sense it is safe to follow and they begin to peck their way out. The performance swells to a crescendo as a frenzy of mockingbirds, boobies, gulls and eagles swoop down, attempting to eat the tiny performers. As the last of the turtles slips into the ocean the only sounds are the unevenly blended screeching birds and the softly lapping waves.

The group arrived as the first tiny sea turtle poked his head out of the sand. They watched a mockingbird circle and land close to the hatchling's head. The bird edged closer and then began to attack the turtle.

One of the observers turned to the guide and demanded, "Aren't you going to do something?"

Another traveler spoke up and said, "I'm not going to sit here and watch this happen."

The guide tried to quiet the group. "This is nature's way," he said.

When the noise of the watchers chased the bird away, the guide reluctantly pulled the hatchling out of its hole. Freed from the restraints of the sand, it began its trek to the sea. Almost at once the beach was filled with baby turtles who had received a false signal that it was safe. Moments later the consequences of the humans' interference was tragically accented. The mad rush was too early. The sky was too light. With no place to hide, dozens of turtles perished as scores of island birds dived to the sand. Rescuers scooped up a few turtles and waded into the sea to release them, but the damage was done. The carnage was on.

What do we do with our problems? Do we wait for someone to pick us out of our shells and risk exposure to circumstances for which we are not ready? Or, trusting our Heavenly Father, do we peck, and chip, and struggle and then when the time is right, burst out into new adventures, new hopes — and yes, even new problems? But problems that we are now equipped to face and overcome.

About your problems — if you need to do so, go ahead, ask him, "WHY?" The Lord knows exactly what he is doing. He has never yet been wrong. And he will never once be wrong. He is the only one who can put the whole puzzle together. He can make it make sense — because He is God — because he is your Father.

Live in the spirit of sonship. Jesus said, “The Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). Wake up in the morning and let your first thought be, “My Father, my Father, be with me today.” Go to your business and when work perplexes you, cry, “My Father, help me in this hour of need.” When you go home and meet domestic anxieties do not change your prayer. When you are alone you are not alone because your Father is with you. Live as his child. Live in him because you will live with him. Cast all of your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Tell him what is on your heart. Even though the bugs on your Christmas tree were not put there by him, you can still ask him, “God, why did you put bugs on my Christmas tree?” It’s okay. He is your Father!

## Chapter Four

### HOME

Would it seem strange if you heard Jesus say, “Do not let your heart be troubled,” and your heart, at that moment was not troubled?

It was probably the greatest night in the life of Jesus’ twelve disciples. It was also the last night they would spend together. Divinely ordered circumstances controlled the events that would change them forever. Never again would that little group be the same. Nor could it be, because before that night was over Jesus would be arrested and Judas would be dead.

It was the third time this group of thirteen shared a Passover meal of bread and wine. So many things were the same as the previous two, but so many things were different. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the commemoration of Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the disciples told Jesus, “We will prepare everything for you to eat the Passover Feast. Where do you want to

have the feast?” (Matthew 26:17 — TEB). Since Jesus was actually staying in Bethany that week, probably at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he had already made arrangements for the celebration. He had given a password to a friend in Jerusalem. The person was obviously known to the disciples, but for reasons never explained, Matthew does not give us the individual’s name. The disciples were to approach that secret follower and say, “The Teacher says, ‘The chosen time is near. I will have the Passover Feast with my followers at your house.’” The disciples followed the instructions and were led to an upper room where they prepared the evening’s meal.

In preparation, the disciples would have removed all leaven from the house. The night the Israelites fled from Egypt, they did not have time to bake leavened bread. Leaven, pieces of fermented dough, was used much as we would use yeast to make the dough rise. It took longer to bake, but it produced an appealing loaf. Unleavened bread was flat, more like our modern crackers than traditional bread. Because it could be made in a hurry, unleavened bread was the choice of the evening before the Exodus. Another reason for using unleavened bread was the symbolism of corruption associated with leaven. For those two reasons all leaven had to be removed from the house.

The main course of the meal was lamb. The animal selected was separated from the rest of the flock and kept isolated for four days to prove it was free from any blemish. Then it was taken to the Temple and sacrificed, its blood given as an offering. The carcass was roasted whole, none of its bones were broken.

In the centuries following the actual Exodus, an elaborate tradition dictated four other items be included to complete the Feast. A bowl of salt water was placed on the table to remind them of the tears they had shed in slavery and of the Red Sea, the salty waters parted to expedite their escape. A collection of bitter herbs, such

as horseradish, chicory, and endive represented the bitterness of slavery and the bunches of hyssop used to paint the doorframe with the lamb's blood. A paste was made from apples, dates, pomegranates and nuts to remind them of the clay from which they had made bricks in Egypt. Cinnamon sticks were added to the paste as a reminder of the straw they had to gather to mix with the clay. Wine completed the meal.

### **DISTURBED? DON'T BE!**

At the conclusion of the meal Jesus gave new significance to the elements of the Passover Feast. He broke the bread and passed it to the disciples, and said, "This is my body which is broken for you." Then he passed the wine goblet with the instructions, "Drink all of it. This is my blood which is poured out for many." The obvious references to death, an impending, almost immediate death, would have greatly frightened the disciples. Add to those events several more disturbing elements. Five days before the Passover Feast began, the disciples had heard Jesus say, "Now I am very troubled. What should I say? Should I say, 'Father, save me from this time'? No, I came to this time so that I could suffer" (John 12:27 – TEB). If he was troubled, how would we have described the state of their minds? If he was anticipating suffering, what did the future hold for them?

Then, during the meal, Jesus told them that one of their own number would betray him to death. They each asked, "Lord, is it I?" Understanding the possibility for treachery within their own hearts, not one of them pointed a finger at any one else. No one suspected Judas. Jesus told them he would be with them only a little while longer. And he told Peter, "Before this night is over you will deny three times that you even know me." Is it any wonder that their hearts were troubled? Troubled they were!

It was at this point Jesus spoke words of incredible comfort and hope:

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know” (John 14:1-3 – KJV).

Jesus did not promise an untroubled life, but he did offer the possibility of an untroubled heart. “Let not your hearts any longer be troubled,” Jesus said. “Don’t let your inner life roll like a storm tossed sea,” Jesus said. Life is full of difficulties. There are burdens to be carried, obstacles to be overcome, foes to be conquered, battles to be won. “But,” Jesus said, “you can do it in confidence and with inner peace.” We may have anxieties in our professional lives. The heaviest burden of all at home may be at home. Those problems are meant to stay on the outside of our lives and not penetrate into our hearts. In the darkness, in the midst of pain, if we can remember God’s everlasting arms are underneath us, if we can remember not a single sparrow falls to the ground without being noticed by our Father, we can have peace. The battlefield may be enveloped with noise, but our souls can be fortified in peace. The message is, “Let not your hearts be troubled,” and the Speaker is the Author and Finisher of our faith. With the peace of God in our hearts, the weakest of us is more than a conqueror.

Thomas spoke next with what some have called doubt and distrust. I think rather it was fear and frustration that caused him to say, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:5). Thomas did not pretend to have a faith he did not have, or knowledge he lacked. He bluntly contra-



dicted Jesus and said, “We do not know where! Peter asked you earlier, ‘Lord, where are you going? Why can’t I follow you now?’ You haven’t answered him. How can we know the way when we don’t know the destination?”

### **HOME, SWEET HOME**

In answer to that honest question, a question of disagreement, Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). It is as if he said, “Thomas, I am going to the Father’s house. I am the way to his house. If you want to get there you must follow me. If you really knew me you would know my Father, because I am the truth about him. I am the life, I am the Father’s life, I am the life that the Father gives. I am going to the Father, Thomas, and you do know the way. I am going home.”

Home. What thoughts and images come to our minds with the mention of that one little word. We understand what J. Howard Payne meant when he wrote, “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like Home.” When Dorothy Gale clicked the ruby slippers together she woke up in her own bed, clutched her dog, Toto, close to her, and cried, “There’s no place like home.” A German proverb says, “Blessed are the homesick, for they shall reach home.” When the prodigal son came to his senses he thought of home. Or was it thoughts of home which restored him to his senses?

Home. I think of three addresses. First, 117 Shenandoah Avenue, where I grew up. The place where my Mom and Dad taught me about God. The place where my brother, Kyle, and I shared a bedroom and became best friends. The place where all the memories are happy. Second, 4214 Cap Chat Street, where my wife, our children and I lived for ten years. Although we no longer live there, it is the first place that was uniquely ours. The place where Bonnie and I taught our children about God. The place where Jennifer, Amy, Michael, and Matthew took refuge from the outside. The place where, no matter what, there was always someone to tell me, “I love you.”

The place where all six of us last lived together. And third, Heaven, where I will live, and live forever, a permanent abiding place. The place where Father is. The place my Elder Brother is preparing for me. The place of untroubled hearts. Home!

“I am going,” Jesus said, “to prepare a place for you.” If it needs Jesus to prepare it, what a wonderful place heaven must be! It is a task he has assigned to no one else. Paul said, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things were created by him and for him*” (Colossians 1:16 – *emphasis added*). God has never established his people in a place that was “unprepared.” Adam’s first home was in a garden God planted (see Genesis 2:8). It was not a haphazard scattering of seeds that produced Eden’s Garden, it was a deliberate design executed by God’s creative power. When Israel moved into Canaan, they lived in cities others had built, drank from wells others had dug, and ate grapes and olives others had planted (see Deuteronomy 6:10-11). He has always prepared for his people. Jesus could not delegate the work of preparation. He could not perform the work while he was here. He had to go back home to prepare a place for his people.

Jesus told his troubled disciples, “I am going to my Father’s house.” Everything they were hearing and seeing upset them. Talk of death and departure depressed them. Jesus reminded them that he was going home. He had come on explicit instructions of his Father, to do his Father’s work. Now he had almost finished that work. He said, “Remember what I told you – I am going away, but I will come back to you again. If you really love me, you will be very happy for me, for now I can go to the Father, who is greater than I am” (John 14:28 – LB).

Try to imagine the glory of Jesus’ return to the Father’s place. One day he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a borrowed animal and crowds of thousands

welcomed him. He borrowed nothing when he arrived triumphant back at the Father's throne: it was solely on his own merits. Unnumbered saints welcomed his return to the Father's right hand. Imagination cannot picture the glory of our Lord's return, the homecoming afforded the Conqueror as he presented his own blood, a sacrifice once and for all. We do understand, however, that "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9). In that place of exaltation he is preparing another place, a place for us.

### **EYE HATH NOT SEEN**

Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2 – KJV). The word "mansions" means "abiding places," "dwellings," "resting places," or "rooms." Of all of the words used as an alternate for mansions, perhaps none is more significant than "abiding places." That term speaks of the permanency of our eternal home. Contrast that with the pilgrimage depicted by the writer of Hebrews: "For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Hebrews 13:14 – KJV). Or, as the Living Bible paraphrases, "This world is not our home; we are looking forward to our everlasting home in heaven."

The idea of "many rooms" was familiar to the disciples. When Solomon constructed the Temple in Jerusalem, he included an interesting arrangement of rooms. "Solomon built some side rooms against the walls of the main room of the Temple. These rooms were built on top of each other. The rooms on the bottom floor were 7-1/2 feet wide. The rooms on the middle floor were 9 feet wide. The rooms above that were 10-1/2 feet wide" ( 1 Kings 6:5-6 – TEB). In those chambers the utensils of the Temple were carefully laid, the priests dressed and undressed themselves, and possibly in some of the rooms, they feasted on the holy things. These rooms would have served as vestries – the rooms where sacred objects were stored.

The promise of many abiding places would have been of great comfort to the disciples. For the Twelve, their world was becoming smaller and smaller. It seemed that sinister hands were drawing their world ever tighter. As the hostility of their enemies increased, there were fewer and fewer places of sanctuary, fewer and fewer places where they were welcome. But, says Jesus, “There are many abiding places in my Father’s house.” Earthly homes become crowded. There are some places where you may not be welcomed. Wary or uncooperative people may turn you away. That is not the case with our Father’s house. Heaven is as wide as the heart of God. Men may shut their doors and close us out. In heaven we will never be shut out. Centuries have passed and a place has been made for everyone who has fixed their personal trust in the Savior’s word, and still there will be room for the very last person who will place his personal faith in God’s Son. In heaven there will be room for all.

John wrote, “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, *prepared* as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2 – KJV – *emphasis added*). There is that word again, prepared. By now we know who has done the preparation. Let’s pause a moment to consider the beauty of his handiwork:

“I watched that wondrous city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of the skies from God. It was filled with the glory of God, and flashed and glowed like a precious gem, crystal clear like jasper. Its walls were broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels.

“The city itself was pure, transparent gold like glass! The wall was made of jasper, and built on twelve layers of foundation stones inlaid with gems: The first layer with jasper; the second with sapphire; the third with chalcedony;

the fourth with emerald; the fifth with sardonyx; the sixth layer with sardus; the seventh with chrysolite; the eight with beryl; the ninth with topaz; the tenth with chrysoprase; the eleventh with jacinth; the twelfth with amethyst. The twelve gates were made of pearls--each gate from a single pearl! And the main street was pure, transparent gold, like glass” (Revelation 21:9-12, 18-21 – LB).

Jesus knows all about us. He knows what will give us the most happiness. That is part of the preparation. Nothing will be second-rate. The above description of the City lists several precious gems the exact nature of which are unknown to us today. Even in that mystery there is revelation – what Jesus has gone away to prepare will be beyond our wildest imaginations or our fondest dreams. Nothing will be stinted. He showed us his lavish love when he described the welcome home party for the prodigal son. The best robe was put on the returning son. He was given his father’s ring. His bare feet were covered with sandals, only slaves went without shoes. The fattened calf – the original party animal – was prepared for a feast of celebration. The meal was accompanied by music and dancing and rejoicing. If this much prodigal, unrestrained preparation was made for a son who has squandered his inheritance, what will be prepared for the bride, the Lamb’s wife, who is without spot or wrinkle? “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9 – KJV).

### **LOOK HOMEWARD, CHRISTIAN**

In a sermon entitled, “The House on the Hills,” T. DeWitt Talmage expanded the idea of the “many rooms.” He pictured the believer as being received first

into heaven's reception room, then the throne room, next the music room, and finally the family room. With apologies to Dr. Talmage, let's walk through those rooms.

Heaven's reception room is the meeting place of all newcomers. Jesus redeemed them and he has the right to the first welcoming embrace. A favorite hymn for many says, "His smile will be the first to welcome me." All of our Christian lives we've looked forward to that moment. We've thought about it, sang about it, dreamed about it, and prayed about it. When it happens we will understand what the Queen of Sheba meant – the half has never yet been told.

Talmage writes:

"At that moment when you confront each other, Christ looking upon you, and you looking upon Christ, there will be an ecstatic thrill and surging of emotion that beggars all description. Look! They need no introduction. Long ago Christ chose that repentant sinner, and that repentant sinner chose Christ. Mightiest moment of an immortal history – the first kiss of heaven!" (*500 Selected Sermons*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978], volume 15, page 182).

To gain admission to the throne room of an earthly monarch is beyond the ability of most of us. You have seen photographs of the beautiful appointments. Perhaps you've taken a tour and from a distance looked at the grandeur of the throne room. Into heaven's throne room, however, the believer will be freely and warmly welcomed. We have a right to be there. We belong to the royal family. The King has adopted us and we are joint heirs with His only begotten Son. When we look around the throne room, we will realize this is not the first time we've been here. With a confidence that comes only from knowing that the King is our Father, we frequently and

continually “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16). We will boldly go where many have gone before. We were invited!

The music room in our Father’s house will be a special room. For uncounted millennia angel choirs have been singing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3 – KJV). To those voices will be added the praise songs of the redeemed. When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory. When by His grace we shall look on His face that will be glory. There will be music of a different sort when we begin to sing. We know a song that the angels cannot sing. The sound of “Amazing Grace” will never have been sweeter. After ten thousand years of celebrating, it will be as when we first begun.

Talmage writes:

“May we be there some hour when David the psalmist  
fingers the harp, and Miriam of the Red Sea banks claps the  
cymbals, and Gabriel puts his lips to the trumpet and the  
four-and-twenty elders chant” (pp. 186-187).

I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God. There is something special about the word “family.” To the rocking sounds of the Pointer Sister’s song, “We Are Family,” Willie Stargell and the 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series. The Bucs may have overestimated the value of the song, but they learned the worth of the concept. It is a special time when the family gathers. The family room is a special gathering place. Many of our thoughts about heaven revolve around spending time with the saints of all ages. We imagine talking about our experiences and sharing with each other all that the Lord accomplished on our behalf. We think about sitting down with our Father and our Elder Brother and rejoicing in their presence. If that idea of eternity

is true, then perhaps heaven's family room will be the most popular of all of the "many rooms."

### **IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE**

That night, long ago, in the Upper Room, Jesus told his troubled disciples, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3 – KJV). "If I, personally, was not going to prepare a place," Jesus asked, "would I have told you I am going to prepare a place for you?" Writing to the Church in Corinth, Paul seems to acknowledge the importance of the Lord's affirmation. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ," Paul wrote, "we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:19 – KJV). Jesus' statement told the disciples that he had kept no secrets from them concerning this subject. If there was a sorrowful fact that had to be revealed, he would have revealed it. He discussed at length his own death and revealed their coming persecution. Even if it was a piece of knowledge which would have been painful to receive, he loved them – and us – so much that he would have told them. "I would have told you," Jesus said.

On a night when their hearts were troubled, a reaffirmation of Jesus' honesty would have been important to the disciples. It is important to us. We have no document signed by his hand. We have nothing we could take to a court of law. And what court would have the power to summon God to account for his actions? But what we have is all we need. He has given us his promise, he has given us his word. "Because I am the truth," he said, "you can stake all of your hopes confidently in my promise."

