

Sermons on Matthew-Robert Morgan

Introduction - Robert J Morgan is the teaching pastor at [Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee](#) and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles.

D = Daily Devotions: The Soul-Secrets of Sacred Reading Matthew 4:1-4

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"—Matthew 4:1-4

Several years ago, there was a popular television show entitled "The Facts of Life," and one of the stars was a woman named Lisa Whelchel who played the part of Blair. In "real life," Lisa is a busy mother, a pastor's wife, and a popular Christian writer and speaker. Several months ago, we cooperated in a little project, and I learned something from her.

One of Lisa's specialties is teaching busy mothers how to take time for spiritual nourishment in the Word of God every day. On her bookshelf is a copy of Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament, and one day she noticed something. In the Bible, the term "word" is sometimes translated from the Greek word "**rhema**."

For example, here in Matthew 4:4, Jesus told the devil that human beings could not exist merely on physical nourishment, they needed spiritual nourishment as well. We don't live by bread alone, but by every rhema that proceeds from the mouth of God.

The term "word" in this verse is the Greek word rhema, which means something that has been definitely stated, a pronouncement, a specific word uttered by a living voice. This term struck Lisa and she began thinking of specific Bible verses as "Rhema Rays." She wrote, "When I sit down in my recliner, snuggle up with a cozy blanket, a hot cup of coffee, and my favorite comfy Bible every morning, there are some days, as I am reading the Word to know God personally, that He reveals Himself in an especially intimate way. It is as if the Lord shines a ray of light on a verse, even if I have read it a hundred times before but suddenly I understand how it specifically applies to me and my life. I call these moments 'Rhema Rays.'"

It seems to me that this is what the ancient Christians and the desert fathers called lectio divina (pronounced lex'-ee-o / dih-vee-nah), which means, literally, sacred reading. This is one of the ancient disciplines that we need to rediscover in this day of blaring noises and non-stop sound. Lectio divina means that we find a time to be still and to open the Bible or some great devotional piece of literature, and we read it for our own soul's nourishment, looking for that word or phrase or verse or chapter that will speak to us as though it had our names on it, as though we could hear the voice of Jesus Himself speaking to us personally and pointedly.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Word

Sometimes all it takes is a single word of Scripture. I believe that every word is inspired, and Jesus said that every dot and dash is given with authority. Look across the page at Matthew 5:17ff. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Some time ago, I was reading through the book of 2 Chronicles during my morning devotional periods, and one day I came to the story of King Jehoram in chapter 21. This was a very distressing story. Jehoram's father had been the good King Jehoshaphat who had worked tirelessly to bring about revival in his nation. Upon his death, Jehoram ascended to the throne and he immediately undid his father's twenty-five years of work. To solidify his power, Jehoram massacred all his siblings and married the daughter of Queen Jezebel, the most wicked woman in the Old Testament. He descended into idol-worship, and the kingdom of Judah began collapsing around him.

But having described these multiple disasters, verse 7 (NIV) says, "Nevertheless, because of the covenant the Lord had made with David, the Lord was not willing to destroy the house of David. He had promised to maintain a lamp for him and his descendants forever."

That one word—nevertheless—jumped out at me, and with my pencil I drew a box around it, and for days and days I was encouraged in my spirit because of that one word. Everything may be collapsing around us, but nevertheless the promises of God are secure. Nevertheless God is in control. Nevertheless He is faithful and His Word is sure. Nevertheless I can trust in Him.

It's wonderful when a word in the Bible jumps out and assaults you, as it were.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Phrase

Sometimes God speaks to us in a phrase from the Bible. I've occasionally battled anxiety, but there's one thing about that for which I can give thanks. My anxiety has so often driven me to the Bible to find a promise or a word of reassurance from the Lord. For example, one night a four-word phrase in Mark 11:22 hit me like a load of bricks: "Have faith in God." On another occasion, it was a two-word phrase in Psalm 37: "Fret not."

On another occasion, I was reading through the book of Daniel, and it was a time of special concern for me. There were two words in chapter 4 that struck me like two bullets from a derringer. In this chapter, Daniel is interpreting the strange dream of Nebuchadnezzar. I'll not give you the full context, but let me read this one verse for you—Daniel 4:26: "The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules."

I had never noticed those two words before: Heaven rules! It reminded me of the phrase we come across in the book of Psalms—the Lord reigns! But what a joy to go into the day with those two words written above our heads in the sky, as it were: Heaven rules. The Lord reigns.

This was one of the Bible study methods our Lord used. I'd like to show you a wonderful passage of Scripture. It's Psalm 31, a song written by David and consisting of 24 verses. This is a favorite of mine, and in glancing back over it in my old, underlined Bible, I counted a dozen different circles and underlines and brackets and other marks that I've made through the years as I've underlined its verses. Let me show you how Psalm 31 begins: In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Deliver me in Your righteousness. Turn Your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. Since You are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of Your name, lead and guide me. Free me from the trap that is set for me, for You are my refuge. Into Your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.

Our Lord Jesus evidently loved Psalm 31, and in the dying moments of His life on Calvary's cross, there was one phrase that meant all the world to Him; and He uttered it in His dying moments. He didn't have the physical strength to quote the entire Psalm or even the entire verse, but the whole weight of His dying moments rested on one phrase from verse 5 and He spoke them from the cross: Into Your hands I commit My spirit. And having quoted that phrase of Old Testament truth, He gave up the ghost. It was just a phrase from Psalm 31, but how it ministered to His heart in the very last moments of life.

When you have a very rich dessert in your kitchen, maybe a rich chocolate concoction, sometimes all you need is a little bite of it. And some of the verses in the Bible are so rich that all you need is a little phrase. When God gives it to you, underline it or circle it, and then write it on your mind and in your heart.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Verse

This week I read about a woman in Central America who, some years ago, fell prey to amoebas, and the doctor prescribed amoeba medicine and hormones and told her to quit nursing her 11-month-old baby. She did so, but in the process of taking the treatments she discovered she was pregnant again. The doctor told her gravely that she should have an abortion because the amoeba medicine and hormones are contraindicated during pregnancy. They could cause serious birth defects.

The woman went home greatly troubled, but she picked up her devotional book and Romans 15:13 jumped off the page at her: Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Somehow that verse gave her divine reassurance, and she said, in effect, "Lord, you knew all about my illness, my medications, and my pregnancy. You've given me new life, and I'm going to rejoice in it whether there are birth defects or not."

She was so bolstered by that verse that she carried the baby to term. And as she wrote her story, she said, "Twenty-four years have passed since that time. Today our daughter, Rebecca, is a short-term missionary." (Voices of the Faithful, with Beth Moore, Kim P. David Compiling Editor, Integrity Publishers, 2005), p. 67.)

I want to praise God today for two men—one was a Jewish Rabbi by the name of Nathan who divided the Old Testament into verses in AD 1448. The other is Robert Estienne, a Parisian printer, who was the first to divide the New Testament into verses in 1555. We owe them a debt of gratitude because they make these wonderful little segments of Scripture so accessible to us and so easy to find and learn. How often God speaks to us through a simple verse.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Paragraph

There are also times when God speaks to us in a paragraph of Scripture, which has the advantage of providing us a truth in its context. When I talk about preaching, I often advise ministerial students to consider the paragraph the most basic unit for the preaching text. The reason is that paragraphs are our shortest segments of contextualized truth. A chapter provides the context, but often it's too long for a sermon. A verse presents truth, but not with an adequate context. But when we study a paragraph,

we're studying bite-sized, manageable, workable units of contextualized truth. And that makes them ideal for both personal study and biblical preaching.

Years ago, I heard my favorite professor in Bible college preach a sermon from Isaiah 40:27-31, and from that day this has been one of my favorite paragraphs of Scripture. Let me read it for you: Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Those last verses are among the most beautiful of the entire Bible, but in studying the paragraph I realized that it's the first verses that provide a sense of context. These verses were written to people who were so defeated in life that they thought God had forgotten all about them. They thought God wasn't listening to their prayers. They thought their problems were beyond God's concern or control. They were complaining, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God."

Isaiah was addressing His majestic words to those who were cast down in their spirits, and he was asking them, "Do you not know? Have you forgotten? Don't you remember? The everlasting God is the creator of the ends of the earth, and He knows all about it, and He hasn't forgotten you, and He wants to give you renewed strength...." And in that context, he paints the beautiful picture of faith that we have in verse 31. What a powerful paragraph, especially in times of perplexity and discouragement.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Chapter

Sometimes God speaks to us in an entire chapter. I don't have any better example of this than my experience over the Atlantic Ocean with Exodus 14. Several years ago, I was returning home from overseas, and I dreaded getting back because I was coming back to a particular problem that was draining the very life out of me. I was so worried about something and so dreading coming back to deal with it. As I sat there on the airplane, the seat beside me was vacant, and my Bible reading that day was from Exodus 14, the story of the children of Israel at the Red Sea. As I read that passage, I had an experience that has seldom been equaled in my life. I felt that the Lord Jesus Himself sat down beside me and began tutoring me through that chapter, giving me ten ways in which I should respond to the particular situation I was facing. I could hardly write quickly enough to jot down in my notebook the insights that came to me. It was so transforming to my heart, and out of it came a series of sermons that we entitled "God Will Make a Way," and a book entitled The Red Sea Rules.

I just love it when an entire chapter comes alive like that, and how wonderful some of these great chapters of Scripture are.

Sometimes God Speaks to us in a Book

And then sometimes God speaks to us through a whole book of the Bible. Every one of the 66 books in the Bible meets a different need in our lives; and there's nothing richer than doing book studies of Scripture. You can begin by just reading through a book in one sitting.

I think a lot of us have gotten lazy in our reading habits, and it seems too hard for us to read a whole book in a sitting. We don't mind to sit down for a half-hour situation comedy on television, or a one-hour drama, or a two-hour movie or ballgame; but to sit for more than three or four or five minutes for Bible reading seems like a chore. I can read an average chapter in the Bible in just over a minute, and I've made a little project of seeing how long it takes me to read through the various books of the Bible.

It took me just a little over an hour and a half to read through Genesis. Exactly one hour and a half to read through Isaiah, which is one of the longest books of the Bible. I read through the entire book of Proverbs in 42 minutes, and James in seven minutes. Every book of the Bible has its own purpose and theme; and sometimes as we read through a book in the Bible, the whole book just sinks into our hearts by spiritual osmosis, and we are blessed and strengthened by it. Recently I've been reading and re-reading the entire book of Job. I'm planning to preach a series of sermons this fall from Job, and nothing is richer than book-studies of the Bible

Conclusion

If, then, the Lord is eager to speak to us with the words and phrases and sentences and paragraphs and chapters and books of the Bible, how do we do we read the Bible for all its worth? How do we listen and learn and lean?

First, make Bible reading and Bible study a daily habit.

Second, ask God to speak to your heart and mind as you read.

Third, read methodically, picking up where you left off the day before.

Fourth, read contemplatively, thinking about what you're reading and praying through it.

Fifth, read with a pen or pencil. One morning I came to my office for my morning devotions, and my reading that day was in Ezra, chapter 1. I sat down and read the entire chapter and did not get one thing out of it. My mind just wasn't engaged. It was like when you have your car motor in neutral, and you can gun your engine all you want, but you're not going to make any forward progress at all. I was having trouble focusing. So I said to myself, "I know there are some good lessons in this chapter. I'll just start taking notes." This time I didn't get any further than verse 1, because suddenly as I began to outline the verse and jot down some notes, that verse came alive.

Sixth, take advantage of times of distress. Very often, it'd during difficult times that we're most receptive to the wisdom and strength of the Bible.

And finally, as you find those passages that speak to you, learn to lean on them with your whole weight. I prepared this message while traveling; I was in Toronto, and on this very morning I received two e-mails. One was from a woman who had read the preface I had written for a special edition of a Bible published by Thomas Nelson. In that preface, I had talked about the reliability of the biblical text, and this woman was not happy with what I had written:

"Mr. Morgan: I just finished reading the King James Bible. I just wanted to tell you how wrong you are about the historical accuracy of this Bible, or any other. In your introduction, you imply that the events in it, Old Testament and New, are well founded, verified historical facts. This is demonstrably not so...."

He went on to excoriate Christians for their hypocrisy and to blame them for just about every evil under the sun, and she ended by saying: "What a better world this would be if all this nonsense would just go away."

On the very same morning, I received another e-mail from a woman who told me of how very often, in times of crisis, hurt, and disappointment, the Bible has spoken to her. She described a number of crushing blows that have come her way in the last few years, and she gave me specific occasions of how certain Bible verses have kept her going. For example, she described what she called the most painful day of her life when some things happened in the summer of 2004 that just devastated her life. But there was one verse that gave her courage and the strength to go on. It was Proverbs 3:5: Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

In her e-mail to me, she said, "I sensed God's voice saying over and over again, 'Trust me. Trust me.' I knew (that whether or not I could ever trust another person), I knew I could trust God."

She ended her letter saying: "God's Word is powerful enough for any crisis. The Word can speak to your need and give you direction. You can trust the God who is truth and who never changes."

I received those two letters within a few minutes of each other in a hotel room in Toronto. The Lord surely arranged for those two letters to come at the same time to show me what a contrast there is between those who respect God's Word and those who don't, and to show me the blessedness of the former and the bitterness of the latter.

One thing I know for sure. It's impossible to really appreciate the Bible without knowing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Only when you give Him your heart and life can you fully grasp the Bible. It's like the woman who read a book and didn't get a thing out of it. To her, it was wasted time. Then shortly afterward, she met the author. They fell in love and married, and she read the book again; and this time it came alive to her. To really appreciate and love the Bible, you have to know and love its author, who died for you and rose again.

Today I want to point you to God and to Jesus Christ and to the wonder of the Word of God. I commit you to God and to the Word of His grace that can build you up and give you an inheritance among those who are sanctified. For we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

In this manner, therefore, pray....
Matthew 6:9

He was the original Prince Charming, Ludwig Otto Friedrich Wilhelm of Bavaria. Standing six-foot-four, the young man with raven-black hair, piercing blue eyes, ivory skin, and a shy demeanor charmed his subjects. He ascended the throne at age eighteen as if out of a child's storybook. Bavarians called him their fairytale king, which is just how he thought of himself.

Ludwig (LOOT-vik) had grown up in the neo-gothic chambers of a castle in the Bavarian hills. As a child, he'd been transfixed by the gigantic murals depicting folktales of life in the dark forests of Germany. Being a brooding and lonely child, Ludwig soaked up the wistful legends as though they were real, as if he were part of them. As a teen, he was spellbound by the fanciful operas of Richard

Wagner, whom he idolized. Between the murals and the operas, Ludwig created a fantasy realm in his mind as he ascended the throne upon the death of his father in 1864.

Ludwig was no ordinary king. In matters of state, he showed no interest. When it came to government dignitaries, he had no patience. During the war with Prussia, he retreated to a private island and brooded, ignoring the Prime Minister's pleas to rally the nation. He proposed marriage to one of the most beautiful woman in Bavaria, but cancelled the engagement when he couldn't face the pressure of a royal wedding. In matters of money, he had no sense of budgeting. In public relations and diplomacy, he was as disinterested as a character from the Brothers Grimm.

His social skills were abysmal, and he was only interested in what fascinated him—castles. He could think of hardly anything but the building of palaces. "Oh," he said, "how necessary it is to create for oneself such poetic places of refuge, where one can forget for a little while the dreaded times in which we live."¹

Peering through the telescope of his bedroom window, Ludwig gazed across the valley at nearby Jugend Mountain and envisioned a palace nestled on its rugged ridge. Aided by artists and theatrical designers, Ludwig designed and built a castle in the clouds, a place called Neuschwanstein New Swan Castle—arguably the most breathtaking castle in the world.

Then Ludwig poured his energy into another palace about twenty miles away in a peaceful valley. This is Linderhof, and many people believe it's the most beautiful of Ludwig's residences, a white jewel resembling a wedding cake tucked amid the emerald green of the valley, laced with pools and gardens. The interior of the place is gilded with gold, and the royal bedroom is almost blindingly glorious, lit by a 1000-pound crystal chandelier. The dining room boasts a table that lowered with the flip of a switch into the kitchen below, where servants would fill it with dishes of food and raise it back up to him. When dinner was over, the table was again lowered for easy cleanup. Since Ludwig usually died alone or with imaginary guests, the table insured his peace and quiet.

Ludwig built his third and most ambitious palace – a replica of France's Palace of Versailles – on an island in Bavaria's largest lake and named it Herrenchiemsee. It's a masterpiece of opulence, with marble floors and walls, a grand staircase flanked by huge murals, and a state bedroom encased with gold. The bedding, crafted from golden threads, took seven years for twenty tailors to complete. The Hall of Mirrors is even larger than the Versailles original.

King Ludwig drew up plans for more palaces and castles, but that's when he met an insolvable problem. Within a mere two decades, he exhausted 700 years of family wealth and ran up staggering debts. His financial pressures aggravated his eccentric traits, and he panicked at the thought of losing his properties. He sent official ambassadors to friends and foreign governments, begging funds. In return, he received an avalanche of criticism from newspapers, pundits, and commoners. His own government viewed his actions with disfavor. Utility companies sued for non-payment, and Ludwig's increasingly bizarre conduct provoked a constitutional crisis. He was declared insane, and Prime Minister Johann Lutz sent commissioners to seize him.

On a dark and stormy night—literally—the commissioners arrived on the bleak slopes of Neuschwanstein to arrest King Ludwig. Phone lines and power supplies were cut, and Ludwig paced the darkened halls of his castle in turmoil, drinking heavily, clinching and unclenching his fists, contemplating suicide. Finally submitting to authorities, Ludwig, 40, donned a dark coat and low hat to be driven down the steep winding road, through rain and mist, as villagers lined the way like a funeral procession.

Ludwig had spent only 172 days at his castle in the clouds, and less than two weeks in his Versailles-like palace of Herrenchiemsee. Now he was exiled to place he despised, which was to be his prison—Berg Castle on the shores of Lake Starnberg.

The next day Ludwig, agitated and depressed, ate supper, drank a glass of beer and seven glasses of wine, and asked the eminent psychiatrist, Dr. Bernard von Gudden, who was treating his alleged insanity, to join him for a walk in the rain. Wearing heavy coats and carrying umbrellas, the two men wound down the dark path toward the lake. The rain increased, and attendants were alarmed when the two didn't return by bedtime. A search party with torches and lanterns scoured the property, discovering signs of an apparent struggle. Presently the bodies of both men were found floating in shallow water in the dark waters of Lake Starnberg. How and why they died is one of history's most baffling mysteries and the subject of endless speculation to this day.

Seven weeks after his death, King Ludwig's three great castles Neuschwanstein in the Alpine foothills, Linderhof in the valley, and the Versailles-like Herrenchiemsee—were opened to the public, and within a few years all the outstanding debts were retired by tourism and ticket sales. Today the income generated by "Mad" Ludwig's castles far exceeds their original costs as millions of tourists flood the palaces every year. Ludwig's palaces are Germany's premier tourist attractions and some of the most photographed sites on earth. Last year when I visited Neuschwanstein with my daughter and granddaughter, we were nearly suffocated by the wall-to-wall crowds.

The postcard-perfect palace in the clouds—Neuschwanstein—inspired the castles at Disney theme parks around the world. King Ludwig once said of his fairytale castle at Neuschwanstein: "The location is one of the most beautiful to be found, holy and unapproachable, a worthy temple" and he said that those who inhabit this castle will live "on the lofty heights, breathing the air of

heaven.”

That didn't prove true for Ludwig, but it can turn out better for us. In his book on the Lord's Prayer, Dr. R. C. Sproul wrote, “The Sovereign has condescended to give us an audience. He has invited us into the heavenly palace. He has lifted the scepter and told us to enter. We have access to His very throne.”²

Only one King has a palace that's truly holy and unapproachable, a worthy temple where we can live on the lofty heights breathing the air of heaven.

For those who are heirs of the kingdom, the palace is never closed. We may approach it with boldness with no fears we'll be turned away. We have constant access to every chamber at any time. Its every room is unlocked to those who come in Jesus' Name.

That's the way I visualize the Lord's Prayer, the most famous prayer in history. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, “The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught His disciples, commonly called The Lord's Prayer.”³

We can occupy the Palace of Prayer whenever we earnestly say these simple words and model our prayers on its timeless pattern:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.⁴
(Matthew 6:8-13, NKJV)

The Scriptural Foundation

Every castle needs a cornerstone, and the larger the palace the stronger the needed foundation. The Lord's Prayer has its foundations in Scripture, in history, and in experience. In terms of Scripture, we uncover the Lord's Prayer twice in the Gospels. First, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:9-13. This was our Lord's inaugural sermon, the greatest sermon ever preached. Its theme is true righteousness. Here Jesus described the very best life that can be lived on earth. About a third of the way through His message, Jesus brought up the subject of prayer.

And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. In this manner, therefore, pray...”

At that point, Jesus introduced a prayer He had composed, a prayer of only 66 words in English, which can be read or repeated unhurriedly in less than thirty seconds. The original, as Jesus spoke it in Aramaic, was even shorter.

Sometime later and on another occasion, which was recorded in Luke 11:1-4, Jesus was praying as His disciples watched, impressed by the poignancy and power of His method. “Lord,” they said, “teach us to pray.” In response, Jesus repeated virtually word for word the prayer he had originally given them in the earlier sermon.

Some scholars claim Jesus only gave the Lord's Prayer once, and Matthew and Luke framed it differently in their respective Gospels. I don't understand that logic, for the settings are obviously different. Being a Master Teacher, Jesus knew the power of repetition and review. All pastors and preachers go back and reinforce their material to remind their listeners of what had been previously taught. That we have two renditions of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels is proof to us that it's doubly important. The Holy Spirit gave it a double emphasis in God's Word.

From the very beginning, from the Galilean ministry of Christ, the church of the Lord Jesus has instinctively known this is the best blueprint for prayer that it's possible for a human tongue to utter. It takes us from room to room in our Lord's presence and shows us how to worship Him and how to ask Him to meet our needs and to fill our hearts. It's a gift from Jesus to aid us in our walk with the Lord in daily prayer. It's priceless real estate for the soul.

The Historical Foundation

There are allusions to the Lord's Prayer throughout the remainder of the New Testament. Then as the last of the New Testament books were written, another book came into circulation—a short and simple letter distributed among the churches. It probably dates from somewhere around the year AD 100, shortly after the death of the last of the original disciples. This document was known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles—The Didache (pronounced DID-a-key). We don't believe it was actually written by any of the Twelve Apostles, but it does contain a summary of apostolic practices for the New Testament churches. The Didache has been called our "oldest surviving written catechism."⁵

This is what the Didache said in instructing new Christians to pray: Do not pray like the hypocrites, but rather as the Lord commanded in His Gospel, like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily (needful) bread, and forgive us our debt as we also forgive our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (or, evil); for Thine is the power and the glory forever. Pray this three times each day.⁶

This is our earliest known commentary on the Lord's Prayer. The writers of the Didache told us to pray this sincerely and to pray it verbatim three times a day. This was probably written against the backdrop of the Jewish habit of praying three times a day, the roots of which went back to Daniel (see Daniel 6:10). Since The Didache is not divinely-inspired Scripture, we don't have to legalistically follow its advice, but it does show us how highly the early church treasured this succinct prayer offered us by Jesus.