And he has gone ahead of us, marking out the way for us. Like the scout who goes ahead of the main body of the army to blaze the trail and determines that it is safe for the rest of the troops to follow, he has gone ahead. Like the pilot boat that



leads other ships through unfamiliar waters and into safe harbors, he has gone ahead. Forty days after his resurrection the disciples watched as Jesus “was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9). While they stood looking up in amazement two white robed men announced, “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” (Acts 1:11).

Jesus promised to return. He did not tell us how or when. God has not revealed the specific details, the exact day and hour, to either man, or angel, or, while he was on earth, to the Son (see Mark 13:32). Jesus simply said that he would return. He did not say that he would send for us. He promised to come in person and conduct us to the Father’s house. Paul echoed that promise: “The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16 – KJV). Jesus will receive us and will confer the honor of the Father and of the Kingdom upon us.

A few hours before Jesus died He prayed, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am” (John 17:24). He will answer his own prayer on reception day. Paul said when that happens we will be “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The expression “caught up” suggests an eagle catching up his prey and carrying it off toward a mountain peak. It suggests a strong man rescuing a child from the path of a runaway car and carrying the child to safety. It is from a root word which means “to take for oneself.” It is the same word used to describe the position of security enjoyed by believers: “No one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:29). In usage outside the Bible, the word describes the action of a magnet. Like a magnet, his love will snatch us out of this world and take us directly to our God. The phrase “to meet” indicates we will be as eager for this

gathering as will our Lord. Jesus said if he was lifted up he would draw all men unto himself (John 12:32). Our home going will be the supreme demonstration of that power. Let not your heart be troubled.

When he is ready to return nothing will be able to stop him. History is going some where. That somewhere is the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. Let not your heart be troubled. The world situation changes with each passing day. Let not your heart be troubled. Your circumstances and needs may be great. Let not your heart be troubled. Nothing can hinder or impede his glorious return, not by the twinkling of an eye!

Looking up at the stars one night a little girl remarked, "If it's this beautiful on this side, what must it be like on the other side?" Jesus has stated the greatest truth in the simplest way: "Heaven is where I am. There is no need to speculate. There is no need to be afraid. There is a room in my Father's house that is yours alone. I am preparing your place of permanent abode. As soon as it is ready, I will personally come for you. Do not be afraid. Do not let your heart be troubled."

What a difference between, "I told you so," and "I would have told you!" That difference calms a troubled heart.

## Chapter Five

### GRACE ENOUGH

I received a letter from Elaine, a 20 year old woman, who wrote, "This is very important to me. I have been praying for healing for many years. I have heard from so many people who say you will never receive healing if you lack faith. People also tell me that I have to believe that I have received healing, even if I still feel sick. I am human just like everyone else. So if I do not see a healing, how can I say I have been healed? Then I went to a different church and the preacher said that God wants to heal all of his people. Then why won't he heal me? I'm confused!"

It is no wonder Elaine is confused. She has been told three different things about divine healing: lack of faith hinders all healing; we must believe you have been healed whether we have received healing or not; and God's will is for everyone to

be healed. Let us examine what Elaine was told about divine healing. Can they be supported from Scripture?

First, does lack of faith hinder all healing?

Some of the Bible's most notable individuals were victims of illness. They also failed to see healing accomplished for others and resigned those people to their sickness. Nowhere is it suggested that these people were sick because they were living in sin or lacked faith to appropriate healing. The facts are merely stated as they occurred.

God promises healing and he performs it, but he did not always heal sick people in Bible days, neither does he always heal them today. Consider the following people of Bible days who suffered sickness themselves or left others sick, unable to pray the "prayer of faith" for them:

Elisha, prophet to a nation — "Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died" (2 Kings 13:14).

Timothy, companion of Paul — "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23).

Epaphroditus, a pastor in the first century church — "Indeed he (Epaphroditus) was ill, and almost died" (Philippians 2:27).

Trophimus, early Christian leader — "I [Paul] left Trophimus at Miletus sick" (2 Timothy 4:20).

Elisha was one of the most outstanding of all Old Testament characters. The Bible says that Elisha had a double portion of God's Spirit, twice as much as Elijah (whom the Jews revered more than Elisha), and yet he became sick and died.

Timothy, a leader in the Early Church had stomach problems and Paul advised him to use wine as a medical remedy. Timothy obviously had received no miraculous healing.

Epaphroditus, who took a love offering from the Philippian church to Paul, became sick. His condition deteriorated to the point of near death. He later recovered, but for a time, the outcome was in doubt.

Paul, himself, prayed for Trophimus and did not see a miracle of healing in the life of his friend.

Was Elisha a sinner? Was he less than totally committed to God? Was Timothy, or Epaphroditus, or Trophimus, or Paul lacking in faith? Were they hiding sin in their lives? The Bible does not relate these cases as though these men were abnormal, or that their lives were out of pattern. We must be honest — there are times when God chooses not to grant our prayers for healing. It is not because of whim, but because of his divine will. It is not our fault. Sometimes it is his will!

Secondly, Elaine was instructed to make a positive confession about her healing. Positive confession teaching states: “The Lord has healed us of our sicknesses or diseases. We may still have all of the symptoms of the disease, but if we will confess our healing, and make a positive confession, we are healed. We may continue to have the symptoms for days, weeks, or even longer, but if we confess our healing, we are healed. We must make a positive confession.”

Words can be abused or misused. One such word is “confession.” The basic meaning of the word is “saying the same thing” — in other words, agreement or consent. There is a current usage of the word “confession” that has no basis in the New Testament. To be specific, nowhere is any mention made of “positive” or “negative” confession, and especially as those expressions relate to divine healing.

The New Testament speaks of confession in two ways. First, we must confess our sins. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9 — KJV). Second, Jesus must be confessed (or acknowledged) as having come in the flesh and he must be confessed as Lord. “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3). “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Our sins are a fact, as are the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ. We are advised, however, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 — KJV). Faith is evidence. It has substance. That is very different from the wishful thinking generated by the teaching of a positive confession. False teaching only amplifies the frustration of the sufferer, gives opportunity for new guilt, and never glorifies the Lord. God’s Word nowhere tells us to state publicly as a fact something for which there is no evidence. We may confess our healing and claim our healing, but if God has not healed us, we have not been healed, all confession to the contrary.

The third confusing statement Elaine heard about divine healing declared: it is God’s will for everyone to be in perfect health.

This teaching is based in part on 3 John 2: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth (KJV).” John was simply stating his fondest wish or prayer; he was not establishing a doctrine of physical wholeness. If such a doctrine were true, why does the death rate remain 100 percent among Christians? This does not at all detract from the Biblical teaching that God can and does heal by His power.

### **A GOD WHO HEALS**

God is a healing God. In fact, one of the titles by which he identified himself in the Old Testament is, “Jehovah-Rophi” — “the Lord that healeth thee” (Exodus 15:26). The Hebrew word for “heal” is used more than sixty times in the Old Testament. It is also translated physician or doctor (Genesis 50:2; Job 13:4). In 1 Kings 18:30, the word is translated “repaired” (KJV, NIV) or “rebuilt” (TEB) and is used of Elijah repairing the altar of sacrifice. The majority of times, the word is used concerning spiritual healing, or the healing of objects other than human bodies. When God declared himself the Healing God in Exodus 15:26, he had just shown a tree to Moses which turned the bitter waters of Marah into sweet drinking water. In 2 Kings 2, God used Elisha to “heal” water (see 2:19-22). In 2 Chronicles 7, God told Solomon if his people repented, he would “heal their land” (7:14). Isaiah prophesied a similar national healing for Egypt (see Isaiah 19:22). In Psalm 41:4, David prayed, “Heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee” (KJV). In Psalm 60:2, David asked God to fix earthquake damage. God “heals the brokenhearted. He bandages their wounds” (Psalm 147:3 — TEB). Isaiah compared conversion with healing: “Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed” (Isaiah 6:10 — KJV). Through Jeremiah God said, “I will cure you of backsliding” (Jeremiah 3:22). He repeated the promise to Hosea: “I will heal their backsliding (Hosea 14:4 — KJV).

Although most Old Testament references to healing refer to spiritual healing, there are direct, specific passages which describe the healing of sick, diseased, or broken bodies. The Bible contains many examples of God’s intervention in human misery, suffering and sickness and the healing of individuals by his miraculous power. In Genesis 20, Abraham prayed to God and he healed Abimelech and his whole family. In Numbers 12, Moses interceded for his sister, Miriam, and after a delay of seven days, she was healed of leprosy. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman followed Elisha’s

instructions to wash seven times in the Jordan River and he was healed. In 2 Kings 20, Hezekiah prayed and God healed him of an immediate life-threatening condition. In Psalm 21, David received additional years of life in answer to prayer.

Isaiah prophesied that the wounds of Messiah would become instruments of divine healing: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5 — KJV). There are 22 specific New Testament instances where Jesus performed miraculous healings. Add to that the three ultimate healings — the three dead people He restored to life — and the picture of a God who heals is complete. Attempting a chronological look at Jesus’ healing ministry we see him actively overturning physical, human suffering by his own power.

The first recorded healing may have been of a nobleman’s son. Next, he healed a demoniac. Then in quick succession, he healed Peter’s mother-in-law, a leper, and a paralytic. Next he healed a man who had been paralyzed 38 years. The next person to receive a miraculous healing was a man with a withered hand. Then he healed the Centurion’s servant. A demon-possessed man who could not speak was healed next and then a Gadarene demoniac. A woman with an issue of blood touched his garment and was healed. Matthew next records the healing of two blind men and a man unable to speak. The daughter of a woman of Syrophenicia was healed next. She was followed by a deaf mute. A blind man at Bethesda had his sight restored. Coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus healed a demoniac son. Luke records next that Jesus healed ten lepers, one of whom paused to thank him. John notes another blind man’s sight restored. A woman with an infirmity that bent her double walked upright for the first time in 18 years. Next, he healed a man suffering with dropsy — an inflammation of the tissues. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record what



appears to have been Jesus' last healing, the restoration of sight to two more blind men.

### **A GOD WHO ACCEPTS THE BLAME**

One of the most awesome discoveries is that Jehovah-Rophi, the God who heals, in his own Word, takes total blame for all physical affliction:

“And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the Lord said unto him, *Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing or the blind? Have not I the Lord?*” (Exodus 4:10-11 — KJV, emphasis added).

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse conducted a week of meetings in a church when the pastor's wife was expecting her first child. On the last night of the services, Dr. Barnhouse led the worship, knowing that a baby was being born into the parsonage family. At the end of the service the pastor returned and asked Dr. Barnhouse to speak to him in his study.

There the pastor blurted out, “Our child is a Mongoloid. I haven't told my wife, and I don't know what I'm going to tell her.

Dr. Barnhouse said, “My friend, this is of the Lord.” And he turned to the above passage from Exodus 4 and read it to the heartbroken pastor. Then Dr. Barnhouse said, “You know the promise of Romans 8. All things, including this Mongoloid child, work together for good to those that love the Lord.”

The pastor went immediately to his wife's hospital room. She was nearly hysterical. “I want to see my baby,” she screamed. “I've asked to see my baby and they won't let me see him. What's wrong with my baby?”

Her husband said, "My precious darling, the Lord has blessed us with a Mongoloid child."

She cried for a long time and then asked, "Where did you get that?"

"From God's Word," he replied.

This incident occurred long before the days of direct dialing and instant call switching. All telephone calls, in and out of the hospital, had to be routed through a central switchboard. The switchboard operator was cruel and sadistic. She wanted to prove that Christians are no different from anyone else. So when the pastor's wife called her mother, the operator listened in. She heard no hysteria, there were no tears, just the recounting of the blessing. The operator could not believe what she heard, but she quickly circulated the story throughout the entire hospital.

The following Sunday the pastor was back in his pulpit. The telephone operator and 70 nurses were in service. That morning 30 of the nurses received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – because of the birth of one Mongoloid child!

### **A SOVEREIGN CHOICE**

Visiting in Jerusalem one day for a feast, Jesus walked near a pool named Bethesda. Surrounding the pool were "a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water" (John 5:3 — KJV). It would have been easy for Jesus to heal them all. We know that on several occasions, he healed the sick from an entire town or geographical region. In Capernaum one day, he "healed all that were sick" (Matthew 8:16). Another day he withdrew from a confrontation with the Pharisees and as a great multitude of people gathered around Him, "He healed them all" (Matthew 12:15). Standing in an area that could be reached from Tyre and Sidon, many sick people were brought to him, and he "healed them all" (Luke 6:19). This time he healed only one man.

Bethesda's pool was surrounded by human despair — sorrow being always in the majority. None of the sufferers seemed to be any more needy or any more powerless. One man there had been sick for 38 years. During that time an entire generation had passed away. The population of the world changed while he suffered. For reasons that are not revealed to us, Jesus passed the "great multitude" of sick, chose that one man and healed him.

This man did not turn to Jesus and cry, "Have mercy on me." He had no more idea than the other sufferers that Jesus could heal him. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed, the man gave a whining complaint of how he had suffered alone for years, and never answered Jesus' question. On one occasion, Paul healed a crippled man in Lystra. Luke writes, "Paul looked straight at him and saw that the man believed God could heal him" (Acts 14:9 — TEB). There was no expression of faith on the part of Bethesda's cripple. After he had been healed, he did not know who it was who had healed him. Nothing is written of the man's faith after the incident and there is no indication he ever became a loyal follower of Jesus. Human reason finds no explanation for him being singled out above the others. The only explanation is the sovereignty of God. Sometimes he heals; sometimes he does not.

Paul told the believers in Rome:

"[God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.'

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:14-18).

Paul was speaking directly and specifically about God's sovereign choice of Israel as his people, as the nation through whom his Son would be born. He traced God's selection first to Abraham, then Isaac, and then Jacob. Paul pointed out that Jacob had a twin brother who was not chosen. The reason was simply God's sovereign will. Commenting later on the healing of the man at Bethesda, Jesus appealed to the same principle. "For just as the Father raises the dead and give them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (John 5:21).

Why did Jesus choose this one man? Was he the most needy? Was he the most friendless, or the most helpless? Surely there were others equally needing healing, equally deserving of mercy! The world says survival goes to the fittest. Was this Jesus' way of saying, "Survival goes to the unfittest?" Maybe this was Jesus' way of saying, "Do not try to lock my mercy into a rigid pattern of your own making. I will upset your wise schemes by choosing the foolish things of this world. I will confound your mighty plans by choosing the weak things of this world (see 1 Corinthians 1:27). My will is sovereign. Sometimes I will bless you with instant, miraculous healing. Sometimes I will bless you by delaying or denying that miracle."

### **CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?**

One of the most important passages in the Bible dealing with divine healing, details Paul's own struggles as recorded in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul tells about praying three times for a thorn in his flesh and three times being told, by God, "No, Paul. I'm not going to heal you. My grace is sufficient for you." Let's take a closer look at this story:

"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man — whether in the body

or apart from the body I do not know, God knows — was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me — to keep me from exalting myself!

“Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.’

Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4, 7-10 — NASB).

For fourteen years, Paul kept the most incredible secret. When he finally broke his silence and spoke about it, he was still overwhelmed by what had happened to him. Fourteen years after the fact, Paul still did not know whether he had received a vision, or whether he had been physically transported into Paradise. Only God, he said, knew the facts of the matter. More than a decade later, Paul was not permitted to reveal the details of his experience.

One thing was certain, God had allowed him to see Paradise. In writings found outside of the Bible, “paradise” suggests “a king’s park.” To be invited to such a place meant that the individual enjoyed a rare intimacy with the royal household. Next to being chosen as an apostle, it was the most sacred privilege, the greatest honor,

Paul had ever known. This secret between Paul and his Lord, was also the source of the greatest trial of Paul's life.

### **THE GRACE OF THORNS**

Paul explained that he was kept from becoming too elated about his experience. His enemies frequently pointed to their spiritual experiences as signs that they were better than Paul. It would have been easy for Paul to boast about his visions and to become the center of a personality cult. In the face of an array of revelations he received an antidote. As a preventive against spiritual pride, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to buffet him continually.

Many explanations have been offered for Paul's "thorn in the flesh." Speculation ranges from carnal temptations to migraine headaches, from persecution to epilepsy, from a tortured conscience to eye trouble. There is no reason to abandon the literal meaning. Paul suffered some physical problem. It was something which frustrated Paul and caused anxiety in his life. It was a permanent affliction with which Paul suffered continually. It was suffering with a point.

Within the limits set by God, a messenger from Satan, continually buffeted Paul. Recognizing the source of the attack, Paul prayed with persistent faith for the complete removal of the thorn. There are two ways to lighten a burden. The first is to lessen the actual weight. The second is to strengthen the person who bears the burden. Paul asked for a lighter burden, God gave him a greater measure of divine strength. James said, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man, availeth much" (James 5:16 — KJV) The Everyday Bible translates that verse, "When a good man prays, great things happen." In this case, it did not produce a miraculous healing.

After three specific prayers for relief, Paul knew that his affliction would never leave him. His specific request was not granted, but he received a better answer than the one he wanted. Jesus indicated the grace that Paul was, at that moment

experiencing, was sufficient. What he already possessed was enough for all of the diseases and disappointments he would ever face. The word “sufficient” paints a picture of an impressive fort raised to ward off an invading enemy. No matter what the enemy attempts, he cannot breach the walls, or conquer the people inside the walls. It was this sufficient grace that Paul was describing to the Ephesians when he declared Jesus “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

Because God’s strength became his glory, Paul exulted in his personal weakness. He would never boast about the magnificent vision. The compensation of sufficient grace far outweighed the trial brought on by the thorn. A weakness he would never overcome and a suffering he would never escape declared a grace that could never be defeated. “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me,” Paul said. Just as the Shekinah of God’s presence hovered over the Tabernacle in the wilderness, God’s grace was pitched around Paul like a tent. The pain was never removed, but he was surrounded by God’s love.