The next commentary we have on the Lord's Prayer comes from the pen of Tertullian. In general terms we can date the Didache to about AD 100 and Tertullian to AD 200. He was a church leader in Northern Africa. Tertullian was a great writer and produced a great body of literature. He's been called the "Father of Latin Christianity" and the Founder of Western Theology.⁷ Tertullian called the Lord's Prayer "a new form of prayer" and "the prayer composed by Christ."⁸ He said, "And what is the Lord Christ's—as this method of praying is—that is not heavenly?" He said, "Jesus Christ our Lord, namely who is both the one and the other, has determined for us, the disciples of the New Testament, a new form of prayer; for in this particular also it was needful that new wine should be laid in in new (wine) skins..."⁹

Shortly after the days of Tertullian, another North African Christian leader arose. His name was Cyprian. Born into a very wealthy family in North Africa, he became a professor of rhetoric in Carthage and evidently came to Christ sometime in midlife. It's amazing how instantly he grasped Christian truth. It was said that he was more mature in his faith at the beginning of his Christian life than most people are at the end.¹⁰

Cyprian wrote a book about the Lord's Prayer, and it became the definitive work on this subject for centuries. It set the standard and the template for all the sermons that have been preached—and books that have been written on the Lord's Prayer. In fact, about a hundred years later another great church leader, St. Hilary of Poitiers, wrote in AD 354 that he considered himself relieved from the task of providing an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. In his commentary on Matthew, when Hilary came to the Lord's Prayer he simply told his readers to refer back to what Cyprian had written a hundred years earlier. Ambrose did the same thing. And St. Augustine quoted from Cyprian's work on the Lord's Prayer over and over.

"It is a loving and friendly prayer," wrote Cyprian, "to beseech God with His own word, to come up to His ears in the prayer of Christ.... Moreover, in His teaching the Lord has bidden us to pray in secret—in hidden and remote places, in our very bed-chambers—which is best suited for faith, that we may know that God is everywhere present, and hears and sees all."¹¹

And Cyprian said something else: "But what matters of deep moment (significance) are contained in the Lord's Prayer. How many and how great, briefly collected in the words, but spiritually abundant in virtue."

This is one of the great statements in Christian history, for as far as we can tell this was the first time the words of Matthew 6 and Luke 11 were given the title: "The Lord's Prayer."

Well, in those days Latin was beginning to replace Greek in the common usage, and in the Latin, it was the *Oratio Domenica* – the Lord's Prayer. It also became known by its first two words in Latin: *Pater Noster* – Our Father.

For a thousand years, medieval Christians offered the *Oratio Domenica*, the *Pater Noster*—the Lord's Prayer, which began with the words "Our Father...." At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther grew alarmed that the masses of people in the churches were simply saying the words of the Lord's Prayer like a magic formula or incantation, hardly knowing what they were

reciting. Luther translated the prayer into German, explained it in his catechisms, and told Christians to offer it to God from their hearts with sincerity. "What a great pity," said Luther, "that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world!"¹²

In 1535, Luther wrote a little pamphlet for his barber, Peter Beskendorf, to tell him how to maintain a daily walk with God. Luther told him to use the Lord's Prayer as a pattern for his prayer life. "To this day," wrote Luther, "I (nurse) at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the Psalter, which is also very dear to me."¹³

Time will not permit me to survey the literature on the Lord's Prayer what the reformers like Calvin had to say, what the Puritans like Thomas Watson had to say, what the evangelists like John Wesley had to say, what the great preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon had to say.

To my knowledge, no other paragraph of sixty-six words has been so appreciated, so contemplated, so venerated as the Lord's Prayer. It is the church's special treasure, cherished and passed down from generation to generation as one of our greatest spiritual heirlooms.

The Personal Foundation

We know the Lord's Prayer is a priceless gift to us not only because of its scriptural and historical foundations, but because of its personal foundation, its experiential foundation. Wherever the Lord's Prayer has gone, it has changed lives, changed history, and overcome the forces of evil. Let me give you an example from the life of a man named Leo Keith Thorsness. On April 30, 1967, on his 93rd mission as an Air Force pilot over North Vietnam, he was shot down and captured by the enemy. He spent six years in captivity as a Prisoner of War, and after he was released he wrote about his experiences in a gripping book entitled *Surviving Hell*.

Chapter 15 of his book is entitled "The Lord's Prayer." He said that one Sunday morning the prisoners decided to conduct a church service. "One POW volunteered to lead the service," wrote Thorsness, "and we all started gathering in the other end of the long rectangular cell from the cell door. No sooner had we gathered than an English-speaking Vietnamese officer who worked as an interrogator burst into the cell with a dozen armed guards. Ned Shuman went to the officer and said there wouldn't be a problem; we were just going to have a short church service.

But there was a problem. The guards forbid the practice. The POWs complained about it all week, and toward the end of the week Ned Shuman, who was the Senior Ranking Officer, asked, "Are we really committed to having church Sunday?"

Everyone nodded and murmured their approval, but Ned said that he wanted to know person to person if they were committed to having church, because the next attempt would surely end with some of them being tortured—starting with Ned himself. So he went around the room asking each POW if they were willing to have church, whatever the cost. All forty-two men said yes. They were totally committed to having church.

The following Sunday morning, Ned walked to the center of the cell and said, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." The group stood up and started praying, but they were only halfway through when the guards burst in and hauled Ned Shuman away to be tortured.

The second most Senior Ranking Officer stood and said, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." They started praying but the guards grabbed the leader and dragged him away to be tortured.

The third Senior Ranking Officer stepped to the center of the cell and said, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." This time they got as far as "Thy Kingdom Come" when the guards burst in and dragged their leader away for torture.

Immediately the fourth SRO stood up and said, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." Thorsness said, "I have never heard five or six words of the Lord's Prayer—as far as we got before they seized him—recited so loudly, or so reverently. The interrogator was shouting, "Stop, stop," but we drowned him out. The guards were now hitting POWs with their gun butts and the cell was in chaos."

"The number five ranking officer was way back in the corner and took his time moving toward the center of the cell... But just before he got to the center of the area, the cell became pin-drop quiet. In Vietnamese, the interrogator spat out something to the guards, they grabbed the number five SRO and they all left, locking the cell door behind them. The number six SRO began, 'Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer.' This time we finished it."

In his memoirs, Thorsness said, "Five courageous officers were tortured, but I think they believed it was worth it. From that Sunday on until we came home, we held a church service. We won. They lost. Forty-two men in prison pajamas followed Ned's lead. I know I will never see a better example of pure raw leadership or ever pray with a better sense of the meaning of the words."¹⁴

The Lord's Prayer and what it represented to these men was so important they were willing to be tortured for their right to offer it to

God; and it was so powerful that no enemy could withstand the force of those simple words: “Our Father who art in heaven; hallowed by Thy Name.”

Let’s hold onto the Lord’s Prayer like a drowning man. Let’s teach it to our children, commit it to our memories, and occupy it like a palace, becoming at home in every room, as we learn to pray with fresh insight the ancient words Pater Noster... Our Father in heaven, hallowed is Your Name.

Endnotes

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2 R. C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 14.

3 www.opc.org/sc.html

4 The New King James Version

5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didache>

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8 Tertullian: *On Prayer*, Segment 8760.

9 Location 18106.

10 St. Cyprian on the Lord’s Prayer: An English Translation with Introduction by T. Herbert Bindley (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904), p. 9.

11 Ante-Nicene Christian Library: *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Vol VIII – The Writings of Cyprian* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882), 400-401

12 Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), excerpted from chapter 5: “A Practical Way to Pray.” 13 Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), excerpted from chapter 5: “A Practical Way to Pray.” 14 Leo Thorsness, *Surviving Hell* (New York: Encounter Books, u.d.), Kindle edition, pages 85-88 (Kindle location 1356-1406).

This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father...” Matthew 6:9

In the 1990s, a grandmother in Shakopee, Minnesota, named Dorothy Holm was diagnosed with lung cancer, and, sadly, it metastasized to form a brain tumor. As her illness progressed and robbed her of her ability to speak, Dorothy took a handful of index cards and began writing notes. Some of the notes were written in a secret code, and her grandchildren, who ranged in age from 8 to 12, thought she was sending them a message. They tried as hard as they could to decode the cards, but they could never figure out what their grandmother was trying to tell them. It was a mystery, and when Dorothy passed away in 1996 she took the secret with her to her grave, or so they thought.

Eighteen years passed, and one of the granddaughters, Janna Holm, decided to give it another try. She posted a picture of one of the index cards on the Internet, hoping someone with decoding software would give it a try. The picture showed a card with a long series of capital letters that seemed to have no sequence or plan to them: OFWAIHHBTNTKCTWBDOEAIHH....

In less than thirteen minutes, there was a reply. A computer geek was able to break the code and explain the message. The string of letters represented the first letter of each word of the Lord’s Prayer. In her dying days, Dorothy wanted to make sure she could remember the Lord’s Prayer and pass it on to her grandchildren. OFWAIH stood for: “Our Father Who Art In Heaven....”

Janna Holm said in a newspaper article about the story, “It was kind of relieving to have an answer... It’s nice to know that they were prayers, and kind of gave some insight into what she was thinking and what she was focused on in her last couple weeks.” 1

The Lord’s Prayer is often the first prayer we learn as children and the last we hear as we wing our flight to worlds unknown. It’s part

of the legacy we want to leave our children and grandchildren. It's part of the unbroken prayer chain that has kept the lines to heaven continuously alive for the past two millennia.

Well, we're in a series of messages about the Lord's Prayer, and today we're coming to those first words: Our Father....

The visualization we've developed for this series of sermons is that of a castle or a palace. Every phrase of the Lord's Prayer is represented by a different room in a palace that we can occupy whenever we pray. Last week we studied the foundation for the Palace of Prayer, in terms of Scripture, history, and experience. Today we want to venture into the first room, which is the nursery. This is where we learn to say, "Our Father...." It may seem strange to devote an entire half-hour sermon to just two words of Scripture, but believe me, due to time restraints I've cut out much of what I wanted to say. I could easily preach an entire series of messages on these two words and on the concept of the fatherhood of God.

In preparation for this message, I looked up the word "father" in the Bible. It occurs over 1100 times. As I went through verse after verse, there were five lessons that emerged as a blessing to me. That's what I'd like to share with you in this message.

1. The Old Testament heroes loved God, but they seldom viewed Him as their Father.

First, the Old Testament heroes loved God, but they seldom viewed Him in terms of fatherhood. The word "father" occurs over 700 times in the Old Testament, but there are less than twenty references to that word as it relates to God. Here are some of those 19 or so examples:

- In Deuteronomy 1:30-31, Moses told the Israelites: The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as He did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the wilderness. There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place. Here the writer didn't say that God was their father, but he did suggest that the Israelites think of some of God's actions as being similar to those of a good father. He used fatherhood as an analogy. God was treating them like a father would treat a child when He carried him over rough patches. That's true for us.
- Psalm 2:7 is another reference. It says: I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to Me, "You are My son; today I have become your Father." This sounds very much like the writer and the Lord are in a father-son relationship, and they are. But this is distinctively Messianic. This is a prophecy about the Lord Jesus Christ and about the special father/son relationship that will characterize the life and ministry of the Messiah. Of the nineteen or twenty Old Testament references to God as a father several of them are bound up with prophecies about the coming of a Messiah, who will truly be, said the Old Testament writers, the Son of God.
- Psalm 68:5 refers to God as... A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.
- Psalm 103:13-14: As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
- We have something similar in Proverbs 3:11-12: My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves as a father the son He delights in. This is another analogy that compares some of the aspects of our relationship with God in father and child terms.
- The prophet Isaiah is the only person I could find in the entire Old Testament who, in a non-Messianic text, addressed God in prayer using the word, "Father." He did it only twice, in Isaiah 63 and 64. In Isaiah 64:8, for example, we read: Yet You, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, You are the potter; we are the work of Your hand.

That's a brief summary of this subject in the Old Testament. When you read the prayers of those Old Testament heroes, they typically addressed God using the words God, or Lord, or Sovereign, or Yahweh. They thought of prayer as the act of a creature coming to their Creator, as a servant coming to their master, as a subject coming to their King, as a needy person coming to a generous benefactor. But they almost never thought of prayer in terms of a child coming to his or her father. Abraham never spoke to God saying, "My Father." Neither did Moses or Samuel or Ezra or even David. Only in the Messianic prophecies and twice in Isaiah can I find a reference in which God is addressed in prayer as our Father. It was virtually unheard of in Old Testament days. God was viewed as too lofty, too holy, too sovereign for such familiarity.

2. From the beginning, Jesus instinctively viewed God as His Father

All that changed with Jesus. From the very beginning, Jesus instinctively viewed God as His Father in a very intimate and personal and familiar way. This is quite remarkable, and I think the significance of it has been lost on us because we're so accustomed to it. I think it must have sounded shocking and irreverent to many of the rabbis to hear our Lord address God in such intimate and familiar terms.

Do you remember the very first words Jesus spoke, as recorded in the Bible? He was twelve years old, and He stayed behind in Jerusalem when His parents and family returned to Nazareth at the end of the Passover celebration. When Joseph and Mary realized they had left Him behind in a teeming city, they were understandably frantic. They found Him three days later, sitting in the

temple asking and answering questions of the priests. His mother, Mary, said to Him, "Why in the world did you scare us like this? We have been searching for you with great anxiety."

The boy Jesus replied: "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49, NKJV).

In His very first recorded words, Jesus referred to God in a way that virtually none of the Old Testament heroes had contemplated: My Father.

Later, in our Lord's opening sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, He again referred to God as a Father over and over and over. In those three chapters of Matthew 5, 6, and 7, Jesus called God our Father seventeen times. That's almost as much as in all the Old Testament. We see the same thing through the rest of Matthew, and in Mark and Luke.

The capstone of this teaching is in the Gospel of John, where Jesus referred to God as His Father so often that the redundancy is astonishing. The word "father" occurs over 100 times in the Fourth Gospel, and most of the references refer to the relationship between Christ and the Heavenly Father. John is the place where we find verses and phrases like these:

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known... The Father loves the Son and has placed everything into His hands... My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working... For this reason they tried all the more to kill Him; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God... I have come in My Father's name... if you knew Me, you would know My Father also... I and the Father are one... Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father... I am going to the Father... The Father is greater than I... I am not alone, for the Father is with Me... Father, the hour has come... As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.

Jesus was the first Jew in history to openly, easily, frequently, redundantly teach us to think of God as our heavenly Father. This is not an Old Testament teaching; it is a Jesus innovation. I confess that I don't understand it. I know that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are equal in essence and substance. Yet as they reveal themselves to us and in the work of redemption, we amazingly find the teaching of the Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Jesus. Who can understand that?

3. In His Grace, Jesus Has Chosen to Share This Exclusive Relationship with Us.

But here is the truly amazing thing, and it's the third lesson I want to try to explain: In His grace, Jesus has chosen to share this exclusive relationship with us. He longs to share with us the experience of calling God our Father. He had such a wonderful experience with the Fatherhood of God that He wants us to experience it with Him.

That's why He taught us to pray, "Our Father..." This is new. This was exclusive. This was revolutionary when Jesus said it. This was a new way of praying and a new way of thinking about the One to whom we are praying. But it resonated with the writers of the New Testament, and it immediately became the primary way in which we view and understand our relationship with God.

Galatians 3:26 sums it up: So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

John 1 says:

He (Jesus) was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God.

4. Jesus is the One and Only Son, but we are God's children by adoption.

Here is a fourth aspect to this. Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way, in an only begotten way. The Bible calls Him the One and Only Son of the Father. We are adopted into God's family. We become children of God through adoption.

Ephesians 1:5 says: He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.

Romans 8 says: For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Galatians 4 says: But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are His sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are His child, God has made you also an heir.

Let me put it this way. Many people live in London who are citizens England, but only a few are members of the royal family. They are part of the kingdom, but they are not actually members of the queen's own family. They belong to her realm but not to her home. They can feel right at home walking through Hyde Park but not walking through the door of Buckingham Palace.

In same way, one day we're going to be living side-by-side with angels in heaven. They will be citizens of heaven. They are part of God's kingdom. And I suppose it would have been possible for you and me to have been born again as members of God's kingdom and given a home in heaven. We could have been citizens of heaven without actually being members of the royal family. But because of God's grace, we are not only born again into His Kingdom, but we then are adopted into His family.

There is a scholar named Wayne Grudem who wrote a book on systematic theology that has been used in Bible colleges and seminaries and universities for the last twenty years. It's one of my favorite books. Here is the way Dr. Grudem put it: "We might initially think that we would become God's children by regeneration, since the imagery of being 'born again' in regeneration makes us think of children being born into a human family. But the New Testament never connects adoption with regeneration.... It is possible that God could have creatures who are spiritually alive and yet are not members of His family and do not share the special privileges of family members—angels, for example, apparently fall into that category. Therefore, it would have been possible for God to decide to give us regeneration without the great privileges of adoption into his family...."²

He, he said, "Adoption is a privilege that comes to us at the time we become Christians."

"Adoption is an act of God whereby He makes us members of His family."³

And Wayne Grudem said: "One of the greatest privileges of our adoption is being able to speak to God and relate to Him as a good and loving father. We are to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven."⁴ 5.

That Makes Us Part of God's Family and Heirs of His Riches.

And that brings us to the last thing I want to say. We've been born again into God's kingdom and adopted into His family, and that makes us heirs of all His riches. This is the theme of the first chapter of the book of Ephesians, but it's too overwhelming to explore in the time we have left today. I don't know how to understand it or describe it, except to say you are richer than you think you are—if you're a Christian.

All this is what Jesus brought to the theology of the Bible. This is the radical new way He taught us to think of ourselves and to pray. They did not understand this in the Old Testament. Abraham didn't see this as Jesus did. Moses didn't understand this. Not even David or Isaiah saw this. The rabbis and scribes didn't understand it. They sought to stone Jesus because of this very thing.

When Jesus came, He started talking about our Father who art in heaven, and it changed the vocabulary of the Bible and the very paradigm we use when we think of our relationship with God.

The Old Testament heroes loved God, but they seldom viewed Him as their Father. But from the very beginning Jesus thought of His relationship with God in terms of Fatherhood. And in His grace, He chose to share that privilege with us. He is God's Son in an exclusive one-and-only sense; but we are God's children through adoption. In Christ, we are part of the Father's family and heirs of all that belongs to Him.

That's also why we pray, "Our Father..." It's not just "My Father." I'm in a family, and when I pray I am joining my brothers and sisters around the world, across the ages, both those on earth and those already in heaven.

Conclusion

This truth also provides the basis for human adoption. My daughter and son-in-law traveled to Korea several years ago to adopt a little boy named Wu-Jin, who was two years old. He had been born in the doorway of a sauna in a Korean city and given up for adoption the day after he was born. He was suffering a wide range of physical and emotional and intellectual needs. It took a long time and a lot of emotional ups and downs before they were able to travel to Korea to collect him.

I wish I could have gone with them to the orphanage. They had seen his picture. They knew his story. They had watched a video of him playing by himself on the floor of the nursery. But nothing could prepare him for the love they felt when they were driven to the orphanage and when the little fellow was brought out. Grace took him in her arms and said, "Hey, buddy!" and he grabbed the cap to the lens of her camera and stuck a slice of apple in her mouth. And it was love at first bite. Suddenly that little boy had a family. He wasn't home yet. He still had an ocean to cross. But he had the guarantee of lots of love to come. He had a home, he had a family, he had love.

We'll we're not home yet either. One day we'll be there in our Father's House where there are many mansions. One day we'll cross the river and be home. But until then we're safe in our Father's arms. Even now, we have a palace to occupy and a place to pray.

What a pleasure to be in the nursery and to pray even as Jesus taught us, “Our Father, who art in heaven....”

Endnotes

1 Adapted from several media outlets, including Mark Memmott on NPR, “How an 18-Year-Old Code Was Cracked on the Web in 13 Minutes,” at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/the-two-way/2014/01/24/265693864/how-an-18-year-old-codewas-cracked-on-the-web-in-13-minutes>. And Garry Gruhn in “The Harvest,” published by the Iowa District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Vol. 12 Nub. 1, Spring 2014, page 30. Janna Holm’s quote is from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/01/22/grandmas-code-cracked/4786329/>.

2 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 738.

3 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 736.

4 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 739.

In this manner, therefore pray: Our Father in heaven.... Matthew 6:9

Let’s begin our study this morning with a little story for church history. Christians in the British Isles in the 1640s faced some very difficult days. The church was splintered, the land was divided, and Civil War was ripping the kingdom apart. The king had been executed, Parliament was running the English government; and Ireland and Scotland were in play. In the middle of all the bloodshed and confusion, the British Parliament appointed an assembly of theologians and laymen – most of them were Puritans – to figure out ways to unify the church and to heal the nation. This group of about 120 people became known as the Westminster Assembly because they held their first meeting in the Henry VII Chapel in Westminster Abbey. The delegates met over a thousand times during the next few years. They did their work well, and as a result the Westminster Assembly contributed some very famous documents to Christian history. Perhaps the most useful was a little booklet called the Westminster Shorter Catechism. You can find it very easily by searching the Internet, and it’s well worth reading and studying.

What is a catechism? A catechism is a series of questions and answers for teaching of the Christian faith (the word “catechism” comes from a Greek word meaning to teach orally). The Westminster Shorter Catechism was prepared especially for children and for new or illiterate believers. It’s a list of 107 simple questions and answers.

The very first question is wonderfully stated and has become one of the most famous declarations of theology in the history of the church: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is church history’s classic statement on our the meaning and purpose of life. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

The fourth question is equally wonderful. “What is God?” How would you answer that? The Westminster answer is so succinct and summarizing that the great theologian Charles Hodge called it “probably the best definition of God ever penned by man.”¹ It said: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

Those are some of the first questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, but now let’s skip to the end. How does it end? There are 107 questions, and the last ten of them – nearly ten percent of the entire document – are devoted to the Lord’s Prayer. These concluding questions and answers focus on how we can communicate every day with this God, how we can learn to pray, and here the writers were intent on making sure the children knew the Lord’s Prayer.

They began this section with Question #98: “What is prayer?” How would you answer? Well, the Westminster Shorter Catechism suggests an answer, which may be the best definition of prayer ever devised outside the Bible. For centuries, children were taught this definition: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies.”

Question Number #100 – asks: “What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer? The answer: “The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught His disciples, commonly called the Lord’s Prayer.” The remaining questions explain the Lord’s Prayer phrase by phrase, and thus ends the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Well, in this series of sermons we’re looking at the Lord’s Prayer as if it were a palace to occupy. We begin with the nursery, as we say, “Our Father....” Last week we saw the radical nature of that phrase as Jesus used it. The Old Testament heroes didn’t pray with

the visualization of God as a Father, but Jesus instinctively viewed God as His Father and shared with us the exclusive blessings of that relationship.

Now, this morning we want to move from the nursery to the observatory. A month or so ago, I explained to someone the concept behind this series of studies and he asked me if palaces really had observatories. Yes, at least some of them did. They had towers and turrets, which were the best places for early astronomers to aim the telescopes at the stars. For example, in the English city of Lincoln some distance north of London there's an old palace known as Lincoln Castle. It was constructed by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century. The tower of Lincoln Castle is still called the Observatory Tower, because in olden days astronomers used the tower for their stargazing.

Several years ago, I visited Greenwich, England, and visited the Flamsteed House, which was built in the 1600s on the edge of a plateau in Greenwich Park. It's a dramatic setting at the top of a hill overlooking the River Thames. It was designed by the famous architect, Sir Christopher Wren, and on the upper level is a special octagonal room with thirteen-foot high windows and a view of the sky in every direction. Astronomers peered at the heavens through sixteen-foot telescopes and here they studied the movements of the heavenly bodies.

Well, today we are coming to the observatory in the Palace of Prayer. This is where we gaze upward. This is where we say: Our Father in Heaven; Hallowed by Your name.

This tells us two things about how we pray.

1. Prayer Is Stepping into the Heavenly Realm

First, prayer is stepping into the heavenly realm. It is aiming our telescopes toward the highest heavens. It is drawing near to your heavenly Father. He is our Father in heaven, so He is intimate. But He is our Father in heaven, so He is infinite.

The word "heaven" here is not referring to the stellar heavens but to the invisible heaven. This is very important for us to understand. The Bible teaches that when God made the universe, He made two dimensions or two realms. There are two different neighborhoods in the creation. Two different regions or spheres. Two different stomping grounds.

There is heaven and earth. There is the spiritual and the physical. There is the invisible and the visible. Both are equally real. The atheist and the materialist and the humanist reject one-half of reality. But the Bible teaches there are two zones of reality side-by-side, and one is visible to us while the other is invisible.