This chapter in the autobiography of Paul is important for us today. Here was one of God’s greatest saints plunged from privilege to pain. Chosen by God to do incredible works for His Kingdom, Paul still suffered physical infirmity and was denied healing by divine prerogative, but granted divine grace. He had everything to recommend him, but Paul was still a man with a physical handicap and suffering. If one so great as the “Apostle to the Gentiles” could trust God in his suffering, so can we. We should pray for healing, believe God for healing and expect God to heal. But understand that God’s perfect will for our lives is in His control and not ours. Cultivate an attitude that says, “I believe God’s Word. My condition does not lessen my faith!” His all-sufficient can grace minister to us even if we remain sick.

Remember this: if we demand complete, instantaneous miraculous healing, we may be limiting what God wants to do in our lives. When we are weak in ourselves, and conscious of that weakness, then we can pitch our lives under the tent of God's grace. The burden of pain, the suffering of sickness, can be a means to lessening our dependence on ourselves, and deepening our dependence upon God. Sometimes the greatest blessing is not the healing, but patient endurance under grace.

### **HIDDEN RESOURCES**

"We know," Paul wrote, "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 — KJV). That verse is a favorite of many. There is comfort in knowing God is working in us according to his own good pleasure. When things we do not understand are viewed through the light of trust, his peace floods our hearts. Too often, however, we allow that verse to become an excuse for meager faith, rather than a reason to exult in a loving Father. When we are confronted with something we do not understand, we are tempted to throw up our hands and say, "Oh, well, you know what the Bible says, 'All things work together for good.'"

On the other hand, a defiant confidence, one that looks at the reality and decides to trust God regardless of the circumstances, makes that verse both a sword and a shield. It is a defensive safeguard for our faith, and an offensive weapon that can overcome doubt and despair. One of the greatest lessons we need to learn is, God can do something with sickness besides heal it. He can make it one of the "all things (that) work together for good" for those who love him. God has revealed, in his Word — in the Old Testament, in the life and ministry of Jesus, and in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Early Church — his willingness to heal. Nevertheless, he has a perfect plan for your life and mine and those plans may not include miraculous healing. Remember, if



you are sick, he can do something with your sickness besides heal it. He can use it to bless you, and those around you, far more than you might ever be blessed by healing.

Paul wrote:

“We have troubles all around us, but we are not defeated.

We do not know what to do, but we do not give up. We are persecuted, but God does not leave us. We are hurt sometimes, but we are not destroyed.

“I have learned to be satisfied with the things I have and with everything that happens. I know how to live when I am poor.

And I know how to live when I have plenty. I have learned the secret of being happy at any time in everything that happens. I have learned to be happy when I have all that I need and when I do not have the things I need. I can do all things through Christ because he gives me strength” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9; Philippians 4:11-13 — TEB).

All of nature depends on hidden resources. Tall, massive trees send their roots down into the earth to draw up water and minerals. Powerful rivers have their sources in far-away snow-capped mountains. The most important part of a tree is the part you cannot see, the root system. The most important part of a river is its source. The most important part of the Christian’s life is the part only God sees. Unless we draw on the deep resources of God by faith, we will fail against the pressures of life.

Paul’s motto was, “I am ready for anything through the One who lives inside of me and gives me His strength.” The Christian’s roots are deeper than himself or his circumstances. That is the reason Paul could be content with plenty or penury. He was content with his Christ. And that is the secret!

God may not have healed you. He may never heal you in this life. If that is the case with you, then trust his Word that declares in your weakness, his strength is made perfect and achieves its purpose. You can say with Paul, “Most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Amplified Bible expands God’s promise:

“But he said to me, my grace — my favor and loving kindness and mercy — are enough for you, [that is, sufficient against any danger and to enable you to bear the trouble manfully]; for my strength and power are made perfect — fulfilled and completed and show themselves most effective — in [your] weakness. Therefore, I will all the more gladly glory in my weaknesses and infirmities, that the strength and power of Christ, the Messiah, may rest — yes, may pitch a tent [over] and dwell — upon me!”

At this moment, and at all moments that will ever occur, the grace of God is sufficient. This sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ is declared without any limiting phrases. His grace is sufficient to hold you, sufficient to strengthen you, sufficient to make your trouble useful for you, sufficient to bring you out of it, sufficient to bring you out of ten thousand like it.

I believe in the ability of God to heal sick bodies, but if he chooses not to do so, I know that he has decided to do something with that sickness besides heal it. It is one of the “all things” that “work together for good to them that love the Lord, who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

## Chapter Six

# THE GREATEST FAIRY TALE OF ALL TIME

She came into my store carrying several containers of jewelry – boxes, bags and Tupperware (TM) bowls. With a nervous smile she said, “I’m Martha. I called you about an appraisal.”

For the next several hours we examined dozens of pieces. There was a special story connected with many of them. I remember the airplane cuff links. Martha declined my offer to buy them, explaining that they had belonged to her father.

Among the collection was a beautiful emerald cut diamond. It had been her engagement ring. Since the divorce some years earlier, it had not been worn.

Hesitantly at first, Martha began to talk about herself, and a customer became a friend.

She shared her daughter's wedding plans with me and she shared her feelings about the marriage of her only girl. She showed me Lynn's bridal photographs – I think I saw them before Lynn did.

Then there was the fairy tale. Martha had gone to the mountains for a week-end vacation, but she and her automobile ended up in a ditch. That was when she met John. He stopped to help her, and a romance began.

When Martha first told me about John, she was cautious. And they were cautious with each other. Old wounds still needed healing, for each of them. Little by little, however, they opened up to each other and one afternoon, in what was literally a spur of the moment decision, they drove from North Carolina to Tennessee and were married.

They bought Martha's wedding ring in a jewelry store across from the courthouse. A preacher worked in there, so they walked down the hall and the Reverend Mr. Loveday performed their wedding ceremony. They shared their honeymoon meal at the Cracker Barrel restaurant. John, always the strong, silent type, succumbed to wedding day nerves. He ordered the Wednesday special. It was Thursday.

Their honeymoon trip was back to their new home in North Carolina. They sat for a long time in the front porch swing.

A few days later John's vacation was over and he went back to work. He called Martha when he arrived at the factory, just like he'd done when they were dating. "I thought since we were now married he might not call," Martha said. You could tell the phone call pleased her.

Martha was back in town to close the sale of her house and stopped in to tell us all the good news. In typical fashion, she nervously twisted her hands and said, "We did it! John and I got married last week!" If ever I have seen a lady walking on the

clouds, it was she. A newlywed of one week, and, more the bubbly bride than her daughter had been.

I have written the words you have just read with a smile. I sincerely wish for Martha and John a life that is “happy ever after.” It really does seem like a fairy tale.

### **FAIRY TALES AND TALL TALES**

J. R. R. Tolkien, one of the great modern masters of the fairy tale, writes that the fairy tale “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat..., giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (*The Tolkien Reader* [New York: Ballantine, 1966], page 68).

And I think of another fairy tale.

It is about a king no one recognizes. He sleeps out in the open and depends on the kindness of others for his daily bread. He so scandalizes the people of his day that they ask, “Are you he who is to come?” With the world’s greatest attempt at humor his enemies write down the joke. In fact, they wrote it in three languages so no one would miss out on the laugh.

Six hundred years later someone else wrote about that fairy tale: He “suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He arose again from the dead.” It is God’s fairy tale. And he expects us to believe it. If we believe it, He promises, we will live happily ever after!

We like our fairy tales.

“Once upon a time” fascinates us.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Dorothy. A tornado picked up her house in Kansas and dropped it on a wicked witch in the merry old Land of Oz.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Cinderella. Her foot fit the glass slipper and she lived happily ever after.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Lucy. She played hide-and-seek in a wardrobe and had great adventures with a lion and a witch.

Today we've updated once upon a time. It now begins, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."

A first cousin to the fairy tale is the tall tale. Did you hear the one about:

A pine tree that grew so fast it pulled itself up by the roots.

A climate so healthy they had to shoot a man to open a cemetery.

A grandfather clock so old that the shadow of the pendulum has worn a hole in the back of the case.

A scarecrow so frightening that crows bring back the corn they stole last year.

A young boy came home from Sunday school one day and told his mother, "We heard the most exciting story today. It was about an Israeli general named Moses. He led a commando raid into Egypt and rescued a bunch of prisoners. When the Egyptian king heard about it, he sent his army after them. Well, General Moses radioed back to headquarters and called for a construction crew who built a bridge across the Red Sea. When Moses had his people safely across, he radioed for the air force and they blew up the bridge and the Egyptian army."

His mother asked, "Son, are you sure that's the story you heard today?"

"No, Mom," he admitted, "but if I told it the way my teacher did, you would not believe it!"

The Bible is full of such stories.

Matthew abandoned a lucrative tax collecting business to follow a carpenter who claimed to be Messiah.

Zacchaeus climbed up a sycamore tree a crook and climbed down a saint.

Paul set out to deliver Christians to their deaths and came back a fool for Christ.

### **THE PUBLICAN**

The King James Version calls him a “publican.” That was because Matthew handled public money, the tax money. In the town of Capernaum, which Jesus made his headquarters, Matthew had successfully bid for the job of tax collector. Rome established how much tax each individual paid. Any money that could be collected above the minimum went to the publican as his commission. It was completely legal, but it was inherently corrupt. Because the citizens had no right of appeal, they had no protection against the extortion of the tax collectors.

Rome established three specific taxes required of each man: a ground tax of one-tenth of his grain and one-fifth of his fruit, a one percent income tax, and a poll tax that he paid until age sixty-five. In addition to these there were taxes on imports and exports, a road tax, a bridge tax, a tax to enter a market place, a town, or a harbor, a tax on pack animals, a tax on wheels and axles of wagons and carts. There was even a sales tax. The man who controlled and collected the taxes could become a very wealthy man.

One day, Matthew was sitting at his tax office when Jesus walked by. This was probably not the first time he had seen the Teacher from Nazareth. Jesus had already made a reputation for befriending people whom the good citizens of Galilee avoided. Perhaps Matthew knew some of them. Maybe he had stood on the outskirts of the crowd and listened to Jesus teach. Perhaps Jesus had personally paid the tax of some poor person, a widow or an orphan. From what we know about the compassion

of Jesus, that would not have been out of character. Whatever the circumstances, Jesus stopped, looked at Matthew as he worked on his books, and said, "Follow me."

And Matthew followed! He just laid aside his pen and his books and followed Jesus down the road. If this story had occurred in the twentieth century, Matthew would not even have turned out the lights! The voice of Jesus was ringing in his ears and in his heart, and he just started following. There may have been a dozen career opportunities for Matthew – bigger territories, bigger commissions. Maybe a retirement villa in some exotic city. Maybe even a governorship of a Roman province. There was plenty of opportunity for hesitation, plenty of chance for second-guessing. But he never looked back.

Logic suggests some questions need to be asked. Where are we going? Why are we going there? Who is this man who claims to lead? What will we find when we get there? That is the fairy tale! A man can be touched with the message of Jesus and leave behind everything he holds dear, just to follow. No questions asked, just one foot in front of the other, the heart following where the mind may hesitate to go.

"Follow me," Jesus said.

"Okay," Matthew said.

And they started an adventure together. It is the way of a fairy tale.

### **THE SWINDLER**

I wonder what thoughts occur to parents when they select names for their children. One of my favorite stories is about parents who were almost illiterate. They could read only enough to get themselves into trouble, as witnessed by the name they chose for their newest son. When the pastor, who was to dedicate the child, asked for the name of the infant, the father proudly replied, "Peesalm Sieve."

"Where did you get that?" the preacher asked.

"From the Bible," came the reply.



“See, here preacher,” the man said as he pointed to an old Bible with Roman numerals – Psalm CIV.

For a male child to be named “Innocent” or “Pure” demonstrates the faith of his parents. It would be a difficult name to live up to. For one man who grew up in Jericho, it was impossible. His name may have meant “innocent” or “pure,” but Zacchaeus was neither. Like Matthew, he was a tax collector, a man mentioned in the same breath with robbers and murderers. You can find the occupation listed in the Bible as “tax collectors and other sinners.”

Jesus was making His final trip through Jericho, and it was causing no small stir. A blind man who demanded to be noticed was miraculously healed and the whole town paid attention. Word even reached Zacchaeus. With only curiosity for his motivation, Zacchaeus joined the crowds trying to see the Miracle Worker. Short of stature, he could not see over the heads of the people in front of him and certainly no one would step aside to give a hated tax collector a chance. His only opportunity was to reach the branches of a nearby sycamore tree.

If you have a set pattern for introducing someone to Jesus, throw it away. Here is one conversion which does not follow four spiritual laws, a favorite witness scripture, or praying a sinner’s prayer. Jesus looked into the tree and said, “Zacchaeus! Come down. You and I are having dinner at your house today!” There is no other recorded incident where Jesus invited himself anywhere. This time he did. On his way out of the tree, Zacchaeus turned over a new leaf.

Conversion for Zacchaeus was expensive, but it was a price he willingly paid and paid beyond any possible legal or moral obligation. The salvation he freely received generated a unique generosity in his heart. The Law required a four-fold repayment only if robbery was deliberate and accompanied by a violent act of destruction. If voluntary confession was made and voluntary restitution offered, the

penalty, above the price of the original goods, was only 20 percent. Zacchaeus offered to pay back 400 percent to anyone he had cheated, plus give half of all he owned for the care of the poor! Zacchaeus would be a poor man when the day was over, but he would possess greater riches than he had ever dreamed possible. That's the fairy tale!

### **THE PHARISEE**

Can you imagine reviewing your life – a life of promise and position – and then in a completely frank analysis saying, “I know that all those things are worthless trash?”

What accomplishments were being so easily dismissing? From the man's own pen, here is the list:

“Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

“What anyone else dares to boast about, I also dare to boast about. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 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 day and a night in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from

false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:21, 23-28).

That is quite a resume! The speaker, of course, was the Apostle Paul. After listing achievements of incredible magnitude, he tells us a fairy tale. “I dismiss all of those things,” he said, “as completely worthless, as though they were excrement fit only for the sewer, when I compare them with being found in Jesus Christ and being clothed in His own righteousness” (see Philippians 3:8).

“We are,” he told the church in Corinth, “fools for Christ’s sake” (1 Corinthians 4:10). And that is the fairy tale. Possessions and honors, accomplishments and triumphs, punishments and defeats – none of them singularly, nor all of them together, outshine the joy of knowing Jesus Christ in a personal, intimate, life-changing way.

### **THE SLAVE WHO OWED \$10,000,000**

Jesus told an incredible story one day. He must have winked at someone in the audience as he began:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The

servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:23-35).

This parable has two messages, two fairy tales. First, God is willing to forgive the staggering debts we have charged to our individual accounts. Second, because He has forgiven us, He requires that we forgive those who are in debt to us.

Matthew said that a man owed his master 10,000 talents. A talent is a measure of weight equal to 75 pounds. Its value would depend on whether the talents were talents of gold or of silver. If he owed the debt in silver it would equally approximately \$10,000,000. If the debt was owed gold, the balance the slave owed would have been over \$300,000,000. Even using the smaller figure, the amount of money that the slave owed was astonishing. Most cities in America do not have annual budgets of \$10,000,000. The total annual revenue of the province of Judea at the time of Jesus was only 600 talents. How could a slave, who made only pennies (denarii) a day owe that much money? The only logical answer is that he served a gracious king who extended any credit asked.

Suppose you had borrowed \$10,000,000, interest free, the day Jesus spoke this parable. If you paid back the loan at the rate of \$500 each month, you would have satisfied the debt about the time the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. At current interest rates, you could make payments totaling tens of thousands of dollars each year and not reduce the principle. You would still owe \$10,000,000! The debt was greater than a king's ransom!

William Barclay gives a vivid illustration of the size of the debt:

“The ten thousand talent debt would take to carry it an army of about 8600 carriers, each carrying a sack of sixpences 60 pounds in weight; and they would form, at a distance of a yard apart, a line five miles long!” (The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, page 194).

Faced with the prospect of prison until he could pay the debt, the servant fell on his knees and begged for more time. Time would not be the slave's friend, it would only add to the debt. I heard about a woman who charged \$13,000 at a store in South Carolina. She arranged to pay \$150 per month on the account and did so

faithfully for two years. Because of the interest structure on the debt and the amount of the payment, at the end of those two years the woman owed \$14,000! Time only compounded the problem. It was that way for the man who owed 10,000 talents to his king. Interest would pile up and he could never pay. What he needed was cancellation. That is what he received – his master forgave the entire debt. He simply canceled the slave's account!

If a man only earns a few cents each day, there is no way he could ever pay a debt of \$10,000,000. We are all like that slave. We owed a debt that was beyond our ability to pay. Every sin we committed only added to our account. When we asked God to forgive us, He did not remind us of the size of the debt. We asked Him to forgive it, and He did. We could not pay it, so He canceled it. That is the greatest fairy tale of all time.

### **FORGIVENESS DEMONSTRATED**

One of the godliest kings to ever rule the nation of Judah was Hezekiah. One of the ungodliest kings to ever rule the nation of Judah was his son, Manasseh. One day the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah, "Put your house in order, because you will die; you will not recover" (2 Kings 20:1). Hezekiah prayed for mercy and for recovery and God delayed his death for 15 years. Three years after he prayed that prayer, three years after Hezekiah should have died, Manasseh was born. At age 12, Manasseh became king.

Can you imagine what it would have been like for Manasseh to grow up with a father whose last 15 years were a testimony to the power and grace of God? Wouldn't you suppose that seeing how God had blessed his father, Manasseh would have been an even greater king than Hezekiah? Things, however, are often not what they seem.

Manasseh erected idols throughout the land, reestablished the worship of Baal, and built pagan altars in the temple of the Lord. He completely overthrew the influence of his righteous father. He even offered his own sons as fiery, human sacrifices. When some of his people began to oppose him, Manasseh had them murdered. The streets of Jerusalem flowed from one end to the other with innocent blood.

God sent the Assyrian army against Judah as His instrument of judgment. They captured Manasseh and led him in chains to Babylon. In a gesture calculated to totally humiliate Manasseh, the Assyrians put a hook through his nose and paraded him as a prisoner. In captivity Manasseh remembered his father's God, humbled himself, and repented.

God forgave Manasseh and restored him to his throne where he reigned for a total of 55 years. In response to the mercy of God, the Bible says:

“[Manasseh] got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord” (2 Chronicles 33:15-16).

Will God forgive? Yes, He will! How much? He will forgive everyone who asks, as much as He forgave Manasseh, or Matthew, or Zacchaeus. Or me. The first message from the greatest fairy tale of all time is, God will forgive anyone who asks for His forgiveness!

### **IF YOU WON'T, I CAN'T**

What would you do if you owed someone \$10,000,000 and he suddenly wrote, “Paid In Full” across your IOU? Do you think you would be willing to forgive

anyone any debt that they owed to you? The man in Jesus' parable looked for, and found, a man who owed him a debt. Remember the debt that had just been forgiven was so large 8600 men carrying it would form a line five miles long. If this is really "once upon a time" and "they all lived happily ever after" this man will forgive a debt so small that he could carry it in one pocket.

With great naivete we believe that the reason he is looking for his debtor is to return the gift of forgiveness.

We are shocked when he grabs his fellow slave by the neck and demands full payment.

We are horrified when he orders the man thrown into prison until the entire 100 denarii debt is paid.

We are gratified when the king throws the ungrateful servant in prison and orders torture until the original 10,000-talent debt is fully paid.

We are grieved and confused when Jesus says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

There it is – one of the most awesome statements in all of Scripture! And it is the second lesson from the greatest fairy tale of all time. If I refuse to forgive those who trespass against me, my heavenly Father will refuse to forgive me. My unwillingness to forgive in a horizontal direction plugs up the channel of forgiveness in a vertical direction.

Concerning forgiveness, the first reaction of many people is like a woman in Omaha, Nebraska. She was bitten by a stray dog. Tests were made on the health of the dog.

"I am sorry to inform you," the doctor said, "but you have been bitten by a rabid dog."



The woman sat down and instantly began to write. She wrote furiously for some time. When the doctor noticed what the woman was doing, he said, "It will not be necessary for you to write your will. I am going to give you a shot which will cure you."

"I am not making my will," the woman said. "I am making a list of all the people I want to bite before I get the shot!"

I would have bitten Russell. More than any other person I have known, he caused me the greatest personal pain. He is the only person I have hated with such intense feelings. For years I harbored great resentment against the man. For several months I had the newspaper in the town where Russell lived mailed to me. I read it daily, hoping to have the pleasure of reading his obituary. I knew a man as mean as he would surely be struck dead by divine vengeance.

Many years later, and by God's grace, I finally forgave Russell. It was then that I learned how costly forgiveness is. It cost me my bitterness, hatred and malice. It cost me my poisoned spirit. It cost me sleepless nights. To the best of my knowledge, Russell never knew of my intense feelings against him. My bitterness affected only me. That bitterness was like the deposits which build up on the inside walls of our blood vessels, causing hardening of the arteries. The more build up, the less blood can flow through the arteries. The condition is ultimately fatal. My festering bitterness had the same effect. God's mercy could not flow freely into my life because my sour spirit blocked the channel.

It cost me to forgive Russell. It cost the king to forgive the multi-million dollar debt. It cost the unforgiving servant to not forgive. But the cost to you or me in extending forgiveness to someone else – no matter how intense the hurt, no matter how large the debt – cannot be compared with the cost to Jesus when He extended forgiveness to you and to me.

Jesus said that when the slave refused to forgive his fellow slave, the forgiveness he had received was revoked. Jesus said if we do not forgive from the heart God will not forgive us. An unforgiving spirit absolutely prevents God's forgiveness from reaching us.

Maybe the person who most needs your forgiveness is you. Maybe you are looking at your past from your perspective, instead of the perspective of a God who is more willing to forgive than you are to ask. Whatever the condition of your past, the fairy tale is: God is waiting to forgive you and forgive you completely. The only hesitation, the only reservation, is from you, not from God.

Some years ago in Scotland, communion was being served in a large church. The building could seat 600, but only sixteen people attended. Seated on the far right side of the sanctuary, completely separated from the other worshipers was a young woman, about 20 years old. When the usher offered her the elements of the Lord's Supper, she lowered her face and shook her head.

On the other side of the church was an old man, wrinkled with age, and bent with a lifetime of hardships. He whispered to the usher to take the Bread and the Wine back to the young woman.

The usher went back to the opposite side of the sanctuary and offered to serve her again. With tears streaming down her face, she again refused, and then started sobbing softly.

From across the auditorium, the old man said, "Take it, Lassie. It's meant for sinners."

That is the fairy tale. It is right here in this parable. It is right there in that line five miles long. It is right there in your pocket. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Jesus said as soon as the slave asked for forgiveness the king canceled the

10,000-talent debt. If the man had only asked, would the king have forgiven that debt a second time? If that king was God the answer is, "Yes!" That is the greatest fairy tale of all time!

How much will God forgive? Ask Manasseh. Ask Matthew. Ask Zacchaeus. Ask Paul. Ask me.

## Chapter Seven

### ALLIE, ALLIE, OXEN FREE

Songs like “Anticipation,” “You’re So Vain,” and “Nobody Does It Better” put Carly Simon on the pop charts. Carly said she saw her first “shrink” at age 11. By her own admission she’s had a number of gurus, psychics, and an astrologer. “I even did carpentry,” she said. When questioned about doing carpentry she replied, “If you go in any store and look under ‘Self Help,’ you will find carpentry listed. I found that of more help than telling the truth about my life to a room full of people with full bladders. I’ve been into hypnosis. It’s habitual, and it’s kind of like the song, ‘I keep looking for the cure, but I don’t know what it’s for.’”

The cure Carly is looking for is Psalm 139. It is a beautiful song that has four promises. First, God’s knowledge of my every thought and my every action is my

greatest source of security. Second, there is no place I can go where He is not already there. Third, He knows me intimately because He formed me in my mother's womb, and He is still working toward my completion. Fourth, God can keep me from becoming like the evil men I see all around.

### **GOD KNOWS**

"O Lord, you have searched me, and known me.

"You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off.

"You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

"For there is not a word in my tongue, but, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

"You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me.

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:1-6 – NKJV).

Job asked, "Is it good that [God] should search you out? (13:9 – KJV).

He was asking, if God searched you or me, if He made a very thorough examination of our lives, would the results please us? Can our lives stand careful scrutiny? Job understood how closely God was watching him:

"You fasten my feet in shackles; you keep close watch on all my paths by putting marks on the soles of my feet" (Job 13:27).

These words proclaim comfort and security. We serve a God who knows all about us. He is no make-believe deity. No pretend God would know us so intimately. It is not merely the things about us that God knows – He knows us. He

notices our most casual acts, as well as our most detailed plans. Whether we are running or at rest He watches us. He does not watch us simply to correct us at the slightest deviation, although He will do that. We may leave the path, but He never leaves us. He watches us for our own protection and defense. This continual care by an almighty, loving God is our safeguard. He is for us, as He was for Abraham, our shield (see Genesis 15:1). David knew that “thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy” (Psalm 61:3 – KJV).

David did not say God has restricted us. On the contrary, God has released us. My family and I lived once in an area where rattle snakes were populous. One morning I went outside to mow the lawn and saw a snake curled up in the middle of my children’s toys. That day I prepared a special play area for our children. I constructed it in such a way that they could play outside without fear. Every morning before they went outside I went before them and made a diligent search for snakes. When I was confident there was no danger, I allowed them to go outside. My actions did not restrict them – they protected them. Danger and death were possibly outside of that play area. Inside they were safe.

That is what God has done for us! That old serpent, Satan, will destroy us if he can. The King James Version says God has beset us – surrounded us, hemmed us in by his power – so the devil’s power is limited. If viewed from the outside, that place of God’s protection may seem to be restrictive, or limiting. It is really our place of greatest security. Within the confines of God’s love there is safety and there is life. The devil even admitted it. Speaking to God about Job, he said:

“Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land” (Job 1:10).

We talked about the meaning of the word “hedge” in Chapter One. Let’s review.

The Hebrew word means to fence in or about. It was used of a structure that was built around a house or a farm. It was no ordinary fence. It was constructed by placing long, pointed stakes together. The sharp points faced outward.

That means Job was eminently under God’s protection. God, Himself, kept Job, his family, and all of his property safe. The protection of Job, and of every believer, is a deliberate and purposeful act of God.

When David declared God was acquainted with all of the psalmist’s ways, he was speaking of God’s knowledge of the present. When he said God had hemmed him in before and behind, he was looking to the future and to the past, to the steps of tomorrow and to the steps of yesterday. God stands between our enemies and us. David understood that God defends us from our past, but He does not remove its consequences. We have set in motion situations we may not be able to avoid. The outcome may be inevitable, but God can redirect the results.

Do you remember Sandra (from chapter 2) whose car was struck broadside by a hit and run driver. The force of the 60-mile-per-hour collision shattered her pelvis, broke her hip, and caused permanent nerve damage in one leg. Sandra said, “If I had a chance to take this car accident back I would say, ‘No,’ because Jesus has taught me so much. I live in pain every day because of this accident, but I have really learned to love. I am so excited about what Jesus has done in my life. He has taught me how to forgive the man who hit us, and I pray for him.”

Sandra’s statements are startling if we view them from outside God’s hedge around her past. The normal reaction would be one of great bitterness. The consequences of the incident changed because she learned, through the accident, how much the Lord loves her. Her pelvis and hip remain broken. The nerves in her leg

remain damaged. Those facts did not change. The Lord, however, changed Sandra's heart and attitude so much, she would not go back in time and avoid the accident. What could have been the agent of destruction became the agent of blessing. God transformed havoc into hope.

### **GOD SEES**

"Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?

"If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.

"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

"Even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

"If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me;

"Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You" (Psalm 139:7-12 – NKJV).

It is possible that David wrote this psalm as Israel was taking up defensive positions against the invading Philistine army. Several years earlier Israel had lost the Ark of the Covenant in a battle against that same enemy. The Ark was the visible symbol of the invisible presence of God in their midst. Just before the battle that would restore the Ark to Israel, and even with the symbol absent, David asked, "Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" Many people wish it were possible to hide from God. David did not say he wanted to get away from God. He confirmed the impossibility of such an event and rejoiced in the unattainable.



David turned his gaze from the glories of the heavens to the darkness of the grave. He set the two realms in contrast and then declared their similarity: "Behold, thou art there!" David expected to find God in heaven. That's why he wrote with a word of surprise--"behold"--when he looked in the opposite direction. David may have been thinking primarily of the grave, but if we look deeper into the hopelessness of hell, the wonder expands. We don't expect to find God in hell, but behold, You are there. Wherever and whenever, behold, You are there!

David said, "If I rise on the wings of the dawn even there your hand will guide me." David had no idea the light of the morning sun was traveling at 186,000 miles per second. Nevertheless, he said if we could travel in a space ship at warp speed our star trek would still be with God. If we journey to the uttermost part of the sea, the God who saves to the uttermost will be there waiting for us. If we travel from light into darkness He will be there.

I read an interesting survey that described how people react in the light and in the dark. Out of four individuals, one, the survey said, is basically honest. One is basically dishonest. The other two are as honest as the system. If the survey is correct, in the dark, three out of four people are dishonest.

A startling example of that survey was the July 1977 electrical blackout of New York. The riots in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992 had a greater toll in terms of lives and property destroyed. Dozens were dead, hundreds injured, and billions of dollars – both in immediate and in future damages – were lost. The excuse for the chaos was an unpopular jury verdict and unrelenting racial tension. While inexcusable, those reasons were seen by some as justification.

The events in New York City fifteen years earlier were not motivated by a desire for revenge, or a cry for retribution. The only rationale for the New York riots was darkness. When the lights went out, people went to the streets to loot and burn.

Seventeen thousand false alarms were turned in to keep police away from the looting. Over 2,000 stores were plundered, but few criminals were arrested. The damage was over \$1 billion – and all because it was dark. David wants us to know that God is in the darkness. If we try to hide in the darkness it will become as bright as the noon-day sun, because God is light. To God darkness is the same as light.

David said if we travel up to the heavens or down to hell, if we journey on the morning's wings to the farthest sea, if we traverse from brightest day to darkest night, God's right hand will hold us fast. The word he used for "hold" means "to seize, or to snatch." It is associated with the idea of "holding in possession." Because we are God's possession – bought and paid for by His only begotten Son – He seizes us away from destruction and holds us fast. Jesus said that we are doubly held – in His hands and in the Father's hands:

"I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28-29 – KJV).

Picture Jesus closing His hand over us, not to smother us or hinder us, but to protect us. Now picture Father closing His hand over the hand of Jesus. "Your right hand shall hold me!"

David was no doubt familiar with a similar statement made by Moses: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27--KJV). More than a secure stronghold is depicted here; we are embraced by the personal care of Almighty God. Between the child of God and the attack of Satan – underneath, where the powers of darkness work, are the strong arms of our Father. God is close to us. He has a strength that never fails and is never diverted from our

protection. Our own feeble strength does not alone determine the outcome of our spiritual warfare. We have a Champion who is always stronger than any foe we may face. Underneath are the everlasting arms. God has hedged us in. It is the perfect place to hide – right out in the open, safe, even in the presence of our enemies.

### **GOD CARES**

“For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb.

“I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are your works, and that my soul knows very well.

“My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

“Your eyes saw my substance, yet being unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there was none of them.

“How precious also are Your thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them!

“If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; when I awake, I am still with You”  
(Psalm 139:13-18 – NKJV).

Has it ever occurred to you, the first developed science was astronomy? Why did man study first that which was farthest away? Next he studied geology. That was the earth, closer to home, but still impersonal. Biology became the next discipline, but that is still study at arm’s length. It is only within the last century we have started to look inside. Psychology, the study of the inside of our minds and emotions, is a very

young discipline. It is easier to deal with the stars – they are far away and impersonal. It is much more difficult to deal with ourselves – that is up close and personal – too close, and often too personal. Man was hiding. We did not trust God enough to hide out in the open.

David did not understand anatomy as we do. And yet he had seen enough to give him great reverence for the One who had created him. Who could look at the human body and not feel a sense of awe and admiration for God, the Creator? With an insight from the Holy Spirit, David looked into his own mother's womb. What he saw caused him to rejoice at the power of God creating life. David's statement that he was "curiously wrought" can be compared to a craftsman embroidering a beautiful tapestry. William MacDonald wrote:

"In a speck of watery material smaller than the dot over this 'i', all the future characteristics of the child are programmed – the color of his skin, eyes and hair, the shape of his facial features, the natural abilities he will have. All that the child will be physically and mentally is contained in germ form in that fertilized egg. From it will develop 60 trillion cells, 100 thousand miles of nerve fiber, 60 thousand miles of vessels carrying blood around the body, 250 bones, to say nothing of joints, ligaments and muscles" (Enjoying the Psalms, Volume 2 [Kansas City: Walterick Publishers, 1977], page 314).

It is no wonder David said, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." In the same way that God saw David developing as a physical embryo, He looks at us as we grow and mature spiritually. Jeremiah saw an illustration of that as he walked by a potter's house one day and watched as the craftsman placed a lump of clay on the

wheel. No doubt Jeremiah admired the progress of the work. He watched fascinated as the man spun the wheel with his feet, and with his hands fashioned a useful vessel. All at once the potter stopped the spinning wheel. He looked closely at his creation, and with a frown, crushed it back into a lump of clay. He sprinkled some water on the clay, rolled it into a firm lump and started over. God spoke to Jeremiah's heart and said, "Can I not do with you as this potter does?" (Jeremiah 18:6).

An American couple went to England to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. Their hobby was collecting pottery and china. In one shop, a single teacup, high on shelf, caught their attention. They asked to see it, and while they were holding it the teacup spoke.

"I have not always been a teacup. There was a time when I was simply a lump of clay. The potter rolled me and patted me over and over. I yelled out, 'Stop! That hurts!' He smiled and said, 'Not yet!'

"Then he placed me on a wheel and spun me around and around. I was getting dizzy and cried out, 'Stop!' He simply said, 'Not yet!'

"Then the potter put me in an oven. I have never felt such heat. I couldn't understand why he would want to burn me. I yelled, but my words were trapped in the oven with me. Through the door I could read his lips as he said, 'Not yet!'

"Finally he pulled me from the oven. Gradually I began to cool. You can imagine the relief I felt as I returned to normal temperature. Then he picked me up and painted me all over. It was horrible! The fumes gagged me. 'Stop it,' I screamed. He just nodded, 'Not yet!'

"The paint dried and I started to feel better when he picked me up and put me into another oven. The heat in there was twice as hot as the first one. I knew I was finished. I screamed. I cried. I begged. He simply said, 'Not yet!'

"I gave up. I knew it was over. I knew I would never make it. But then the door opened and he took me out and placed me on the shelf where you found me. He handed me a mirror and said, 'Look at yourself.'

"I did, and I was beautiful. 'That is not me,' I said. 'It cannot be me.' But it was me.

"Then he said, 'I know it hurt when I rolled you and patted you, but if I had not continued, you would have dried up. I know it made you dizzy when I spun you on the wheel, but if I had stopped, you would have crumbled. The oven was hot and it hurt. I know that, but if it wasn't for the oven you would have cracked. The paint fumes were bad, but without the paint you would have had no color. If I had not returned you to the heat of the oven your hardness would not have been permanent. Now you are finished. You are what I had in mind when I first started with a lump of clay.'"

The apostle Paul said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7). With precious thoughts, God, who intends us to be vessels of honor, says, "I am still molding you. Be patient. I am not finished. Not yet!"