- Jesus said in John 3:12: I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things.
- Then in verse 31, Jesus referred to Himself, saying: The One who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The One who comes from heaven is above all.
- Likewise in John 8:23, Jesus told His critics: You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.
- Colossians 1:16: For in Him (Christ) were all things created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.
- 2 Corinthians 4:17 says: We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.
- Colossians 3:1-2 says: Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

There is a spiritual realm that exists parallel to the physical realm. The book of Ephesians describes this spiritual realm as the heavenlies or the heavenly realms. According to Ephesians 1:9-10, one day in the future when Christ comes again these two realms of reality will be united; they will be merged into one.

He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (NIV/1984).

It seems to me this is what is described at the end of the Bible in Revelation 21: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the

people and He will dwell with them.”

Now, here is the remarkable thing. Here is the thing we underestimate. We currently live in the physical realm. Right now we are on earth, we are physical, we are limited; we are three-dimensional creatures in a physical universe; we are in a different zone than the angels and from God and from those who have gone before. We are in the earthly zone and not in the heavenly zone.

But there is one time when we can step into the spiritual realm. There is one time we can venture into the invisible. There is one time we can travel into the other realm and be at home there. And that is when we pray. When we pray we are pulling aside the curtain and making contact with the spiritual realm. We are establishing telephonic contact. We are putting one foot in the heavenly realms. We are standing with our feet on earth but sticking our heads and our hearts up into another world. We need to think of prayer that way, because it is biblical.

That’s why the Bible tells us to set our hearts and our minds on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Jesus said: When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen... This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven.”

Prayer is pulling aside the curtain and venturing into God’s territory. It is accessing the unseen kingdom. It is drawing near to our heavenly Father. It is living in both realms simultaneously. We are transported into His presence whenever we pray. He are talking to our Father in heaven.

2. Prayer is Stepping into the Spiritual Realm and Hallowing the Name of God

Prayer is also drawing near to our hallowed Father: Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Your name. What does the word “hallowed” mean? We talk about the hallowed halls of the university or the capitol of the United States. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln spoke of the hallowed ground being dedicated that day as a cemetery for the fallen.

The idea of hallowed is that it is sacred; it is special; it is holy; it is set apart. When we pray, we are on sacred ground. We are coming into the presence of the Holy One. And we are praying for the ability to understand His holiness better and to honor it with our lives.

This is an exclamation: Hallowed by Thy Name! It is like saying, “Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Hosanna in the Highest!” This teaches us to begin our prayers with praise, by focusing on God and rejoicing in Him. This is an exclamation of praise.

In the historic teaching regarding the Lord’s Prayer, this is also viewed as a petition, and it is traditionally called the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer. We are praying, “Lord, may I praise and reverence and honor Your Name. May all the world praise and reverence and honor your Name.”

Remember the Westminster Shorter Catechism I spoke about earlier? Question #101 asks: “What do we pray for in the first petition (of the Lord’s Prayer)?” The answer is: “In the first petition, which is, Hallowed be Thy Name, we pray that God would enable us and others to glorify Him in all that whereby He maketh Himself known; and that He would dispose all things to His glory.”

The Puritan writer Thomas Watson put it this way, “In this petition, we pray that God’s name may shine forth gloriously, and that it may be honored and sanctified by us in the whole course and tenor of our lives.”²

And Watson went on to say something very interesting. Some of the other petitions in the Lord’s Prayer have a limited shelf life. They will grow out of date in time. “We shall not need to pray in heaven, ‘Give us our daily bread,’ because there shall be no hunger; nor, ‘Forgive us our trespasses,’ because there will be no sin; nor ‘Lead us not into temptation,’ because the old serpent is not there to tempt. Yet the hallowing of God’s name will be of great use and request in heaven; we shall ever be singing hallelujahs, which is nothing less than the hallowing of God’s Name.”³

The most important thing about prayer is drawing near to God and becoming aware of His presence, praising Him, being filled with awe, and learning to respect and value His sovereignty.

The most important thing we can do in prayer is to begin with the Lord, to contemplate God, to know God, to be filled with awe of Him. We must respect His holiness, enjoy His grace, tremble at His purity, and stand in awe of His majesty. We must search out His attributes and meditate on His infinite qualities.

Dr. Elmer Towns of Liberty University told of a woman he knew who was an office manager. She told him that she liked everything about her job except for one thing. She didn’t enjoy interacting with the plant manager. No matter what happened in the company, he was negative about it, and she dreaded being called into his office. Dr. Towns made a suggestion. “Pray the Lord’s Prayer on the way to his office,” he said. He suggested she pray that God’s name be hallowed in the plant, that

His kingdom would come, His will be done in the plant, and so forth. The woman took up the challenge. Whenever she was called to this plant manager's office, she silently but sincerely prayed through the Lord's Prayer on the way. She prayed to her heavenly Father and asked for God's name to be hallowed and glorified by her life. It changed things, not only for her but for the entire company. Arriving at his office, she was more calm and confident. Instead of being defensive and angry, she would say to him, "Let me help you get a better perspective." She later told Dr. Towns, "I got faith from the Lord's Prayer. It gave me courage to aggressively suggest new ways for him to look at things. Now I always say the Lord's Prayer walking from my desk to his office."⁴

We want God's name to be hallowed in our hearts, in our minds, in our homes, in our families, in our offices, in our factories and plants, in our city, our nation, our world. Our Father in Heaven, hallowed by Your Name!

Conclusion

One way we do this is by paying attention to the posture in which we pray. Recently I worked my way through the Bible looking at the various postures employed by those who prayed. I discovered something that came as a shock to me.

- There is not a single time that I can find in the Bible where people bowed their heads when they prayed. Now, sometimes they bowed on their knees or they bowed their whole bodies to the ground. But nowhere does it say they bowed their heads.
- And nowhere does it say they closed their eyes when they prayed. I could not find a single instance of someone closing their eyes when they prayed.
- And nowhere in the Bible does it say they folded their hands or put their hands together in that way with which we are all familiar.

Now, none of those things are wrong. There may be good reasons for bowing our heads and closing our eyes and folding our hands. But those are not necessarily or specifically biblical prayer habits. That shocked me.

If the characters in the Bible didn't bow their heads, fold their hands, and close their eyes when they prayed, what did they do? How did they pray? The Bible describes about a dozen postures for us to use in prayer. Each posture represents a different aspect of the adventure of praying.

- In the Bible they often stood when they prayed, and standing seemed to convey reverence. If you're sitting down in a room and someone important enters the room, you typically, instinctively stand up. Suppose you were in a room when the Queen of England or the President of the United States entered. You'd stand up as a sign of respect. Many people stood when they prayed in the Bible, and standing might be the most prominent posture for prayer among the Hebrews.
- They often knelt in prayer, and that conveyed submission. The apostle Paul frequently knelt down when he prayed.
- Sometimes the biblical characters sat down when they prayed. That conveyed doing business with God. For example, in 1 Chronicles 17:16, King David wanted to talk with God about the building of a temple. It says: Then King David went in and sat down before the Lord, and he said: "Who am I, Lord God, and what is my family, that You have brought me this far?"
- They sometimes walked when they were praying, and that conveyed a sense of fellowship. The Children of Israel walked around the city of Jericho; and in the New Testament the disciples walked and talked with Jesus along the highways and byways of Galilee. Even today we sometimes go on what we call prayer walks.
- Sometimes people fell prostrate on their faces before God, and that implied a sense of holy desperation.
- Sometimes they prayed lying down in bed.
- Sometimes they prayed with arms stretched out to heaven, as Moses did during the battle with the Amalekites in Exodus 17.
- But one of the most interesting postures in prayer involved their eyes. Many times people in the Bible prayed with their eyes open and lifted up to heaven.

Psalm 123:1 says: I lift my eyes to you, to you who sits enthroned in heaven.

John 11:41 says that by the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."

In Matthew 14:19, Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves.

John 17:1 said, After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed.

Acts 7:55 says about Stephen as his enemies were stoning him to death: But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven

and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

I am not saying we should stop bowing our heads or closing our eyes. In just a moment I'll ask you to do that very thing. I've been bowing my head and closing my eyes all my life when I pray, and I expect I'll continue to frequently use this practice. But I want you to think beyond that for a few moments by thinking in terms of retractable roofs.

Today's architects and engineers have developed remarkable buildings and stadiums that have retractable roofs. The designs for retractable roofs date back to the 1950s and 1960s, but they have become famous today. Earlier this year, the Super Bowl was played at the University of Phoenix, which has a retractable roof. The Atlanta Falcons are building a \$1.4 billion stadium with a retractable roof. It costs many millions of dollars to add a retractable roof to a stadium, and it costs several thousand dollars every time such a roof is opened or closed. A survey by some architectural firm found that most stadiums with retractable roofs don't open them very often. They build them but rarely use them, even in good weather.

But let's conduct a little experiment this morning. Everyone look up at the ceiling. Look up at the catwalks and rafters and girders. Now imagine we had a retractable roof and that you could see the sky.

Now, let's take it a step further. Imagine we had a retractable sky and you could see into the stellar heavens.

Now imagine we had a retractable universe and you could see all the way into the highest heaven, all the way to the throne of God. Look! There is the heavenly hosts. There are the cherubim. There are the streets of gold. There are the saints of the ages. There is the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God. There is the heavenly Father.

From the observatory of prayer with the telescope of faith, we can venture into the invisible, move into the spiritual realm, and set our hearts and minds on things above. We can draw near to our heavenly Father and to our hallowed God. And we can do it whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer is stepping into the spiritual realm and hallowing the name of God. Prayer is entering His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise. We pray effectively when we walk down the hallway from the nursery to the observatory, lift our eyes upward and gaze into the heavenly realms, contemplate the greatest and majesty of our Heavenly Father, and say with our hearts:

Our Father in heaven; hallowed is Your Name.

Endnotes

1 See J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 16.

2 Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer* (1692), Kindle Location 719.

3 Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer* (1692), Kindle Location 732.

4 Elmer Towns, *Praying the Lord's Prayer for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1997), 30-31, kindle location 395 405.

**In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come.
Matthew 6:9-10**

In American Presidential history, stories about the Lord's Prayer go all the way back to George Washington. Though Washington was private about his personal religion, his step-grandson reported that the first president spent time every Sunday reading aloud to his family from books of sermons. One volume was *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, which Washington purchased in Williamsburg in 1772.¹

Thomas Jefferson, America's third president, rejected the miraculous elements of the Gospels, yet the Lord's Prayer intrigued him so much he copied it by hand in very exacting print and used it as a basis for a secret code. Jefferson didn't want his enemies reading his letters, so he experimented with cryptography. One of his formulas was based on the prayer of Jesus, and his hand-printed version of the Lord's Prayer with its secret ciphers now resides in the Library of Congress.

Our sixth president was John Quincy Adams, and to him the Lord's Prayer wasn't a secret code; it was a secret of his life. He was

only seven years old during the Revolutionary War, and he was terrified by the Battle of Bunker Hill, which raged near his family home in Boston. To calm his fears, his mother, Abigail Adams, taught him to recite the Lord's Prayer. She also made him promise to recite the Lord's Prayer every morning of his life before he got out of bed—a promise he kept as long as he lived.²

Adams once said, "There are two prayers that I love to say—the first is the Lord's Prayer, and because the Lord taught it; and the other is what seems to be a child's prayer: 'Now I lay me down to sleep,' and I love to say that because it quiets me. I have been repeating it every night for many years past, and I say it yet, and I expect to say it my last night on earth if I am conscious: 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take: All this I ask for Jesus' sake—Amen.'"³

Let's skip down to Abraham Lincoln. There was a famous actor and theatrical producer in Lincoln's day named James H. McVicker. He knew the sixteenth president, and after Lincoln's death he talked about him with a historian. McVicker said that "the most marvelous exhibition of elocution he ever witnessed was Lincoln's recitation of the Lord's Prayer." He also said that Lincoln told him at the time that the Lord's Prayer was "the sublimest composition in the English language."⁴ In our mind's eye, it's easy to see Abraham Lincoln pacing back and forth in the darkened hallways of the White House, praying the Lord's Prayer during the darkest days of the Civil War.