David said it is impossible to count God's thoughts. It is impossible, he said to realize all the good God intends for us. The sum of those thoughts is more in number than all the grains of sand in the world. How would we start the task of counting those grains of sand? There are so many variables. Do we count at high tide or low tide? What about all the sand at the bottom of the sea? And if we could account for all of that, what about the sand which sticks to the bottom of our feet when we go swimming? What about all of the sand we carry away from the beach in the floors of our cars? And if we account for all of that, and even count the very last grain of sand, God's thoughts are greater than that number. What is the largest number you can think of? Add one to it. That's the number of His thoughts!

How many small numbers make up a great sum! Think of how light one grain of sand is; think how heavy they all are. It is small wonder Charles Spurgeon declared:

“If there were nobody else in the world except you, and God had nothing else to do but to think of you, and there were no objects of His attention beyond yourself, and His eternal mind had no object of consideration but you only, the Lord would not then know more about you than He does right now.”

### **GOD KEEPS**

“Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me therefore, you bloodthirsty men.

“For they speak against You wickedly; and Your enemies take Your name in vain.

“Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate You? And do I not loathe those that rise up against You?

“I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties;

“And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:19-24 – NKJV).

We come now to the closing section of Psalm 139. So far we have learned, God’s knowledge of our every thought and our every action is our greatest source of security. Second, there is no place we can go where He is not already there. Third, He knows us intimately because He formed us in our mothers’ wombs, and He’s

still working toward our completion. The lesson of this fourth stanza is, God can keep us from becoming like the evil men we see around us.

The worst part of the woman's pregnancy was the violence. A sailor raped her. Both her doctor and her attorney advised her to have an abortion. To her friends and family it seemed logical that an unmarried woman who had been raped should terminate the pregnancy. She believed, however, that God creates all life for a purpose. She believed that even though that particular life was forced on her, it was for a special reason. She believed it would be wrong to end that life.

The man who raped her was a total stranger. He did it in a drunken stupor. While she was seeking legal assistance, the rapist's wife confronted her. "If you sue him," she said, "you will ruin my life."

"What about my life?" the nurse asked. "Why should I ruin my life rather than ruin your life?"

"For a very simple reason," the wife replied. "My husband, who raped you, is the father of our severely retarded child. If you sue him, he'll divorce me, and I cannot care for the child alone." She did not sue.

She came to believe God led her to give the baby up for adoption. She understood she was to give her baby to a childless couple. That knowledge helped her through an unwanted and difficult pregnancy.

A doctor and his wife planned to adopt the baby. During the waiting time they showed Christian kindness to the young nurse. They were all three shaken when the baby was born deformed and dead. The expectant mother and the nurse cried in each others arms.

"How close I was," she said, "to becoming utterly consumed with bitterness."



Reading her story you can appreciate why David would pray, “If only you would slay the wicked, O God! I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies” (verses 19, 22). That is why David closed this psalm with a request for a thorough review of his heart by God. He began the psalm by stating such a examination had already occurred. He closed by asking God to repeat the search. The inspection David requested was as diligent as a prospector searching for precious metals. He wanted every possibility considered. David did not want to harbor a trace of fellowship with the wicked.

When Dr. Cosmo Gordon Lang was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury his opening address reflected David’s prayer:

“You have seen the ninety-fifth Archbishop of Canterbury placed with stately ceremony on his seat of rule. The man himself, with his own memories and hopes, his own sins and fears, you have not seen. Nor have you heard his inner cry for Divine mercy and help” (The Speaker’s Bible, Psalms, Volume 4, page 187).

When David prayed, “See if there be any wicked way in me,” he was asking God to do more than simply check for sin. David used a phrase that reflected idol worship. He wanted to see if there was any hint of defection or even a tendency to go back from the true and living God. He knew that many things could attach themselves to his heart and alienate him from God. It is as if he said, “Use any test necessary on me so I will not become like the wicked men I see all around me. It does not matter God, how small a thing it may be, I want nothing to defile me.”

Imagine a surgeon telling you, “I could have removed all the cancer, but I left a little of it inside you. To have taken it all out would have been very hard on you,

and I wanted to spare you that pain.” We would scream, “Open me up, man! If you leave the slightest amount of cancer in my body it will eventually kill me. Get it all!”

Remember the young nurse? Human logic would say she would stay away from babies for the rest of her life. Human logic would say she would do anything to avoid remembering the anguish of her rape. Human logic would be wrong. She works in a hospital delivery room and through her tragedy, she now helps parents of stillborns, and badly deformed babies. She reassures those grieving parents, “God will use this to bless you. He blessed me.”

Because her life was hidden with God, she was comfortable “Hiding Out in the Open.” When difficulties or the devil set the table, God prepares the spread. God has made you a fortified city. Stay behind that hedge. Be comfortable hiding in Him.

O Lord, your knowledge and wisdom have examined every corner of my being. Nothing has been overlooked or unrecognized. Your friendship would not allow anything to be overlooked. One spot missed would have spoiled everything. Search deep inside of me, once again, Lord. If you find the smallest thing that displeases you, reveal it to me. Then we can deal with it together. Keep me from becoming like the wicked. You have laid your hand on me as my Champion. You have hedged me in for my own protection. It is beyond my comprehension how you could love me so! Because of your love I am hiding out in the open.

## Chapter Eight

### IT'S OKAY TO BE GRAY

I have some good news. And some bad news. And some great news.

First, the good news. As a nation we are living longer and growing older.<sup>1</sup>

In 1970 the median age of the American population was 28, in 1990 it had increased to 33. In 1970 slightly more than 20 million Americans were 65 years of age or older. In 1990 that figure increased to 31.7 million. Projections for only the next 10 years indicate that 13 percent of the population, almost 35 million Americans, will be over the age of 65. Since the year 1900, life expectancy has increased 26 years. In 1900 only

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics on aging in this chapter have been compiled from "The Geezer Boom," by Melinda Beck, in The 21st Century Family, a Newsweek special issue, Winter/Spring, 1990 (pp. 62-69).

41 out of 100 people lived to age 65. Today 79 out of 100 live that long. In 50 years one third of the population will be senior citizens.

Now for the bad news. These statistics are not encouraging. Today, 3.3 workers support every person receiving social security. In 50 years it will be fewer than two workers per recipient. In 50 years social security deductions may claim as much as 40 percent of an individual's income. The social security fund's surplus could disappear within 50 years because of the federal government's practice of borrowing those funds to finance the budget deficit. Medicare could be bankrupt within 10 years.

We smiled 30 years ago when the Beatles asked, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" Today we aren't laughing. In 1970 there were 12 senior citizen day care facilities where busy working people dropped off their parents during the day, just like their infants and preschoolers. In 1990 there were more than 2,000 such facilities that provided supervision and company for aging adults. The number of senior citizens who live at the poverty level is 40 percent higher than the national average. Nursing home care can run as high as \$60,000 a year, with the average cost over \$20,000.

As the sheer number of elderly citizens increases, so will health care problems and health care costs. We are living longer, but medical science has yet to combat successfully many of the disabling conditions of old age. Arthritis, stroke, and other ailments continue to make it difficult to enjoy the so-called golden years. In 1990, six million Americans age 65 or older required assistance with such basic life functions as dressing, eating, bathing, and going to the bathroom. In 50 years that figure will increase to almost 14 million. In 1990, 2.5 million Americans suffered from Alzheimer's disease. That figure could triple in the next 50 years.

As bad as all of that is, and it is bad, do not despair. Wait until you hear the great news!

## WHEN JEHOVAH HUMILIATED THE GODS OF BABYLON

Babylon was about to be invaded by the Assyrian army. The idols of Babylon, unable to defend their city, were loaded onto animals and carried away for safety. God told Isaiah, “Bel and Nebo bow down. Their idols are carried by animals. These false gods all bow down. They cannot save themselves. They will all be carried away like prisoners” (Isaiah 46:1-2 – TEB). With their conquerors about to be conquered themselves, the prospects for God’s people were not good. God spoke directly to their fear and reminded them that as a nation, He had carried them when the nation was first established.

With the tenderness of a mother for her new born child, God took care of His people. Four hundred years had passed since Saul was anointed king and the Israelite monarchy had been established. Eight centuries had passed since the nation of Egypt groaned with the birth pains of Israel’s deliverance. With a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, God led His people. With manna and quail, He fed them. With water from a smitten rock, He quenched their thirst. By His battle plans, He defeated their enemies. As the idols of their captors were loaded onto beasts of burden, God reminded them of His loving care.

The false gods became objects of scorn as they were hurried off for their own protection. They were unable to even get themselves out of danger. As Israel watched that scene, God promised, “Listen to me...you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Isaiah 46:3-4).

God reminded His people that He never changes. Israel had gone through many changes, including being divided into two kingdoms, both of which were invaded and conquered. When His people were like infants, God cared for them. God

said with His changeless being and His changeless love, He would continue to guard and guide Israel. Age did not make them any less dependent. Experience only taught them the need to continue to trust in His sustaining grace.

The direct application of Isaiah 46 was to Israel, but we, who are God's adopted children, enjoy His continual care and constant mercy, no less than did that nation so long ago. The principle applies to those who are literally aged. Advancing years may have stooped your shoulders and slowed your steps, time may have whitened your hair and wrinkled your skin, but God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He has never changed. The same words that brought hope in Babylon can bring hope to you: "Even when your hair has turned gray, I will take care of you. I made you and will take care of you. I will carry you, and I will save you" (Isaiah 46:4 – TEB). That is great news!

### **AMY'S OLDER SISTER**

The story of Albert is tragic, and tragically, too typical. He arrived in Miami by bus one day, having suddenly left his home in California. He told no one where he was going. He was alone, confused, and frightened. But he was no teen-aged runaway. Albert was in his upper 80s. His daughter and son-in-law, with whom he had been living, often refused to talk to him. The Psalmist David wrote about Albert: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth" (Psalm 71:9 – KJV).

Our firstborn, Jennifer, was three and one half years old when Amy, our second child was born. I watched pride sparkle in Jennifer's dark brown eyes as she looked at her new sister. She sat on the sofa and we placed Amy in her arms. The joy on Jennifer's face radiated brighter than the lights in the room. I could almost have taken the photograph without a flash attachment. Then I watched those same beautiful

brown eyes fill with tears as visitors came to see the new baby and ignored Amy's big sister.

Twenty-two months later visitors came to see "the twins." Although she was not yet six, there was a determination in Jennifer's eyes that was beyond her years. It was as though she knew that unthinking adults would push her further into the background as they came to visit Michael and Matthew. Jennifer would wait, just on the outside of the circle, hoping someone would notice her. Once in a while they would. Most of the time, though, it was just a quick, almost embarrassed pat on the head.

It frustrated me because I could not make careless guests understand how much their ignorance was hurting Jennifer. The visitors didn't mean to hurt her, they just did it without thinking. I like to believe that when Jennifer's Daddy gathered her up in his arms and bundled her out of the house to the mall and to the ice cream store, it made up for some of the hurt she was feeling. I think it did.

### **THE OLDER BROTHER**

That same feeling of neglect often comes to older adults, even Christians. Maybe with that insight we can understand the hurt of the prodigal son's older brother when he said to his father, "Look, how many years have I slaved for you and never disobeyed a single order of yours, and yet you have never given me so much as a young goat, so that I could give my friends a dinner! But when that son of yours arrives, who has spent all your money on prostitutes, for him you kill the calf we've fattened!" (Luke 15:29-30 – Phillips).

If the younger son thought the experiences in the far country were the most difficult he would ever face, he was very wrong. Once he came home, he would have to live under the same roof as his older brother. The fact that he was no longer living in the pigpens in the far country was not good news to his older brother. The fact

that his father welcomed him back as a conquering hero instead of making him a hired hand was not good news to his older brother.

The attention lavished on the returning prodigal was more than the older brother could accept. Spiritually, that is often the case. It can be difficult to retain a sweet spirit when someone else takes center stage. The attention the newcomer receives can make us doubt our own position and our own success. The fact that we have never lived in rebellion against Father God seems to be lost on everyone because they are overjoyed at the one sinner who has repented. It is hard when we have served the Lord for many years – and we have served him faithfully – to see a newcomer receiving all of the attention. It is not that we are jealous of his salvation, in fact we rejoice in his homecoming. What hurts is when we feel unappreciated and unloved. That is what the elder brother was saying: “Father, do you realize how much I love you? Have you ever appreciated me?”

Like Jennifer, older sisters and brothers in the Lord are often pushed into the background when babies are born into the Family. It is not the fault of the babies. The babies need and deserve our attention. But the older family members do not need or deserve neglect. That is why the promise of Isaiah is so important: “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you.”

### **WHO HAS CHANGED?**

I still have my first Bible. I earned it by bringing visitors to church during a two-week revival when I was twelve years old. The words haven't changed. The promises haven't changed. But I have changed. The print is now too small for me to read without bifocals. The God of that thirty-five year old Bible has not changed. Whatever our age – either physically or spiritually – God is the same. He is unchanged and His dealings with us are unchanged.



Do you remember how very much in love you were with Jesus when you first met Him? You echoed the words of the bride in the Song of Solomon, “His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this is my friend” (5:16). You have known Him a long time now. Your back is stooped. Your hands shake. Your hair is gray and thinning. Your skin is wrinkled. Has He changed? Or have you discovered that even now He is the same, yesterday, today and forever? When you first trusted Him you knew He was able to carry you. He still is. As you grow older God gives four specific promises of His grace: I have made you, I will carry you, I will sustain you, and I will rescue you.

### **MADE BY GOD**

It is a precious thing to say, “God has made me.” That declaration recognizes His creating power. It means that there is a direction for my life. It overrules fate and accident. It guarantees that the God who made me has not simply left me to my own designs. When we were babies we were weak and helpless. We were completely dependent upon others for everything, and yet we survived. We could not earn our food, or clothing, or shelter, but we were fed, clothed, and housed. When God says, “I have made you,” He reminds us of His constant care in the days of our infancy. He promises that just as He was with us then, so He will be by our sides as the years wear on and we wear out.

### **CARRIED BY GOD**

Secondly, God says, “I will carry you.” Jesus told Simon Peter, “When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). Because of John’s commentary in the next verse we understand, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God” (John 21:19). Jesus’ words to Peter are also an accurate description

of old age. If the time comes that we will no longer be able to provide for even our very basic needs, God promises, “Do not worry! When you were an infant someone had to carry you. Now that you are old allow me to be the One to do that job. I will carry you.”

The God who carried us when we were babies will not stop now. When we were like sheep that had gone astray the Good Shepherd found us, dressed our wounds, and carried us back safely to the fold. There have been many rough places in our lives. If He had not carried us, we would have perished.

### **SUSTAINED BY GOD**

Thirdly, God says, “I will sustain you. I will hold you up. I will support your weight. I will keep you from collapsing under trial or affliction. I will furnish everything that is necessary for your life to continue. I will uphold and validate your claim as My child. I will confirm you in Me.”

Isaiah wrote:

“He gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (40:29-31 – RSV).

Even those whom we would never expect to become faint or grow weary, the very best of men and women, may fall exhausted. So many times, we think we can get by on our own strength, but Isaiah reminds us, we are totally inadequate. Both physically and spiritually, we are subject to stumbling and to falling. Sooner or later we will discover that our energies and our resources are terribly meager. We try so hard to be the kind of people God would want us to be, but no matter how qualified or how talented we may be, we stagger and collapse.

In a culture that prizes youth and discounts the accomplishments of the elderly, we can appreciate Isaiah's declaration. If the youth are so susceptible, what will happen to the aged? The source of strength, both physical and spiritual, Isaiah counsels, is not within us: it resides with God. We need His strength working in us. Without Him, our lives are only weakness – we become faint and grow weary, we stumble and fall. But, those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength!

### **RESCUED BY GOD**

God's promise has a fourth provision: "I will rescue you." We know it is true, because He has rescued us so many times in the past. That was David's confidence when he spoke to King Saul about facing Goliath. "The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37 – KJV). Because of God, we have overcome many obstacles and many enemies. We have lived from mercy to mercy, from blessing to blessing, from rescue to rescue. He has never failed us. Can we dare to trust Him as the years advance?

### **FEAR NOT**

Dr. Jack Kevorkian invented a suicide machine. Mrs. Janet Adkins was the first to use it. Diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease, Mrs. Adkins was losing the ability to enjoy life as she had always known it. At age 54 Janet Adkins was afraid of the future. Afraid of what she would become. Afraid of life.

She flew from her home in Oregon to Michigan and placed herself in Dr. Kevorkian's hands. He hooked her up to his suicide machine and she pressed the switch. Within seconds thiopental sodium put her in a coma. Within six minutes potassium chloride took her life. Dressed in a black skirt and jacket she died in the back of a battered 1968 Volkswagen bus.

Janet Adkins was certainly not an old woman, but the prospect of becoming old in a life and in a body she neither knew nor could control, frightened her. One of the greatest problems facing the elderly is fear, much more so than with any other age group in our nation. The elderly currently comprise about 10 percent of the America's population, yet they commit 25 percent of the suicides. A 1984 study at the Medical College of Virginia concluded that passive suicide – refusing to eat or to take medication – was eight times higher among the elderly than the rest of the population.

Elderly people often ask questions the younger members of our society never consider: Will I be able to live on my pension and social security? Will social security be available? What about the never ending rise of prices and my fixed income? What if I get sick? Will my children throw me out when I need them the most?

John Wesley, co-founder of the Methodist Church, wrote these words in his journal:

“June 28. This day I entered on my eighty-sixth year. I now find I grow old. My sight is decayed, so that I cannot read a small print, unless in a strong light. My strength is decayed, so that I walk much slower than I did some years ago. My memory of names, whether of persons or places, is decayed, till I stop a little to recollect them.

What I should be afraid of, is, if I took thought for the morrow, that my body should weigh down my mind, and create either stubbornness, by the decrease of my understanding, or peevishness, by the increase of bodily infirmities.”

I am 40 years younger than John Wesley was when he wrote that 1789 entry. I the same age as Janet Adkins. I face neither the immediate problems of old

age or a wasting disease. To these issues, I am a stranger, standing on the outside looking in. But I do understand the next line in Wesley's journal: "But thou shalt answer for me, O Lord my God."

God says, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10 – KJV).

### **DON'T LOOSE THE RAINBOW**

The man was, by all outward measures of success, immensely successful. He had all of the trappings: wealth, prominence, position. In an unguarded moment, he revealed the depth of his failure. "When I was a very little boy," he said, "I determined I would find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I can tell you I have found the pot, but I have lost the rainbow." Children dream about beautiful rainbows. They build incredible castles of imagination. Too often the reality of old age never matches the rainbow and the tangible never equals the imagination.

One day Jesus was teaching about divorce. Marital infidelity, Jesus said, is the only reason to sever a marriage. Divorce was never part of God's plan, Jesus said. I do not think Mark's record of what happened next was a coincidence. Perhaps no one is more adversely affected by divorce than children. For that reason, it is significant that Mark's subsequent vignette is about children.

Some people brought their small children to Jesus so He could touch them, but His followers told the people to stop. When Jesus saw what was happening, it affected Him greatly. The disciples probably thought they were protecting Jesus. They did not want Him to be crowded or distracted, but He was indignant. "Do not stop them!" Jesus demanded. "Don't you dare keep them away from me. You let them come to me. The Kingdom of God is like these little children. If you ever hope to enter my Father's kingdom, you must become like these children."

Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample have published two books of letters from children to God.

One child wrote: "Dear God, If you made the rule for kids to take out the garbage, please change it. Love, Maurice."

Another child wrote: "Dear God, I read your book, and I like it. I would like to write a book some day with the same kind of stories. Where do you get your ideas? Best wishes, Mark."

One day a little girl was playing in her backyard. From the kitchen window her mother was watching her closely. The little girl stared at the ground and then very carefully placed herself, stretched out on the ground. When she had repeated the maneuver several times her mother asked, "What are you doing?"

The child replied, "I am trying to see if my shadow fits."

It would be tragic to discover the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and then lose the wonder of the rainbow.

Mary of Bethany understood the wonder. One day while Jesus was reclining at a table for dinner, she broke an alabaster box of perfume and poured it over Jesus. That act of love was almost the last human kindness Jesus received before He was crucified. Judas calculated the cost as the equivalent of one year's wages. With child-like understanding, Mary calculated only her love for her Lord.

Four men with a paralytic friend understood the wonder. Jesus was standing inside a house teaching. When they could not get their friend close to Jesus, they climbed onto the roof of the house, tore off several of the tiles, and lowered their friend into the room. Then with childlike trust, they let go of the ropes. Now it was up to Jesus.

Matthew understood the wonder. He had a secure position and a comfortable living. One day Jesus stopped at his tax collection booth and said, "Follow

me.” In the spirit of a child, he never asked, “Follow you where?” He just got up and walked away with Jesus.

### **IF THE WONDER HAS DIMMED**

It is easy for the wonder of the rainbow to be dimmed. Think of all of the temptations you have faced. How many times have you wrestled with the enemy? So often you have stood in the thickest part of the battle with the forces of darkness. Maybe you were tempted to fall back, to retreat, but the grace of God helped you to stand. Your strength may not be what it once was, but the whole armor of God protects just the same. It may have been many years since you first tied the belt of truth around your waist, buckled the breastplate of righteousness over your heart, pulled the readiness of the gospel onto your feet, put the shield of faith on your arm, strapped the helmet of salvation to your head, and gripped the sword of the Spirit between both of your hands. But in all of that time, God has stood by your side. He has fought with you in every battle. His promise is the same: “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you.”

Troubles? There have been many. Battles? More. But have you forgotten the blessings? Through how many springs have you planted and how many autumns have you harvested? How many times has your table been graced with “bread enough and to spare?” (see Luke 15:17).

How many times have your eyes sparkled with delight as your children and now your grandchildren have crawled into your lap and thrown their arms around your neck? Sure, they may have been dirty. Yes, their fingers may have been sticky, but for what would you trade a single one of those embraces?

Can you count the number of times you agreed with the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord?” (Psalm 122:1). How many hymns of praise have lifted your heart and your hands to God? How many

prayers has the Lord answered just for you? When you look back you can say with wonder, “Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Listen as God says, “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you.”

It would be tragic to discover the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and then lose the wonder of the rainbow. If you have lost the wonder, by the grace of God, you can discover it again. Like a little child, reach up in love and trust to your Heavenly Father. Why don’t you crawl into His arms? He will restore the wonder through the love of His Son.

“The white head is a crown of glory,” Solomon wrote, “if it be found in the way of righteousness” (Proverbs 16:31). That is the key – at any age – be found in the way of righteousness. With that confidence we do not have to live with fear. Or die with it. Facing an uncertain, but certainly debilitating future, a 91 year old Alzheimer’s patient said, “I feel like I have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth. I am ready to put those feet together.”

Solomon wrote, “The glory of young men is their strength: and the beauty of old men is the gray head” (Proverbs 20:29). That beauty is the promise of the God who said, “I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. I will be with you always. Even to the end of this life. And beyond!”



## Chapter Nine

### TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Excitement! That is the only word you would have needed to describe Jerusalem that day. The city was full of people. More were arriving every day. It was Passover. Jews from all over the world were in attendance. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs were all there. Among the hundreds of thousands who swelled the population of the city for that special week were thirteen traveling preachers – Jesus of Nazareth and His entourage.

In this atmosphere of celebration the disciples borrowed a colt that no one had ever ridden. They just walked up to the animal and untied it. When the owner of

the colt saw them, he asked, rather in amazement I would suppose, “Why are you untying the colt?” And he jerked the rope out of their hands.

Twelve men were stealing his animal. In broad daylight and in full view of witnesses, they were about to lead it away. To his question they simply answered, “The Lord needs it.” The look of surprise and disbelief on his face faded and was replaced with a look of wonder and a smile. That was the password he had chosen with Jesus months, or perhaps years, before. It was the signal for which he had been waiting. As he handed the rope back to them and said, “Hosanna. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Concerning the owner of the colt, I have read between the lines a little bit. Concerning the reaction of the rest of the crowd, the Bible does not leave us to wonder.

Luke says:

“They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

“When he came near the place where the road goes down the mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” (Luke 19:35-38).

### **OLD BAGS AND SHOUTING STONES**

For a moment, we will leave the scene of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and go to a scene very early in His ministry. Jesus told a parable using an image that would have been familiar to His listeners. “No one,” He said, “pours new wine into old wineskins” (Luke 5:37). When vineyard workers sealed freshly pressed

grapes in a new, supple wine skin, the fermentation process began. The skin was soft and flexible. It could expand with the fermentation. Jesus' listeners knew if they put new wine into old skins, "the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined" (Luke 5:37). The old skins had already been stretched as far as they could stretch. Their capacity to receive new wine was greatly limited.

Jesus did not want them, or us, to miss His message. When He comes to live inside of our lives, He brings the new wine of His presence. The intensity of that life causes us to expand. If we do not allow Him to give us new, soft hearts, the new wine will cause our old, dry skins to burst. The wine will be lost. Our past – our perceptions, plans, prejudices, and predictions – are cracked and dry. Jesus must soften us and make us useable. If we do not allow Him to do that work of new creation in us, we will never know the joy of His new, sweet wine. We will burst open like an old bag trying to hold new, fermenting wine.

Now, with that set up, let us return to the Passover. Let's go back to the feast.

The high priest and other religious rulers had already condemned Jesus. There was a price on His head, but He deliberately rode into the city in broad daylight and in full view of all. Perhaps it was just a whisper at first, but then more and more voices joined the chorus. Soon shouts of praise were echoing all over Jerusalem. Waves of praise rolled through Jerusalem like waves of water pounding on the seashore. Wherever the Pharisees were and whatever they were doing, these shouts of "Hosanna" soon attracted their attention. The new wine of Jesus' presence so stretched those old bags that they burst. Nothing inside of them was sweet; all was sour. In the midst of the greatest day of celebration the city had seen in a long time, they went to the party with long faces. "Teacher," they cried, "rebuke your disciples!" (Luke 19:39).

“I tell you,” Jesus replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40).

Jesus told the Pharisees that if His disciples stopped praising Him, the stones that made up the streets and walls of the city would immediately begin to praise Him. This was the day for praise. We usually think of Jesus as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). We often forget that He was “anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows” (Psalm 45:7 – KJV). The Living Bible paraphrases that verse: “God has given you more gladness than anyone else.” For one bright and shining moment Jesus received all the praise the world should already have been giving Him.

Did all of the citizens of Jerusalem praise Him? No, the Pharisees did not magnify, they murmured. But “the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices” (Luke 19:37). Instead of saying “the whole crowd,” the King James Version uses the phrase, “the whole multitude.” The noise of a multitude of people singing praises to Jesus is exciting and exhilarating. It was a preview of the day when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10-11).

The mistaken idea that Christians should be gloomy and long-faced is broken on the solid rock of these praises. No one has a right to be happy and rejoice as does a Christian. The praise of God is a fundamental factor in the life of faith. Paul told the Ephesians:

“In Christ we were chosen to be God’s people. God had already chosen us to be his people, because that is what he wanted. And God is the One who makes everything agree with what he decides and wants. We are the first people who hoped in Christ. And we were chosen so that

we could bring praise to God's glory" (Ephesians 1:11-12 – TEB).

## **THE BASICS OF PRAISE**

All this talk of praise, and yet do we understand what the word means? Our English word originally meant "to set a price on," or "to appraise." The meaning grew to "express approval or admiration." The American College Dictionary defines praise as "the offering of grateful homage in words or song, as an act of worship to God or a deity."

In Hebrew there are two basic words for praise. They are not the only words for praise, and many other words have their roots in them, but they are the primary Old Testament words for praise. Incidentally, it is the New Testament that tells us why to praise; it is the Old Testament that teaches us how to praise.

The first of those Hebrew words is "halal." It is pronounced "haw-lal'." It forms the basis of "Hallelujah" or, "Praise the Lord." Halal, according to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, originally meant "to be clear, or to shine." From that came its current definition, "to make a show, to boast, celebrate, commend, glory, praise." It means that to praise is to be boastful, and to be excited in joy. There is an Arabic word that is similar to "halal." A soldier used it at the end of a battle. He was still alive and was about to share the spoils of the victory. He shouted in triumph!

The first time I remember using an English equivalent of "halal" was in 1960. My brother, Kyle, and I were watching the World Series on television. It was the bottom of the ninth inning of the seventh game. The Series was tied at three games between the New York Yankees and the Pittsburgh Pirates. The score of game seven was tied as the Pirate's second baseman, Bill Mazeroski, stepped to the plate. The game and the Series ended in dramatic fashion as "Maz" drove the second pitch of the inning over the left field wall. As his home run cleared the bricks at old Forbes Field, I

ran out the front door of our house jumping with excitement and shouting at the top of my voice. My team had won! All right! Hallelujah!

“Halal” is the word in Psalm 148:

“Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens” (148:1-3, 13).

“Halal” is the word in Psalm 150:

“Praise the Lord. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with the tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with the resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord” (150:1-6).

The exuberance and joy of a 13 year old baseball fan celebrating perhaps the most incredible win in World Series history demonstrates the definition of the primary Hebrew word for “praise.” It is excitement. It is joy. It is boasting. It is loud. Thanksgiving may be quiet. Praise can never be. Thanksgiving may be experienced in solitude. Praise should be shared.

The second basic Hebrew word for praise is “yaddah.” It is pronounced “yaw-daw’.” It literally means “to use (i.e. hold out) the hand.” It means to revere or worship with extended hands. It is a gesture of submission and of honor. It is the word David used in Psalm 9:1 – “I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders.” It is the word used in Psalm 98:4 – “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise” (KJV).

Translated from Hebrew into English, other Old Testament words for praise are: bless, sing, laud, shout in joy, proclaim, extol. They are all words of sound. They are words that express public delight in our Lord and Savior.

### **THE BENEFITS OF PRAISE**

Even though praise is directed towards God and rightly belongs to Him, it is a legitimate question to ask, “What does praise do for me? What are the blessings of praise?” There are two very important things that happen when we praise. First, praise increases our appreciation for God. Second, praise opens avenues for God to minister to us.

David was in trouble. Saul was still Israel’s king, but the people of Israel were celebrating David’s victories with greater enthusiasm than they were celebrating Saul’s victories. Saul believed that David would take the kingdom away from him, so he “kept a jealous eye on David” (1 Samuel 18:9). On two occasions Saul tried to kill David, but David escaped. Saul then plotted an ambush against David, but Jonathan, Saul’s son, warned David. David had married Michal, Saul’s daughter, and she aided her husband’s escape. When Saul discovered that the citizens of the town of Nob, particularly the priests of the town, had given David sanctuary, he executed 85 priests and slaughtered many of the people. That was the situation that prompted David to write:

“I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my strong tower. I will call upon the Lord who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from my enemies” (Psalm 18:1-3).

Before David prayed for help, he rehearsed the reasons for praising God. After praise had built up his image of God and strengthened his appreciation for God,

he was ready to acknowledge that God could deliver him from his enemies. He did not immediately begin by asking for divine intervention. He began by praising God. In his praise he laid down the reasons why God could help him. Look at the military words David used in his praise – fortress, deliverer, high tower. Look at the weapons he described in his praise – rock, buckler, horn of salvation. After praising God with such words – and doing it aloud, and listening to his own words – it is no wonder David declared, “I shall be saved.” Praise increased his appreciation for God.

The second thing praise does for us is to open avenues for God to minister to us. Look at one incident in the life of God’s people under the leadership of King Jehoshaphat. Israel was no longer one unified kingdom, but a divided nation. The northern kingdom, still called Israel, consisted of two of the original 12 tribes. Judah, the southern kingdom, was composed of the remaining 10 tribes. Jehoshaphat ruled the nation of Judah.

Early in his reign a three-part military alliance attacked Jehoshaphat’s nation. The story of the formidable invasion by superior forces is recorded in 2 Chronicles 20. Faced with odds they knew to be overwhelming and forces they knew they could not defeat, the people called on the Lord. Jehoshaphat prayed, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you” (vs. 12). God answered through his prophet Jahaziel:

“Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army.

For the battle is not yours, but God’s. You will not have to fight this battle.

Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you” (vs. 15, 17).

The next morning Jehoshaphat led his army to the battle site. He stood in front of his people and declared, “Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld” (vs. 20). Then he set one of the most peculiar battle arrays even seen on a



field of combat. He “appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness” (vs. 21). The appointed praisers went ahead of the army and sang, “Give thanks to the Lord for his love endures forever” (vs. 21). The advance party went ahead of the army, not with swords, but with songs.

Never was an army so unaccountably destroyed as the tri-part coalition of Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites. Two members of the alliance turned against the third and when they had finished slaughtering them, they turned against each other. Their destruction, at their own hands, was complete. The Bible says, “No one escaped” (vs. 24). After the victory Judah spent three days carrying home the spoils of the battle.

What was Jehoshaphat’s secret weapon? Praise! “As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated” (vs. 22 – emphasis added). They praised. God fought the battle. The people did the praising and God did the fighting. They did not sing to overwhelm their enemy. They sang and praised because God had assured them of victory. When they returned to Jerusalem, they marched in with musical instruments blaring out triumph and praise. Then they went to the Temple for a time of corporate rejoicing. Praise had set the stage for an incredible victory. Praise had opened the way for God to work a miracle for His people. Praise had won the day!

### **WHEN IT IS DARK**

Election night, Tuesday, November 7, 1972, was a night of victory for Richard M. Nixon. In a landslide, the American people had returned him to the White House for four more years. It was a night for which he and his team had struggled hard. In his book, *Born Again*, Charles Colson, said if anyone had looked into the oval office that night they would not have believed the scene: “a victorious President, grumbling over words he would grudgingly say to his fallen foe; his chief of staff angry,

surly, and snarling; and the architect of his political strategy sitting in a numbed stupor” (New York: Bantam Books, 1976, page 10). It was a night of victory, but it was not a night of rejoicing.

Many people find it difficult to rejoice at night. Night speaks of pain, suffering, loneliness, disappointment, and despair. To the nighttimes of our lives, the psalmist gives instruction: “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” (Psalm 134:1-2). These Levites, who were standing in the Temple courts had been trusted with a special responsibility. To take a post of service at midnight is to accept a position of risk. There are all of the inherent dangers of the darkness: the enemy can creep in unseen, dangers lie hidden, man’s senses dull with increasing darkness. God is aware of all of that if He calls you to praise Him in the nighttime.

The Song of Solomon is one of the most exciting books in the Old Testament. It is also one of the world’s greatest love poems. A king and a common peasant girl fall in love. For eight beautiful chapters they sing to each other of their devotion. In this powerful picture of human love, many people who study the Bible find an illustration of the love between Jesus and His Church. There is also a passage that may give some insight into praising God in the darkness.

One night the young woman found herself alone. There is no explanation given for her situation. All we know for certain is, she was experiencing darkness. It was both a physical darkness – the darkness of the night – and a spiritual darkness, the absence of the one she loved. There is no indication she had done anything to drive her love away. He was simply absent from her side at that moment. While it is true that Jesus said, “I will never leave you. I will never forsake you,” there are nevertheless times when we feel darkness all around us and we feel that we are alone. We have not

sinned, we have done nothing to drive the Lord away, if, in fact, we could ever drive Him away. But in that moment, there is darkness, and nothing more.