Lincoln evidently didn't have the opportunity of praying the Lord's Prayer on his deathbed across the street from Ford's Theater, but another assassinated president did so. In 1901, William McKinley was shot in Buffalo, New York, and he lingered for eight days before dying. His biographer wrote this about the last hours of McKinley's life: "In the afternoon of Friday the President knew that the time had come for him to bid farewell to the world. He called the surgeons to his bedside and said, 'It is useless, gentlemen. I think we ought to have prayer.' His eyes were half closed.... A solemn silence fell upon the assembled doctors and nurses and tears could not be restrained. The dying President moved his lips and again it was the Lord's Prayer that welled from his overflowing heart. The twilight descended and the room grew dark."⁵

I don't have time to trace the history of the Lord's Prayer through all the presidents, but let's skip to Ronald Reagan. Several years after he left office, Reagan released a letter to the American public announcing he'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. His daughter, Patti Davis, later wrote a book entitled *The Long Goodbye* about the last years of Reagan's life. She said that even as his mind faded away, her father loved attending services at the Bel Air Presbyterian Church.

"On Sunday morning, I went to church with my parents. It's something my father looks forward to all week, and I wanted to share the experience; I wanted to watch him, absorb some of his reverence. He remembers every word of the Lord's Prayer. He was looking straight ahead, to the pulpit and the tall wooden cross behind it, reciting the prayer along with everyone else, never missing a syllable. The same thing happened with the doxology: 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow....' He sang it perfectly.

"I thought about the mysteries of this thing we call memory. Even being encroached upon by something as relentless as Alzheimer's, the memory has pockets that resist the progression of time and the steady march of disease. It's fitting that, in my father's case, those pockets contain hymns and prayers. They are his treasures; they always have been—the shiny stones he turns over in his hand, keeping them polished and smooth. I closed my eyes for a moment as I sat between my parents and prayed that he will always be able to recite the Lord's prayer, always recall a hymn. I asked God to keep his treasures safe."⁶

If they are wise, the rulers and the leaders of this world—the most powerful men and women on earth—know there is an omnipotent God in the heavens, and that He is King of kings and Lord of lords. In the Bible, God is frequently given the title or the position of King.

- The Lord is King for ever and ever—Psalm 10:16
- The Lord is enthroned as King forever—Psalm 29:10
- The Lord Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth... God reigns over the nations; God is seated on His holy throne—Psalm 47:2, 8
- After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"—Matthew 2:2-3
- Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.—1 Timothy 1:17
- Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations—Revelation 15:3

Well, today in our series of studies into the text of the Lord's Prayer we're coming to the phrase, "Your kingdom come." And that brings us to the throne room in the Palace of Prayer. That brings us to the Throne of Grace. This brings us to the heart of the castle, to the very center of power.

The Bible Says a Lot about the Kingdom

This is also the heart and center of the Lord's Prayer, and I think we often come to this phrase and we aren't exactly sure what we're praying. We know what "Our Father" means. We have some concept of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. We know what it means to ask for our daily bread. We understand about confessing our sins and asking God to forgive our debts and trespasses. But what are asking God to do when we pray, "Your kingdom Come"?

Dr. Arthur Pink in his book on the Lord's Prayer said that this is the "least understood" petition in the passage.⁷

If it seems a little obscure or confusing to you, you're not alone. Even seasoned Bible teachers and theologians struggle to interpret this phrase. But I think we can get a handle on it by thinking through it in several steps.

First, let's confess that this is a major theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there were references, especially in the prophets, to the coming kingdom of God. For example, Isaiah 9:6-7 says: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom." Daniel 2:44 predicted that at some point in the future "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever."

Second, when John the Baptist came, he announced that the kingdom of God was near at hand, that people needed to repent and prepare for the predicted kingdom was imminent (Matthew 3:1-2).

Third, this was the primary message of Jesus Christ. Just read through the Lord's inaugural sermon—the Sermon on the Mount—and see how often He referenced the kingdom: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven... Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven... But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you... Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."⁸

Even after His death and resurrection, this was the main thing our Lord wanted to talk about. Acts 1:3 says, "After His suffering, He presented Himself alive to them and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God."

The word "kingdom" occurs over 100 times in the Gospels. Sometimes the key phrase is the kingdom of heaven and sometimes it is the kingdom of God, but those two terms are used interchangeably and they are used over and over and over.

This was also the message of the early church in the book of Acts, where we read, for example, of the evangelist named Philip: "But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized" (Acts 8:12).

Acts 19:8 says, "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God."

One biblical scholar who has written very concisely and very accurately about this is George Eldon Ladd. In his book, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, Dr. Ladd wrote: "The Kingdom of God was the central message of our Lord's ministry. He 'went about all Galilee... preaching the Gospel of the kingdom' (Matthew 4:23)... This theme of the coming of the Kingdom of God was central in His mission."⁹

This was the core of the message of Jesus and the early church. Their message was the Good News of the Kingdom.

But here is the problem. This is what has stumped Bible teachers for centuries. Whenever we study this subject in the Bible, we come away with two different concepts of the kingdom of God. In some passages, it appears the kingdom of God is something that is now in the present tense. It is something that Jesus established when He came the first time. He kept saying that the kingdom of God was at hand, it was here, it was a present reality. The writers of the New Testament epistles and letters spoke of the Kingdom of God as a present reality. For example, Romans 14:17 says: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Colossians 1:13 says, "He (the Lord) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves."

And yet there are other passages that speak of the kingdom of God as something yet in the future, something that is not a present reality. For example, in the Resurrection Chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul wrote, "I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:50-52).

The book of Revelation talks about the coming day with the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever (See Revelation 11:15).

So this is confusing. Is the kingdom now or is it later? Even the disciples were confused about this. They had spent three years listening to our Lord speak about the kingdom of God. They had heard His Gospel of the kingdom. They had heard His parables of the kingdom. They had been with Him after the resurrection for forty days, listening to Him talk about the kingdom of God. And yet the last question they asked Him as He was prepared to ascend into heaven was this one: "Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

So it's a bit confusing, and that's why we may not be too certain what we mean when we come to the part of the Lord's Prayer in which we say: "Thy kingdom come."

The Kingdom Is Both Now and Later

Well, it all may seem confusing at first, but the confusion clears up quite suddenly when we consider this in light of the first and second comings of Christ. Jesus came the first time as a newborn king, and He is coming again as a reigning king. And in the first and second comings of Christ, we can see that He is establishing His kingdom in stages. He came the first time and He established a spiritual kingdom to take the Gospel of the kingdom to all the world. When He comes again He will establish a political and a governmental and an eternal kingdom.

The kingdom was inaugurated when He came the first time and it will be consummated when He comes again. I'm again indebted to Dr. Ladd for this insight. He wrote, "As there are two advents of Christ, one in the flesh which we call the Incarnation, the other in glory which we call the Parousia or Second Advent, so there are two manifestations of God's Kingdom: one in power and glory when Christ returns, but one which is present now because God's Son has already appeared among men."¹⁰

The main concept behind the word "kingdom" has to do with the authority and reign and rule of a king. When Jesus came the first time, He made Himself available to rule over our hearts and lives. Colossians 1:12-13 says we should give "joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of His holy people in the kingdom of light. For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves."

Hebrews 12:28 says, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe."

Revelation 1:6 offers a doxology of praise to the Lord Jesus Christ, who "loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father."

But one day when He comes again, the kingdom will become a political, governmental, civic, constitutional, universal reality. He will come as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will establish first His millennial kingdom and then His eternal kingdom, and He will reign forever and ever. So, to quote Dr. Ladd a final time: "The Kingdom is a present reality (Matthew 12:28) and yet is a future blessing (1 Corinthians 15:58)."

Three Prayer Requests in One

Now, let's take all this information from God's Word and go back to the throne room in the Palace of Prayer. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," what are we praying? It seems to me that we have three prayer requests in one. Three in one. This is a Trinitarian prayer.

First, it is eschatological in nature. That is, it has to do with the Last Days and the End Times. When we say, "Your kingdom come," we are praying for the Lord to come again soon. We are praying for the Second Coming. We are asking God for the hastening of the coming ultimate kingdom when all the world will acknowledge the sovereign authority of Jesus Christ and the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. The phrase "Your kingdom come" is a prayer for the King to return to earth. This is the same as the final prayer given to us in the Bible, in Revelation 22:20: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." I'm not sure that we're very faithful in offering this prayer to the Lord. When was the last time you earnestly looked up to heaven and prayed for the Lord Jesus Christ to come back again, soon, now, today, this week, this year, just as soon as His timetable allowed? Well, we can pray that very petition whenever we enter the throne room of the Palace of Prayer and say, "Thy kingdom come."

Second, it is evangelistic in nature. As we've seen, the word "kingdom" refers to the spiritual work God is currently doing in human hearts and in the nations of the world. There is an aspect of this prayer that is missionary oriented and evangelistically centered. If we tarried in the Palace of Prayer and wanted to linger in the Throne Room, this is where we would pray for our lost friends and neighbors. This is where we'd pray for the outreach efforts of our church. This is where we would pray for the missionaries and mission organizations we support. Lord, may the Gospel of the kingdom spread from heart to heart, from person to person, from

nation to nation.

Third, it is personal in nature. This is where we should also confess and acknowledge the royal authority of the Lord Jesus over our own lives and circumstances. Lord, establish Your throne in my heart. Administer Your righteousness in my life. Lord, may You be the King over every area of my life today. May Your kingdom – Your will and Your rule and Your reign – dominate and control my mind, my reactions, my circumstances, my areas of concern and responsibility. And that leads, of course, to the next petition that we'll look at next week: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Conclusion

There are times when this prayer and this petition are vital to know. In her book, *No Burning Bushes*, Kathy Marotta said that she and her husband had been living in Miami Beach in August of 1992 when Hurricane Andrew hit. At first, as the storm was heading toward them, no one was overly concerned. They were used to hurricanes brushing past them. But as this one raced closer, an ominous feeling built up like storm clouds. Miami Beach residents were evacuated, and the Marottas found shelter with friends south of Miami, since the storm was supposed to veer to the north. But the storm took an unwelcome turn and headed right toward them.

"For seven hours," Kathy wrote, "we ran from room to room as the windows blew out and the storm was, literally, in the home with us. Walls came down, a portion of the roof blew off." Kathy and her husband ended up in a bi-fold linen closet next to the only concrete wall in the house. They huddled there in sheer panic as the house felt like it was collapsing around them. They knew they needed to pray, so they decided to pray the Lord's Prayer. But they were so overcome by fear they got mixed up, and, she said, they muddled through a version of "Our Father" combined with the Pledge of Allegiance. Nevertheless, she said, we knew that "our circumstances may have been out of our control, but God was very much in control. Even when we were afraid, He still held us in the palms of His hands. We trusted in that and held on tight. Eventually, the storm ended and we made it out alive."¹¹

In a sense, the Lord's Prayer is a Pledge of Allegiance, isn't it? It's our pledge of allegiance to our King. Sometimes our circumstances may seem to be out of control, but the Lord is very much in control. He rules and reigns, and He is Lord of all. If He is a king, He is seated on a throne; and for His children it is a throne of grace.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Thou art coming to a King
Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.¹²
(John Newton)

Endnotes

1 A Companion to George Washington, edited by Edward G. Lengel (Blackwell Publishing, 2012), passim.

2 G. J. Barker-Benfield, Abigail and John Adams (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 306. And Harlow G. Unger, John Quincy Adams, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012), 17.

3 Quoted in Herald of Gospel Liberty, Volume 102, Issues 27-52, page 1239, November 29, 1910, in the article "Our First Prayer" by R. H. Washburne.

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11 Kathy Marotta: *No Burning Bushes: Finding God in the Ordinary* (Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 2010), 89-90.

12 John Newton in his hymn, "Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare," published in the *Olney Hymns*, 1779.

**This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your Name,
Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."**

Matthew 6:9-10

Over a century ago, a Swedish family named Lundberg packed up all they owned, hugged their loved ones, and immigrated to Spokane, Washington. One of the children was a twelve-year-old boy named Godfrey, who was a truly gifted child. During his teenage years, Godfrey excelled in art and music. One of his drawings was exhibited at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and that helped inspire him to try his hand at engraving. Lundberg became one of the best engravers in the world.