To that moment and to that darkness, the young woman speaks: “Until the day breaks, and the shadows flee away, turn, my lover, and be like a young stag on the rugged hills” (Song 2:17). Those words are full of excitement. She recognizes her situation. It is dark and lonely. But she also recognizes that situation will not last forever. The one she loves has not abandoned her. He will come to her. God’s child may walk one day, with full assurance of faith, and at another time he may be sighing instead of singing, weeping instead of rejoicing. But it is only a temporary darkness. The shadows are only momentary. The young woman said, “Until the day breaks, until the shadows flee away.” The day will break! The shadows will flee away! The Lover of our souls will come to us “leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills” (Song 2:8).

### **PRAISING GOD IN THE DARKNESS**

If you are, right at this moment, experiencing darkness, if the shadows are creeping in and blurring your vision of faith, what do you do? The Psalmist said, “In the middle of the night, I get up to thank you because your laws are right. I wake up early in the morning and cry out. I trust your word. I stay awake all night so I can think about your promises” (119:62, 147-148 – TEB). Perhaps you cannot yet respond with such confidence. How then do you respond?

First of all, wait with patience. For reasons that you do not understand, it is your Lord who has called you into this darkness. God knew it would be dark when He chose you for this post of praise, but He has stationed you to this position to serve Him. It is not a darkness of sin, it is not a darkness that would come from abandoning the Lord, it is a darkness of testing. Wait with patience because in the darkness, only the Lord can see you. In the light, when others can see and others can cheer your efforts,

it is easier to wait. In the darkness, keep the words of Jesus close to your heart: “Your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly” (Matthew 6:6 – NKJV).

Second, don’t think of deserting because it is night. It is easy to slip away when no one can see you run. To serve at night is to serve in a position of trust. When dangers are so apparent, whom would you ask to keep watch? Your most trusted servants, of course. God knows who He can trust to praise Him in the darkness of difficulties. If He has asked you to praise Him at midnight, it is because your worship, even in distress and adversity, is precious to Him.

If Paul and Silas had kept silent in the darkness of the Philippian jail, the only sounds that night would have been of an earthquake and of prisoners escaping into a continuing darkness. Because they praised, even at midnight, all of the prisoners stayed even though they all could have escaped. Because they praised at midnight, the jailer’s hand was stayed from suicide and he and his family were born into new light. If you are in darkness, hold on. Dawn is coming.

Third, keep watching. There are only so many hours of night. Then the dawn will break. While your soul is watching for the morning, don’t look toward the direction you last saw the sun go down. Look to where you know it will come up again. You may not be able to see Jesus in your time of testing, but He can see you! Like the disciples that night on storm-tossed Galilee, He can come to you in your darkness.

Fourth, you may be enclosed by darkness, but the darkness cannot get inside of you. If you have been called to praise in the night hours, you must perform with great care. In the brightness of the noonday sun, a workman might lay down his tools because he can easily see them if he needs to pick them up again. A guard might lay down his weapons because the light of day makes it easy to locate them in an emergency. But in the darkness, if you lay down your implements of service, you may not be able to find them. Carelessness can be fatal at any time, but if you have been

called to praise at night, be especially careful. The darkness is deceptive, but the darkness is also deadly. The world lives in darkness. Sinners love darkness because it hides their wickedness. Don't let those who live in darkness tantalize you into carelessness because their fate will be an eternal darkness.

Finally, be expectant. Look! Can't you see that first gray finger of the dawn? A moment ago, there was no hope, now there is a beam of light. "Until the day breaks, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a young deer upon the mountains!" There in the distance, running directly towards you – it is your Lord!

Do you remember what Jesus said when grumbling Pharisees rebuked His praising disciples? "If they keep quiet," He said, "the stones will cry out!" Can a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ keep silent and not praise Him? Can we be saved from hell and be silent? Can we be assured of heaven and be ungrateful? Can we be filled with His Holy Spirit and not speak? If there is no thanksgiving in our hearts and no praise on our lips we deny the God who saved us. We must praise God. We are like Israel of old--the Lord our God is with us, and the shout of a king is among us (Numbers 23:21). Our God reigns! Christ the Lord is risen indeed! Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord! Praise ye the Lord!

## Chapter Ten

### NEVER AND ALWAYS

Maybe the best way to begin this chapter is with two definitions.

Never: (1) not ever; at no time. (2) not at all: absolutely not; not even. (3) to no extent or degree.

Always: (1) all the time; uninterruptedly. (2) every time; on every occasion (opposed to sometimes or occasionally). Synonyms: (1) perpetually, everlastingly, forever, continually.

Both always and ever refer to uniform or perpetual continuance. Always often expresses or implies repetition as producing the uniformity or continuance: “the sun always rises in the east.” Ever implies an unchanging sameness throughout: “natural law is ever to be reckoned with.”

Those are the learned declarations of C. L. Barnhart, editor in chief, Jess Stein, managing editor, and 355 other authorities and specialists, producers of *The American College Dictionary* for Random House in New York.

Understanding those definitions, let us see what God has to say about those words.

“For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13:5-6 – KJV).

“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”  
(Matthew 28:20).

### **EXPRESSIONS OF LONELINESS**

Loneliness expresses itself in different ways. Sometimes it may be a gnawing terror that jolts you awake in the night. Her husband tries to understand, but even as much as he loves her, he still does not quite get the point. She has lived in the same house for so long, all of its nighttime sounds are as recognizable as the voice of an old friend over the telephone. The night sounds do not frighten her, and work exhausts her, but still when he is away on business, she cannot sleep. She never changes the sheets until after he has returned – the smell of his cologne and his sweat are her only comfort while he is away. The loneliness touches her in a way his absent arms cannot.

It may be the loneliness of an 18-year-old girl whose boyfriend has just departed for college. Her normally flawless make-up is streaked by her tears, her small body is racked with sobs. Finally she takes one long, deep breath and says, “I am very sad, and not even my Daddy can make it better.” She and her Dad sit on the edge of her bed, neither one speaking, both taking turns holding “Jonathan,” the stuffed bear her boyfriend gave her last Christmas. As she soaks one tissue with her tears, her Dad

hands her another one and tosses the one that has caught most of her tears into an ever growing pile in the center of the room. Even though they sit with their shoulders touching, she feels the loneliness of their first separation. She is right – it is a loneliness that not even Daddy can fix.

Frequently it is a feeling that even in a crowd there is no one else around. The promotion was a long time in coming, but all of her hard work finally paid off. She was surprised how quickly she loaded her belongings into a rental truck to begin the journey to a new city. Now, with all of the boxes unpacked, her name emblazoned over her very own office door, the newness of everything is developing a rough edge. Walking down the side walk at lunch time, jostled by dozens of strangers, she sees a face in the crowd ahead. For an instant she thinks it is her best friend from back home and she takes a few quick steps toward her. Then her shoulders and her spirits sag as the woman turns. She is a stranger, but it was a close resemblance. People look at her with a variety of reactions as she simply stops and stares. They think she is looking at them. What she is really seeing is the loneliness.

They had never been married, but when she broke the engagement, he jokingly called it a divorce. The courtship was exciting. The two of them genuinely cared for each other. They took their time getting to know each other. When so many of their friends said, “Why don’t you just live together? That’s the best way to get to know each other,” his reaction was labeled old-fashioned. “I want to honor her with a public commitment of marriage,” he said.

Gradually the relationship changed. Although he still loved her, there was a growing dissatisfaction. It was nothing he could put his finger on, but something was not right. He even prayed, “Lord, if this planned marriage is not your will, let her bring up the subject.” When she did, they were both relieved. They both believed it was the Lord.



But then the reality of the break-up settled in. The little habits he had developed with her – the phone calls, the cards, the dinners, the walks – became symbols not of love, but of loneliness. Then one day, still calling him by her pet name for him, she announced she had a date with a new friend. The loneliness swelled in his heart until he thought he might explode.

Not even kings are exempt from loneliness. David, Israel's greatest king, wrote, "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul" (Psalm 142:4 – KJV).

Charlie Brown was awakened in the middle of the night by someone banging on his front door. It was Snoopy.

"Are you feeling lonely again?" Charlie Brown asked. "It's a terrible feeling isn't it?" he continued. "You wake up in the middle of the night and everything seems hopeless. You're all alone. You wonder what life is all about. And why you're here and does anyone really care, and you just stare into the dark and you feel all alone."

Snoopy, who by this time was in bed with Charlie Brown and under the covers asked, "Do we have any night cookies?"

Like the wife, the teenager, the worker, and the fiancé, many people understand what Charles Schulz was talking about in that Peanuts comic strip. They feel there is no one who cares, no one who understands.

Perhaps if Snoopy had crawled into bed with Linus, Peanuts' resident theologian, he might have heard Ecclesiastes 4:11 – "If two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?" As a child, did you ever awake in the night, frightened, and then go into your parents bedroom and get in bed with them? Do you remember that safe, secure feeling? Back in Chapter 5 we looked into some of the rooms in Father's house. If we looked into His bedroom, we would see the covers already turned down. His smile of welcome would drive away our fear and loneliness.

## UNTIL THE TWELFTH OF NEVER

The God who said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), also said, “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). The full weight of that passage in the original Greek is written in a way that is foreign to English readers. There are five negatives in the Greek, and it is difficult to show the force of the statement in English. In English two negatives cancel each other, but in Greek they intensify the meaning as they follow each other. The Amplified Bible vividly reveals the power of Hebrews 13:5:

“For He (God) Himself has said, I will not in any way fail you  
nor give you up nor leave you without support. [I will] not, [I will] not, [I will]  
not in any degree leave you helpless, nor forsake nor let [you] down,  
[relax My hold on you]. Assuredly not!”

The writer literally said, “Never, never, never, never, never will I leave you alone!”

At least five times in His Word, God said, “Never, no never, no never.” The first reference is Genesis 28:15. Jacob was a fugitive. He had deceived his father and had cheated his brother. When Jacob and Esau were born their parents each chose a favorite son. Esau, the oldest, was Isaac’s favorite, and Jacob was Rebekah’s favorite. That atmosphere of partiality filled their home with suspicion and distrust. It was one-up-man-ship with tragic consequences. When Isaac was 137 years old, the same age his half brother Ishmael was when he died, he began to think he would soon die. He was mistaken. He would live another 43 years. Ignoring the prophesy that came to his wife when their sons were born, the prophesy that said, “The older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23), Isaac prepared to give the family blessing to Esau.

As Esau went into the field to hunt deer to prepare a special dish his father enjoyed, Rebekah put a plan in motion that would tear her family apart. With all

of the skill of a gourmet chef, she fixed a goat to taste like a deer. Then, wearing animal skins to give him a coarse feel and some of his brother's clothes to give him Esau's smell, Jacob deceived his father and received the birthright. When Esau learned of the treachery he vowed to kill Jacob as soon as Isaac died. Once more Rebekah plotted and Jacob fled for his life. Rebekah planned to send Jacob away for "a few days" (Genesis 27:44). He was gone for more than two decades.

The first night in exile he slept with a stone for a pillow and dreamed about a ladder that reached from earth to heaven. The Lord stood at the top of the ladder and said, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Twenty years later Jacob wrestled with an angel at Peniel, crossed the Jordan River and was reconciled to his brother, Esau. God did not leave him. God was true to His promise.

The second and third times God said, "Never, no never," occurred during a time of momentous change for the nation of Israel. Moses was 120 years old. His leadership at the head of Israel was over. He would not be permitted to enter Canaan. "God, Himself," Moses told the people, "will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of the land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the Lord said" (Deuteronomy 31:3). For 40 years Israel had only Moses as their leader. They were understandably unsettled to learn that he would accompany them no longer. Knowing their fear, Moses told them, "The Lord goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6).

For 40 years Joshua had been content to be second-in-command. Charles Spurgeon is credited with saying, "It takes more grace than I can tell, to play the second fiddle well." Joshua had been the ideal understudy, but he was about to take the lead. Perhaps frightened by the limelight, he needed a word from the Lord, and Moses gave it to him: "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he

will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31:8).

In Joshua 1:5 God repeated His promise to Joshua: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.” Israel generally, and Joshua specifically, were about to lose their leader, their mentor, their stability, their anchor. Such changes are not received easily – either by them or by us. Even in the midst of upheaval and variation God says, “I will never leave you.” If we would ever learn that the God who cannot lie has made a promise of His constant presence, hope would harness hesitation, courage would conquer cowardice, and faith would force out fear.

The fourth Old Testament passage where God declared His constant companionship is 1 Chronicles 28:20. David gave his son, Solomon, written plans for building the Temple. David made the preparations. David signed trade agreements. David collected the materials. David arranged for the workers. But Solomon would build the Temple. As he handed the plans to his son, David said, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished.” It was an awesome task, but the enterprise was for God’s glory. At such times, He says, “I will never leave you.”

There is one more Old Testament passage that declares the assurance of intimate companionship with a personal God. It is in Isaiah 41. Difficult, even perilous times were ahead for God’s people. Hezekiah, king of Judah, was told that following his death, the nation of Babylon would conquer his people. The prospect of captivity and exile lay ahead. Even at such a time God said, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (verse 10).” Then God promised, “The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord

will answer them; I, the God of Israel will not forsake them” (verse 17). God’s positive statement, “I am with you,” is echoed by His Son: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Look at the occasions when those five promises were given. Jacob was a young man leaving home, starting out on his own. Israel was a congregation facing great change and tremendous challenge. Joshua was a man assuming the responsibility of leadership. Solomon was a man charged with following the revealed will of God. Judah was a nation facing desolation and deprivation. In each instance God promised, “Never will I leave you.” Those five areas cover most of the opportunities of life. “Whatever happens, and wherever I lead you,” God says, “I am always with you.”

### **THE PROMISES OF NEVER**

Sean Connery created the screen persona of British secret agent James Bond. After making five successful Bond films he said, “I will never play this role again.” A decade later he made one more James Bond movie. In one of life’s amusing ironies, it was titled, “Never Say Never Again.”

“Never” is a promise human beings cannot keep. But when God says, “I will never leave you, I will never forsake you,” it is a promise He will keep. And keep for eternity. The writer of Hebrews said, “Because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you,’ we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid’ (emphasis added). There is no reason why He should forsake us. There is no possible reason why He would desert you? Paul tried to come up with a list:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are

more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39 – KJV).

There are some very practical consequences of living in trust of a God who says, “Never will I leave you. Always I am with you.”

First, there is contentment. Hebrews 13:5 has been our main focus in this chapter, but we have so far not read the entire verse. Look at it: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” Paul told Timothy, “Having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Timothy 6:8 – KJV). Paul gives the reason for that warning: “Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). Because we know we have the assurance of the constant presence of God, we have assurance of Heaven’s reserve. If we face times of need, we can fall back on His supply.

Charles J. Rolls, writing in the preface of his book, *The World’s Greatest Name*, amplifies the powerful word, “never:”

“The fountain of His fullness never fails.

The reservoir of His resource never recedes.

The wisdom of His word never wanes.

The vigor of His virtue never varies.

The burnish of His beauty never blemishes.

The luster of His love never lessens.

The prowess of His power never perishes.”

Second, there is confidence. Knowledge of His abiding presence means, “I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13:6 – KJV). The Psalmist declared, “I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear; what can man do unto me?” (Psalm 118:5-6 – KJV). David said, “In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me” (Psalm 56:11 – KJV).

Third, there is companionship. Knowing that He will never leave us should be a source of deep, spiritual joy. There are times when life and the living of it will reduce us to tears, but we can know an inside joy, a peace which passes all understanding. It is a peace that “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). The word for “guard” is a military term. It implies a garrison. It is the secret that Elisha’s servant discovered. Elisha and his servant were in the town of Dothan, surrounded by an opposing army of horses and chariots. Elisha said, “Don’t be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who with them. And Elisha prayed, ‘O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:16-17). Even in our darkest moments, we can have the pleasure of His presence. Even if we can’t see Him, we still know He is there.

How does God look at things? God sees the secrets we do not see. So many people are afraid because God can see inside of them. They imagine that God looks with the eyes of a detective investigating a sordid crime. They never understand that His are the eyes of a lover, beholding one He loves supremely. They imagine that God only looks with suspicion. They never understand that He looks with trust. They imagine that God only looks for rust. They never understand that He looks for gold.

God sees the widow drop her last two coins into the collection box. He knows our prayers before they are ever spoken. He sees love that has no adequate

means of expression. He sees the anxiety of a lonely wife hugging her husband's pillow. He sees the tears of the 18-year-old who wants to be a woman, but at the same time longs for the security of her childhood. He sees the uncertainty of the woman who has risen to ever-increasing challenges and now because of her success is facing her greatest challenge so far – friendless in a frightening, new environment. He sees the empty place in the young lover's heart and will fill it with His own changeless love, if only the young man will allow it and receive it and cherish Him as he once did her.

God sees beyond human reason. When Samuel was seeking for a man to anoint as king, his first choice was the oldest son of a man named Jesse. His last choice was Jesse's youngest son, David. But David had greater, inside, qualifications. David was God's choice. And it was all because of grace. God says that His thoughts are higher than ours. From that perspective He sees everything that we are. From that vantage point He knows everything that touches us. We will never understand all of God's ways, but understanding that He loves us, we can trust Him.

Maybe the best way to end this chapter is with two definitions.

Never: (1) not ever; at no time. (2) not at all: absolutely not; not even. (3) to no extent or degree.

Always: (1) all the time; uninterruptedly. (2) every time; on every occasion (opposed to sometimes or occasionally).

Understanding those definitions, let's see what God has to say with regards to those words.

“For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13: 5-6 – KJV).

“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”  
(Matthew 28:20).



A God like that can be trusted!

## Chapter Eleven

### FINISHING POWER

June 1, 1925 seemed like another day in baseball for the New York Yankees. Popular first baseman Wally Pipp had a headache, so they took him out of the lineup that day and gave another player a start. The new kid did so well that he remained in the lineup the next day, and the next. In fact he stayed in the lineup for fourteen years. Not many people noticed the beginning of Lou Gehrig's career, but the record of 2130 consecutive games played by the "Iron Horse" many said would never be equaled.

I am a native of the "Old Line State" but I have never been a fan of the Baltimore Orioles. There is no specific reason for it, nothing you could pin me down about under oath. The TV at 117 Shenandoah Avenue picked up KDKA, Pittsburgh, not WBAL, Baltimore, so maybe that's why I did not become a home state fan. I can truthfully say that some of my best friends are Oriole fans, but I would not want my daughters to marry any of them.

But I watched, and cheered, with the millions assembled in front of their TVs, when, on September 6, 1995, Cal Ripken circled the grounds at Camden Yards, celebrating consecutive game number 2131. And I appreciated Cal saying that he was not really a hero, he just showed up for work every day. The real heroes, I recall him saying, were the workers who punched the time clock day in, day out.

Cal started the 1982 seasons as the Oriole's third baseman, but manager Earl Weaver saw a shortstop. Despite the protests of the club, he moved Cal over and put him in the line up everyday. Cal missed the second game of a doubleheader against Toronto on May 29, but he was back in the lineup the next day and history was in the making.

History notes that in 1982 Leonid Brezhnev was the leader of the Soviet Union. *Dynasty* and *Dallas* were the top rated TV shows. *E.T.* set new box office records.

In 1983, *The Streak* was one year old, and the Brooklyn Bridge turned 100. *M\*A\*S\*H* went off the air with the highest recorded number of viewers of any TV program.

In 1984, Cal became the second Oriole (Brooks Robinson was the first) to hit for the cycle. Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman to run for national office on the ticket of a national political party.

The Orioles stuck with their shortstop in 1985, but Coca Cola changed its flavor.

The days outside of baseball passed with events of their own that demanded to be noticed.

Seven astronauts died when the Challenger exploded in 1986.

Mikhail Gorbachev openly led the Soviet Union to *glasnost* in 1987.

In 1988, the last Playboy Club in America closed its doors.

George Bush was inaugurated president in 1989, the first vice president since Martin Van Buren to be elected to the presidency.

The Hubble Space Telescope went into orbit in 1990, but it needed glasses.

In 1991 Anita Hill charged Clarence Thomas with sexual harassment and L.A. police were charged with beating Rodney King.

The Great Mall of America, the largest shopping mall in the world, opened in 1992.

Foreign terrorists bombed the World Trade Center in 1993, for the first time.

Richard Nixon died in 1994.

Homegrown terrorists killed 168 of us in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

TV got a rating system in 1996.

China got back Hong Kong in 1997.

And on September 20, 1998, Cal Ripken after playing in 2,632 consecutive ball games (including an unequalled 8,243 consecutive innings) walked into the office of manager Ray Miller and said, "I think the time is right."

It may be easy to start. It is a lot more difficult to finish.

Of all the Gospel writers only Luke records Jesus' parable of the man who started to build a tower and was not able to finish it. Jesus said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? For if he lays a foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'" (Luke 14:28-30). It may be that Luke remembered traveling with a man who started serving Christ, but did not finish. The New Testament mentions his name

only three times, but the name Demas is synonymous with starting and then failing to finish.

Paul's writings are the source of all we know about Demas. The first citation is in his letter to Philemon: "Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers, greet you" (vs. 24). All the indications are that he was a devoted and promising disciple. Paul gives him "top billing," mentioning him ahead of Luke.

The second reference to Demas is in Paul's letter to the Colossians where we read, "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas" (Colossians 4:14). Luke retains Paul's confidence, but Demas, now mentioned second, has become just Demas.

The last mention is in Paul's second letter to Timothy: "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10). What began so gloriously, ended in obvious tragedy. Demas' Christian life can be plotted as a downward curve on a graph. Demas, my fellow worker. Demas. Demas forsook me.

There is nothing as glorious as a good beginning, and nothing as tragic as a bad ending. And yet as we consider this all too familiar occurrence, it should become obvious that the qualities that make a good start possible are not identical with the qualities which see life through to the end. Starting power and finishing power are not the same in any realm.

Think of participating in confidential fellowship with Paul, the greatest apostle. Imagine studying the scripture with Paul, who once sat at the feet of Gamaliel, a teacher still spoken of with reverence in Jewish circles. Try to envision sharing in Paul's ministry and seeing lives changed throughout the Mediterranean world. Yet when Paul wrote to Timothy, from prison, desperately needing encouragement, he said, "Demas forsook me." Paul clearly states the reason for the desertion as "his love for this present world."

The world then, just like today, offered glamour, excitement, and adventure, and a lot of shortcuts. Sometimes we tire of following the path of most resistance, and we return to the path of least resistance. That may have been the case with Demas. Maybe it's happening to you. It is hard to get started, but it is a lot tougher to finish.

We stress the idea of a good start with our children. We want them to have every possible advantage and so in the family, in school, in church, most of us had a very good beginning. Courtship and romance blossom into the promise of a lasting marriage, and yet the divorce courts are full. Every jail in America houses prisoners who started as honest, law-abiding men and women but who finished behind bars. Most of us know how easy it might have been. We have skated over some very thin ice. How easily we could have fallen through.

Perhaps your faith has already fallen far from the strong testimony you once had for Jesus Christ. You know if it were to end today it would be a bad ending. So many people have such a glorious beginning in the Christian faith, and such a tragic ending. What does it take to have finishing power?

### **A SENSITIVE CONSCIENCE**

To finish, to go all the way with Jesus Christ, takes, first, a sensitive conscience – a conscience that is sensitive to the Christ who now lives inside; a conscience that demands the best of us because Jesus will not accept less than that; a conscience that will not allow us to break faith either with ourselves or with our Christ.

I read of a man who was the general contractor for a construction project on a college campus. When the college dean went to examine the newly completed roof of a building, he found it to be poor workmanship.

The dean asked the contractor, “Do you think that is a first class roof?”

“It passed inspection,” he said.

“Seriously, do you think that is a first class roof?”

“What are you going to do about it?” the contractor asked.

The dean said, “You misunderstand me. You have told me you are a Christian. If Jesus Christ were inspecting this roof, would you put your name on it.”

“There’s no court in the world that would tell me to replace that roof,” he said.

“I didn’t ask you that,” the dean said. “If Jesus Christ were inspecting that roof, would you put your name on it?”

The contractor glared at him and walked off, but the next day he called his crew back. They removed the roof and rebuilt it with craftsmanship. He could not hope to break even on the job, but his Christ-sensitive conscience demanded it. Because the world will accept less does not mean that Jesus will!

Roger had never played baseball, but all of his friends were joining little league, so he signed up. After his first day of practice, his father asked him how he had made out.

Grinning from ear to ear, Roger replied, “The coach says I’m the best of the worst three.”

There is an old saying. If you haven’t said it yourself, someone has said it to you: “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” We automatically think that means if we try again, we will succeed the next time. The chances are very good that we will fail the next time, too – again and again and again. That is why failure is so important to success.

Simon Peter boasted one day of his success. “Lord,” he said, looking around the table at the other disciples, “if all of these fail you, I will not. I will die for you.”

To which Jesus replied, “Before this day is over, you will deny three times that you even know me, let alone die for me.”

And Peter did deny Jesus and then wept bitterly.

After His resurrection, Jesus did something most business leaders would consider risky, if not completely foolish. He took a man who had miserably failed at a relatively simple job, and gave him a promotion. Three times Jesus recommissioned Peter: “Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Shepherd my sheep.”

Why would Jesus pick a man who denied three times, complete with cursing, even knowing his Lord, and commission that man to be a shepherd over human lives? Because Peter was more useable after his failure than he ever was after his success.

Joseph was a gifted, but insensitive young man. After he experienced slavery, was falsely accused of rape, and unjustly imprisoned, God elevated Joseph to the second position in Egypt. The humiliation and misuse gave him compassion for those who reached to him for help.

Aaron, Moses’ brother, was Israel’s first high priest. And yet it was Aaron who gathered gold, fashioned a golden calf and said to Israel, “This is your God.” As a direct consequence of Aaron’s sin, 3,000 Israelites were killed.

Would Aaron later have responded with hardness to anyone guilty of transgressing the Law, or with mercy and compassion? Recognizing his own sin, I think he would have been inclined to mercy.

Do not misunderstand. We do not have to fail in order to serve God, but with every failure in my life, I understand a greater depth of the forgiveness of Jesus. With every failure, I realize how important success is. With every failure, I am encouraged to follow more closely a Christ who has never failed me, even though I



have failed Him miserably and often. That is why a sensitive conscience is important if you are going to finish, if you are going to go all the way with Jesus.

### **AN ENTHUSIASTIC DEVOTION**

To finish, to go all the way with Jesus, secondly, takes a complete devotion to His Kingdom. To finish, we must serve something higher than ourselves.

In prison, Paul wrote to Timothy, asking Timothy to come to visit him. He lamented that Demas, who at one time was his fellow worker, had now deserted the apostle and the faith, “having loved this present world.” Demas had served Christ, but without a complete devotion to the Lord. While trying to live for God, Demas was still in love with the world that he could see, not the world he could not see.

Demas had grasped some of the more comfortable aspects of the Gospel, but the Gospel had never taken hold of Demas. Demas had possessed certain details of Christ’s message, but Christ had not possessed him. Demas’ Christianity had a superstructure that, like a child’s building blocks, was easily put up and easily taken down. It was jerry-built on a slim foundation.

What is this love of the world that wrecked Demas and can wreck us? It is anything in life that crowds Christ out. It may be something perfectly innocent in itself that twists itself around my soul until I can no longer reach up to hold on to the strong, loving hand of my Redeemer. It is anything that makes me forget, or even temporarily want to forget, that my citizenship is in Heaven. It is anything that blocks my view of eternity and causes me to look at today as though today were everything.

Jesus told a parable about a man who was a financial success (see Luke 12:16-21). He was completely absorbed in his business. He was correct to be engrossed in that business: it was his duty. But it so monopolized him that eventually it blocked off completely his view of God, and he forgot that his citizenship was in

Heaven. What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose the only thing that really matters – his own soul?

Devotion should be approached with enthusiasm. Devotion viewed as duty soon becomes drudgery. If the love of the world steals your joy, it will soon steal your devotion. What is enthusiasm? I don't mean the dictionary definition of "lively interest." Serving the Lord with enthusiasm means we see beyond this immediate moment. With the eye of faith we rejoice in the certain knowledge of God's ultimate victory. If now we see through a glass darkly, enthusiasm says, there is a day coming when we will see face to face (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

Here are two definitions of enthusiasm that are not in the dictionary.

Joe had a pet turtle named Rocky. They were an odd couple, the four-year-old boy and the turtle. One day, Joe's father noticed that Rocky seemed to be a little sluggish. A veterinarian examined Rocky and said, "He has a disease common to turtles. It is a fatal illness. Rocky will be dead within two weeks."

Joe was devastated. He sobbed as if his heart would break. He refused to eat any supper and cried himself to sleep. As each day passed, Joe became more and more depressed.

Finally Joe's father said, "As soon as Rocky dies we are going to have a parade in his memory. We'll invite all the kids in the neighborhood. We'll have flags and banners and music. After the parade we'll have a party. We'll all eat cake and ice cream. It will be the biggest party you've ever seen."

"Daddy," Joe said, "let's kill him!"

That is enthusiasm!

A few years ago Connie was in an automobile accident. As a result of her injuries she lived in constant pain. In order to find relief, she began taking more and more medicine. She convinced her doctor to prescribe increasingly stronger medica-

tion. Gradually she became addicted to the prescription pain relievers. When Connie's doctor refused to give her more medicine, well-meaning friends had prescriptions filled for her.

Finally, unable to cope, Connie checked herself into a rehabilitation clinic. Before her five-week stay was concluded, her husband of 30 years, announced he was leaving her and filing for divorce.

Connie said, "There are days when the anxiety washes over me and I almost go under, but God's hand lifts me back up and I brace myself for the next wave. The beautiful thing in all this is God's strength and His wonderful peace. My favorite promise is 'weeping comes in the night, but hold on, joy comes in the morning.' I am looking forward to daybreak!"

That is enthusiasm!

Everyone is enthusiastic about something. If our enthusiasm is centered in Jesus, we have an enthusiasm that will last – both now and forever.

### **COUNT THE COST**

To finish, to go all the way with Jesus Christ, thirdly, we must honestly count the cost. It is easy to get caught up in emotionalism and claim the name of Jesus. If we do, we probably will not finish. Sooner or later we are going to come face-to-face with the demands of the Lord. In a moment of honesty we will say, "I never bargained for that. No one ever told me."

Jesus doesn't want commitment to Him based on the idea that it is comfortable to be a Christian. Jesus wants us to understand how difficult it is to follow Him. He never conned anyone into following Him. He wants us to sit down and count the cost. Understand that to follow Him means that we deny ourselves. There will be a cross for us to pick up and carry. And remember, a cross is a place to die.

Too many people have been told that becoming a Christian removes all of life's problems and that is a lie! When we finally understand that we may quit Christ. If, however, we understand the lifetime demand, the candor and the honesty of Jesus, and then with total inside conviction we say, "Yes, Jesus. I will serve you," we can finish.

If you work with a computer, if a customer service agent has ever told you, "That is a computer error," if you've ever heard the expression associated with computers called GIGO, "garbage in, garbage out," you will appreciate this story.

The management of a Chicago hotel decided to send 4,000 letters of gratitude to customers who had patronized their establishment in the previous six months. Due to "a computer error," the letters did not go out to the customer list. They were sent to 4,000 Chicago residents.

Computers can be set to "personalize" letters. Using a data base and a merge program a letter can say, "Dear Bill: It was great to have you stay in the hotel recently."

Some of the spouses who read the letters were not amused. One woman, pregnant with her fourth child said, "My husband has a doubt as to whether it's his." One woman filed for divorce, claiming she now had documentary evidence of adultery.

Most of the men simply called the hotel and said, "Just a minute." Then they put their wives on the line and said, "Go ahead. Tell her I was never at your hotel, that I have never booked a room there."

Even though most of the letters were addressed to men, they were actually opened by their wives. Can you imagine the misunderstandings and the false accusations that were aroused? Many have said that their lives may never be the same again because they were falsely accused, simply by a computer error! Those people never bargained for the trouble they received. They were put into difficult positions they

never expected. That is not the way it is with serving Jesus – if we have counted the cost.

One day Jesus told His listeners that it is a blessing to be falsely accused. He actually stated they would be rewarded for suffering false accusations. “Blessed are you,” Jesus said, “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:11-12). Because Jesus is totally honest with us, we know in advance that finishing power will be costly.

To be falsely accused, and suffer for Jesus is not a moment of penalty, but an occasion for glory. “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad,” Jesus said. Leap, dance for joy, rejoice like a runner who burst to the front and won the prize with a last, split-second, lunge. Shout like a player whose team has just won the international championship for their sport. That is finishing power’s challenge! That is finishing power’s opportunity!

God promises us a faith that is not simply an ambulance following in the wake of a battle to deal with casualties. He promises armor that wins victories. To change metaphors, Christianity is not merely the cure for a disease – it is the vaccine that prevents the disease from destroying a life. Jude declared God “is able to keep you from falling” (vs. 24). God told Jacob, “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest” (Genesis 28:15 – KJV). The Psalmist proclaimed, “The Lord is thy keeper” (Psalm 121:5 – KJV). Paul promised, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion unto the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). By His grace He gives us the power to finish what He has started in us!

One close look at Helen, and it was possible to tell that she had once been quite attractive. The toll she had paid for the life she had lived was severe. Yet as terrible as the years seemed to have been to her, they could not erase the

suggestion of what had once been great beauty. In her gnarled hands was the suggestion of delicate grace. Her hair, now yellowed with age, must have once been quite golden as it caught the rays of the sun.

Her voice cracked as she spoke. The words came with great difficulty. “I would like to pray,” Helen said, “but I wonder now if God will hear me. When I was young and attractive, I turned my back on God. Now that I’m getting old, have lost my health through an incurable illness, and have nothing left of life’s pleasures, I find myself turning to God. There is nothing else. But why would He want me under these circumstances? When I had to sacrifice my pleasures to be one of God’s children, I chose not to. Now that I have nothing to sacrifice, I am ready for God. I am bringing Him nothing but my need. It is a poor bargain for Him. Will He want me now?”

We always assume the prodigal son was a young man when he returned to his father’s house. The Bible does not give his age, either at the time of his departure or his return. We do know that he was the younger of two sons and he was tired of waiting. Hostile and rebellious, he wanted instant independence. When he, like Helen, decided to stop denying himself life’s pleasures, he went whole-hog. In fact, he ended up feeding hogs, competing with them for their slop during a time of famine. We usually think of him as still possessing his youth, although humbled by his circumstances. Perhaps he was now quite advanced in years, stooped by his poverty. When he thought of returning home to his father’s house, the words may not have been articulated with the clarity of a young man. They may have been the mumblings of a man worn out by years and by hardship.

“I will go home to Father,” he thought, “but I have nothing to offer him. The years of riotous living have wasted anything I could contribute, but I will go home regardless. Maybe my Father will take me on in the position of his lowest servant. At least I would have enough to eat.”

When David looked back over the mess he had made of his life – a life that included adultery, murder, and the violation of God – he made this very powerful observation: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Do you have anything to offer to God? Is a broken heart, a broken spirit, all you have left? Then offer it. You may be young, thinking there are years ahead, but from God’s point of view, you are looking at nothing but anguish and despair. God will say with even greater anguish, “You had the need. I would gladly have accepted your broken heart, but you would not offer it.”

Helen was asking, the prodigal son was asking, and you may be asking, “Is it too late?” There is an immeasurable distance between late and too late. Whatever you have, offer it now. God will not despise it. Here is the promise of finishing power. He will not reject you. By His grace not only can you start, you can finish! That is God’s promise!