In 1912, Lundberg commenced an engraving designed to create a sensation and afford him another chance to display his skill at a world's fair. He decided to engrave the entire Lord's Prayer onto the tiny head of a small pin. His motivation was said to be professional pride. Another man had gained quite a bit of notoriety for inscribing the Lord's Prayer on a rather large pinhead, and Lundberg decided he could beat him in the endeavor by inscribing the Lord's Prayer by hand microscopically on the head of a much smaller pin.¹

Lundberg did his work in an office in Spokane, Washington, outfitted with a modified barber's chair and with his arms strapped to an iron bar. He bound his wrists tightly with leather straps so they wouldn't tremble. Even a pulse beat could mar the job. Lundberg worked only in the evenings after the rumbling of the trolley cars had stopped vibrating the streets of Spokane. He worked painstakingly through the nights, month after month, and the enterprise was exacting and exhausting. Using hundreds of tiny strokes, he worked away, scratch by scratch: "Our Father, which art in heaven...."

One night when the project was three-fourths finished, disaster struck. As Lundberg worked with his magnification equipment and his specialized engraver, a sudden scratch appeared over the words he had previously inscribed and marred them. Something undetectable to human senses had shaken his workspace. Lundberg ran out of the shop to see what had caused the vibration. There were no vehicles nearby, but he heard the reverberation of a heavy truck several blocks away. It had caused a slight tremor in his shop, but it had ruined his work. He had to start over again.

It took three years to finish the Lord's Prayer. According to reports he returned home every morning "with each individual nerve on edge and with eyes aching from strain." But the result was a masterpiece – the tiniest version of the Lord's Prayer in human history. It could only be viewed under a microscope or some kind of magnifying equipment. It became a sensation at the World's Fair, which was the Panama-Pacific Exposition, held in San Francisco in 1915. Afterward two of Lundberg's brothers took the pin on a national exhibition of the United States, touring 43 states in two years. At every stop the story was splashed across newspapers and magazines. It was the smallest engraving in the world.

But there's a bit more to the story. This remarkable accomplishment took a heavy toll on the engraver. The strain of the project caused Godfrey Lundberg to lose weight and suffer exhaustion. As soon as the job was done, he suffered a nervous collapse and was never the same again. He later said that he would never again attempt such a project, not for any amount of money in the world. One newspaper said that the project shattered his constitution.²

It seems the Lord's Prayer had the reverse effect on Lundberg than what was intended when the Lord spoke it long ago. Only human beings like us could turn the world's most therapeutic words into an occasion for a nervous breakdown. No one doubts that it's a remarkable accomplishment to engrave the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin, but the point of our current series of sermons is that it's much more beneficial to engrave it in our hearts and minds.

That's what we're attempting to do in these messages where we're looking at the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase. In this series, I'm like a real estate agent taking you room by room through the Palace of Prayer, which is available for immediate occupancy.

In the first message, we looked at the foundation, the bedrock. I showed you the underpinnings of the Lord's Prayer in Scripture, history, and personal experience. Then we started our actual tour in the nursery (Our Father...). We climbed up to the observatory tower (...in heaven, hallowed be Your name). We lingered last week in the throne room (Your kingdom come). Now we're coming to the office where we can sit down and do business with the Lord about the things that concern us. We can pray about all the concerns and matters of life with these eleven words: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

A Purpose for the Earth

First, this third petition in the Lord's Prayer implies God has a purpose for this world and for everyone in the world. He is not a distant, disinterested entity. He is a personal and powerful and very present Father who has a plan and purpose. He has a will. He wants His will done in the entire world and in your life and in mine.

Last week, I spent some time with missionary Fred Hersey, whom I first met in Japan many years ago. He and his wife Evelyn were serving there on the far edge of a northern island. They lived in a very small house and the only place for me to sleep was under the

dining room table. They made a little bed for me there. Well, I saw Fred last week and we laughed about that. Then he told me something I didn't know, about what had influenced him as a young person to devote his life to God. He had grown up going to a particular church in Chicago, and he confessed he could not now recall a single sermon that he heard. But one thing stayed with him all this life. On one wall of the sanctuary there was inscribed in large letters a portion of a verse of Scripture. It was the last half of 1 John 2:17: "Whoever does the will of God abides forever." Fred saw that verse week after week and year after year. He internalized it. He realized God had a will for His life, and one day he said, "Lord, Your will be done in my life as it's done in heaven." God has a will for this world and for everyone in the world.

This truth is pounded into the Bible like a bushel of nails.

- Ephesians 1:11 says, "In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will."
- Jesus said, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).
- Romans 12 says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing, and perfect will."
- The Bible says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).
- It says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Peter said: "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people" (1 Peter 2:15).
- Peter also described Christ-followers as those who "do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:2).

This constant drumbeat regarding the will of God tells us that God has a plan, a purpose, an agenda for all of this world, for all of life, and for you and me. It implies a purpose for the world. It's a very personal and powerful prayer to say: "Your will be done!"

A Prayer for the Moment

But it's also a prayer for the moment. It's a prayer with application to whatever happens to us from minute to minute. It's a prayer we can pray in any and every situation. A couple of years ago, the roof on our home had to be replaced. I had several people wanting the job, but I didn't know any of them personally. I recall distinctively praying: "Lord, may Your will be done on my roof even as it's done in heaven."

Lord, may Your will be done in my finances... in my family... in my health... in my classroom... in my career... in my conflict... in my area of anxiety.

In Colossians 4:12, we're told of a man named Epaphras, who was described as always wrestling in prayer for the Christians in the Colossian church that they "may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." That was his way of praying, "Your will be done."

Likewise, the book of Hebrews ends with a benediction I often pray at the end of our worship services. "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will..." (Hebrews 13:20-21).

These are prayers we can adopt into our own lives for those we love. And the Lord's Prayer is a prayer we can offer for our world, our loved ones, and ourselves. With this prayer, we can do business with God.

A Practice for the Christian

In that respect, this petition – "Thy will be done – is also a practice for the Christian. It's a habitual method for us to use as we pray. And we have another injunction about this in the book of James, when we're told that when we anticipate doing certain things in the future, we should not be presumptuous but should pray, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15).

Recently I went through the Bible looking at occasions when God answered His children with "No."

- In Genesis 17:18, Abraham prayed that his son, Ishmael, would be the heir of the Abrahamic Covenant and the channel through whom the promise of redemption would come. But God said, "No," for He had a better plan – Isaac, the miracle child who would be born to Abraham and Sarah.
- In Deuteronomy 3, Moses prayed earnestly to lead the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, but God

said, “No.” He had a better plan. The Lord wanted Joshua to bear that burden, and He took Moses on to heaven. But in the Gospels, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses did stand in the Holy Land as He spoke with Elijah and the Lord Jesus in a cloud of glory.

- In 1 Chronicles 22, King David asked God to help him build a great temple in Jerusalem, but God said, “No.” He was preparing Solomon to undertake that great and portentous project.
- In 1 Kings 19, the prophet Elijah prayed earnestly that he might die. He was weary, burned out, discouraged, and in despair. But God said no, and, ironically, Elijah became one of only two men in the Bible who never died. He and Enoch were translated directly to heaven without experiencing the process of dying.
- In Mark 5, Jesus healed a demon-possessed man in the regions of the Garasenes. In his newfound enthusiasm and faith, the man prayed and asked Jesus if he could travel with him and become a disciple. Jesus said no. He said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5:19). The man became a missionary in the region of the Decapolis – the five gentile cities of Galilee.
- In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul prayed earnestly and repeatedly to be healed of his affliction, which he called a thorn in his flesh. But God had a different plan and one that was ultimately better. The Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- Of course, the greatest example of unanswered prayer in all the Bible is the aforementioned agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew wrote, “Jesus Himself showed us how to do this in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He personalized the Lord’s Prayer and it really became the Lord’s Prayer. In great agony, He fell with His face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).

If you understand this concept, you’ll become a better person. If you don’t understand it, you’ll become a bitter person. I’ve heard of people who became disillusioned and cynical and who even left the faith because God didn’t say “Yes” to some earnest and heartfelt prayer they offered to Him.

That’s why this third petition is so important. My favorite story from the nation of India is about a great missionary named Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur who became famous for rescuing young Indian girls who had been given over to sexual slavery. One day Amy told of a prayer she had earnestly prayed in childhood. Her mother had told her that God is very good at answering our prayers, and there was one thing that little Amy wanted more than anything. She wanted blue eyes like her mother’s. Amy’s eyes were brown, but she wanted blue eyes. So one night she prayed earnestly that during the night the Lord would turn her eyes blue, and she went to sleep in simple childlike faith that God would hear and answer. The next morning she jumped out of bed, pushed a chair to the chest of drawers, climbed up, and studied her eyes in the mirror. At first she was confused and bitterly disappointed, and then a thought came to her. Even though she was simply a young child, this thought came to her: “Isn’t ‘No’ an answer?”

Later, when Amy was risking her life to rescue little girls from Hindu temple prostitution, she disguised herself by wrapping herself in Indian dress and sometimes staining her hands brown with coffee. But she couldn’t hide her eyes, and if they had been blue she would have been discovered and probably killed in an instant. They had to be brown.

Praying “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” gives God permission to substitute, to say No, to implement a better plan, and to have His wonderful and glorious way in your life.

A Promise for the Future

Finally, the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer contains a promise for the future: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When we arrive in heaven, we’re going to be in a kingdom where everything is perfectly and eternally aligned with God’s will. The Bible says about the citizens of the kingdom: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

Psalms 103:19-21 says: “The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all. Praise the Lord, you His angels, you mighty ones who do His bidding, who obey His word. Praise the Lord, all His heavenly hosts, you His servants who do His will.”

That is the way we want things to be right now in our lives. We want God’s will to be done here among us just as perfectly and happily as the angels and glorified saints are doing His will right now in heaven.

Conclusion

Just after nine o’clock on the evening of January 30, 2000, a Kenya Airways flight took off from Abidjan with 179 people on board. Within moments of takeoff, something went wrong. The plane began tilting from side to side. The oxygen masks dropped down.

There was a frightening spark and all the lights went off. The plane crashed in the ocean within two minutes of takeoff. On board was a young man named Samuel Aigbe, who found himself out in the cold Atlantic. He had a huge gash in his leg, and something struck him in the face, leaving him momentarily blinded. As his vision returned he saw the outline of the plane in the darkness on the water. The only lights were in the cockpit, and it was gradually sinking.

This is what he wrote: "At the time of the crash in the dark freezing Atlantic Ocean everyone in chorus was calling on God, confessing their sins aloud, so much that you could tell what somebody did over ten years ago. We were all praying for a second miracle after the first miracle of surviving the impact of the crash. We hoped that rescuers would come sooner rather than later. Gradually the groans and moans of pain started to die down until it was so totally silent that you could hear a pin drop."³

Aigbe was a good swimmer, and he stripped off his clothes so they wouldn't pull him under. All around him were corpses in the water, and the leaks from aviation fuel were burning his skin. A piece of foam floated by, and he grabbed it and tucked it between his legs. He could see the lights of planes taking off in the distance from the airport in Abidjan and he gazed at the stars in the sky above him. Corpses floated past and Samuel had to push them away from him. The cold was so intense his whole body was shaking uncontrollably. At times he badly wanted to simply give up. Hours passed with no one coming to rescue him.

As he tried to keep himself afloat in the darkness, there was something near him in the water that kept tormenting him, evidently some kind of long hairy strands of seaweed. It would rope itself around him and pull him under. He felt like it was almost demonic.

He later said, "I would quickly say the Lord's Prayer, which was the constant prayer that was on my lips. Thereafter I would untangle myself and stay abreast in the water. Also, I do not know what it was, it was like something was using a blade to give me marks on my body and the saltiness of the water made the cut pepperish. In the face of what for me was a demonic attack I remained unperturbed, with the Lord's Prayer...on my lips and my eyes fixated to the heavens."⁴

After four hours in the frigid waters, Samuel saw a headlight heading in his direction. The light came closer and it almost made a U-turn away from him. Using his final ounces of strength, Samuel flapped on the water and drew their attention. It turned out to be a French fishing boat. They pulled him out of the water and saved his life.

Of the 179 people on board flight KQ431, 169 people from 33 different nations perished. Only Samuel and nine others survived. As we can perhaps imagine, Samuel had a long physical and psychological recovery, but in his book on the tragedy, he wrote, "As every true believing Christian knows, self-will can only sustain you for a while. It is the grace of God that enables and sustains you when all else fails."⁵

Then he wrote, "Knowing that nothing I do by acts of works can earn me salvation except by the grace of God has shed a great light on my walk with God; not by my will but Your will for me, O God, be done."⁶

We never know what we'll face from day to day, but we'll never face a day when this prayer is inappropriate or unneeded:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Endnotes

1 <http://lordsprayerpin.com/history/>

2 From a newspaper clipping from Honey Grove, Texas, posted on the website www.Lordsprayerpin.com.

3 Samuel Aigbe, *A Plane Crash Survivor's Miraculous True Story* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2013), Kindle Loc. 220.

4 Samuel Aigbe, *A Plane Crash Survivor's Miraculous True Story* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2013), Kindle Loc. 241.

5 Samuel Aigbe, *A Plane Crash Survivor's Miraculous True Story* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2013), Kindle Loc. 1389.

6 Samuel Aigbe, *A Plane Crash Survivor's Miraculous True Story* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2013), Kindle Loc. 1410.

IN THIS MANNER THEREFORE PRAY

Matthew 6:9-11

Matthew 6:9-11 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread

On a number of occasions in my life, I've toured a great house – the White House, the Biltmore House, Windsor Castle, Topkapi Palace, Neuschwanstein, or some other such place. I've always imagined what it would be like to live there. Would I be happy? Would I ever get tired of exploring the rooms? How would it feel waking up in one of the bedrooms, going to the window, and looking down on the countryside?

Well, I don't expect to live in a mansion until I get to heaven. But there is one palace we can occupy right now—the Palace of Prayer—the Lord's Prayer. In our study of this passage we started with the foundation and have worked our way through the upstairs rooms—the nursery, the observatory, the throne room, and the office. Now, today, we're going down to the lower level, to the ground floor, and to the kitchen.

The two stories of the palace are not accidental. They represent the two sections of the Lord's Prayer. I don't know if you've noticed, but the Lord's Prayer divides evenly in two. The first half concerns what are sometimes called the "Thy" petitions. These are the things that are important to God. They focus on Him: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The last half of the Lord's Prayer are the "Us" or the "We" petitions: "Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." These petitions have to do with things that are important to us.

There's a profound principle at work there. When God comes first and we come second, things are in their proper order. When we become self-focused, we inevitably become debilitated in our thinking. We're prone to depression, to addictions, to distractions, to destructive tendencies, to discouragement, to temptations, to frustration. That's why we began our tour of the Palace of Prayer on the upper story with the Thou petitions and now we're coming down to the ground level where we live and we're going to talk to the Lord about things we need day by day. And that brings us to the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Now the wonderful thing about this petition is that it's part of a series of interlocking verses that run throughout the Sermon on the Mount. In my message today I want to show you five of these passages, and I'd like to link them together and draw truths from them so as to fabricate a one-sentence summary of this entire message. This is a Build-A-Sentence Sermon. Using truths from Matthew 6 and 7, we're going to construct a single sentence that will sum up everything I want to share.

1. Your Father Knows Your Needs in Advance (Matthew 6:8)

Let's begin with Matthew 6:8, which immediately precedes the Lord's Prayer: Do not be like them (the Pharisees, who loved to pray embellished prayers in the street corners) for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

The Pharisees prayed as if they were giving a performance on the street corners, as if they were street actors. Jesus told us not to do that. We don't have to pray Pharisaical prayers as if trying to impress or inform God. Our prayers are never intended to impress the Lord or inform the heavenly Father. He already knows what we need. He knows what we need better than we do. Our Father in heaven knows in advance what your situation is and He is actively working right now to provide for the needs of today and tomorrow.

That means what whatever you're facing today, the Lord knew about it yesterday. He knew about last month, last year. He knew about it before any clocks started ticking. Without your knowing about it, He has already been orchestrating events to guarantee that your needs—whatever they are—will be met in a timely matter.

There's a story in the archives of the Billy Graham Center that took place in 1937 on the island of Sumatra, and it involved a missionary named Hubert Mitchell, who was 23 years old at the time. He and his small family had arrived on this island to share the Gospel. Eagerly and bravely he ventured into the jungle in search of an unreached tribe, wondering how he could best explain the reality of God's love to islanders who had never heard the Gospel. Finally he encountered a tribe of warriors and he went to work telling them as best he could about God and about the Lord Jesus and about his death on the cross.

Tribal leaders were very intrigued. But the chief had a question: "What is the cross?" At first Mitchell struggled with how to describe the process of crucifixion, but at length he cut down two small trees and crafted them into a homemade cross. The chief then asked how it was possible for a man to be fastened to a cross. Mitchell stretched himself out on the cross and explained how Jesus was nailed to the wood. But the tribe didn't know what a nail was. Mitchell tried in every way to explain and describe a nail, but the islanders had absolutely no point of reference. The tribe seemed to discount the whole story for want of a nail and they begin to disperse. Somehow it appeared everything would be lost for lack of a nail.

Herbert felt discouraged, but also hungry. He had purchased some canned goods at a Chinese store in a jungle village, including a can of mandarin oranges. Opening the can he poured the oranges into a dish. There was a clinking. He looked inside the can and there, to his amazement, was a nail. As soon as his bewilderment wore off, he went running to show it to the chief. The chief studied

it, pressed it into the skin of his hand, winced, and nodded that he understood what Jesus had done. Shortly afterward he knelt down in the hut and invited Jesus to be his Lord and Savior. Soon the entire tribe had been won to Christ.¹

There are no accidents among God's children, and no permanently unmet needs. Jesus told us that our Heavenly Father already knows what we need before we ask Him. But then, three verses later, He told us to ask, to pray, to say: "Give us this day our daily bread."

2. So Pray Every Day (Matthew 6:11)

That give us the next part of our evolving thesis statement: "Your Father knows your needs in advance, so pray every day." Let's put verses 8 and 9 and 11 together: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Give us this day our daily bread.'"

What is our daily bread? Almost every commentary I've read on the Lord's Prayer affirms that Jesus isn't just referring to a loaf of bread. The word "bread" in verse 11 is symbolic of whatever it is that we need day-by-day.

The German reformer Martin Luther wrote a catechism for fathers to use in teaching the Bible to their children. It's called Martin Luther's Small Catechism. The third section of questions and answers is devoted to the Lord's Prayer, and one of the questions says: "What is meant by daily bread?"

I love Luther's answer:

"Everything that belongs to the support and needs of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."²

You would think that about covers it, but I can think of a few other things. We can also ask God for the daily strength we need, for our daily work assignments, for our daily allotment of joy and love and inner peace. We also need friends and meaningful relationships. Whatever you need on a daily basis is covered by this request. You can personalize it to fit your needs. What do you need today? Whatever it is, God knows in advance that you need it and He has invited you to ask Him for it.

Here's something else: This fourth petition makes an assumption that we will have a definite habit of daily prayer. Give us this day our daily bread. That implies we are praying this day. We can only offer that petition in one-day increments, so it's a subtle reminder that the Lord expects us to go into the kitchen every day and talk to Him about the things we need.

3. Depending on His Grace (Matthew 6:25-32)

But that's not all. As soon as Jesus finished giving us the words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, He doubled back to the theme of how God meets our needs. He told us that having prayed about those things we need, we should leave them with the Lord without worry, concern, or anxiety. We should trust Him and depend on His faithfulness. So our evolving sentence is: "Your Father knows your needs in advance, so pray every day depending on His grace."

Let's look at it in verses 25:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat..."

Do you see our Lord's unfolding logic? Our Father knows what you need before You ask, so ask Him each day for your daily bread and then don't worry about what you're going to eat. He has planned the answers before you even spoke the request.

Jesus continued: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

He continues in verse 31 and returns to His original point: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagan run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."

4. Devoted to His Cause (Matthew 6:33)

But now, in verse 33, the Lord is going to add another digit to the equation: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well." This implies devotion to His cause. As we take care of the things that are important to God, He will take care of the things that are important to us. We not only have to pray about our needs, we have to prioritize our lives, making sure that Jesus Christ and His kingdom and His lifestyle of rightness comes first, before all these other things.

5. And Delighted in His Care (Matthew 7:7-11)

And the last phrase is: "...and delighting in His care." Jesus wasn't finished with this subject in His Sermon on the Mount. He returned to the same theme in the next chapter as He neared the end of His Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew 7:7-11: "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." He went on in verse 9 to say, "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?"

When we ask for our daily bread, when ask in confidence, with commitment, and in the expectation that He will be faithful to provide good gifts in keeping with His grace. The epistle of James later reminded us that every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights who does not change like the shifting shadows (James 1:17).

Conclusion

There's an old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." As far as we can tell, that phrase was coined by a Roman Catholic priest during World War II. His name was Father William Cummings, and he was born in 1903 in San Francisco. As a young man, Cummings had a burden to go into foreign missions; so in 1940 he was sent to Manila. Imagine going to the Philippines at the onset of World War II! Cummings ministered to the people of the Philippines and became an unofficial chaplain of Allied Troops and American soldiers.

Two stories about Father Cummings fit into our sermon series. The first occurred one day in 1942 in Bataan. Father Cummings was trapped with American and Allied forces on the Bataan Peninsula of the Philippines. Conditions at Bataan Hospital Number 1 were horrendous. Many of the men suffered shrapnel wounds, and 90 percent of them also had malaria or dysentery or both. Many were suffering gangrene. On April 4, the medical workers at the primitive hospital heard bombers overhead, and suddenly incendiary bombs began falling all around the compound—the wards, the mess hall, the doctor's quarters, the nurses' dormitory. It was chaos and terror. Three days later it was repeated and patients, even those facing amputation, were tossed from triple-decker beds. The cacophony and confusion were awful. But suddenly in the middle of the chaos and confusion, a voice was heard, speaking loudly, speaking above the sound of the horror. It was the voice of Father Cummings, who had ducked through the bombings and rushed into the ward. He was standing on a desk. Several accounts of the following moments exist, but they are all consistent with what happened. "All right, boys," Cummings shouted, hands uplifted, "Everything's all right. Just stay quietly in bed or lie still on the floor. Let's pray together. You know the Lord's Prayer. I'll start in and you follow."

The screams and the crying stopped almost as if by magic, and Father Cummings began: "Our Father, which art in heaven." At that moment another plane dropped its bombs, and the explosion threw the nurses three feet into the air. The beds swayed and some tumbled down. The roof was shattered into flying pieces and iron beds folded up as if they were made of paper. One soldier was blown out of the building and his body became caught high in the branches of a nearby tree. But Father Cummings continued his prayer, hardly missing a beat. "Hallowed be Thy name," he said. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread..."

One witness later said, "All through the attack, we could hear his voice repeating the Lord's Prayer. He never faltered and never fell to the ground. Despite the bombing, none of the patients panicked; all remained quiet as though God were there with them in the form of the Lord's Prayer."

The priest finished a prayer as the bombing ended, and his voice and his words stilled the hearts of the men. Stepping down from his makeshift podium, he turned to a nurse and said, "All right, you take over. Put a tourniquet on my arm, would you? I've been wounded." And for the first time, the nurses saw that he himself had been badly hit by shrapnel, yet it hadn't deterred him from his prayer.³

A few days later, the enemy rounded up 10,000 American men and tens of thousands of Filipinos and ordered them to march 65 miles in what came to be known the Bataan Death March. Father Cummings was one of five priests who accompanied the men. One of those men was Sidney Stewart. He later wrote his story, which he entitled Give Us This Day. Stewart gave a vivid and brutal account of the Bataan Death March, and the hell ship, as it was called—the prisoner of war ship that took him to Japan.

Stewart said that the prisoners aboard the Japanese ship suffered so terribly they nearly went insane. But Father Cummings was also on that ship, and sanity returned, Stewart said, every evening when Father Cummings began to pray.

Each night the solace and the comfort that we received from the prayers was more than anything that that anyone else could do for us... I looked forward every hour for night to come, when Father Cummings stood and said his prayer again. I lived only for that prayer of faith and hope. It was the only strength I had. His voice was like the voice of God to me.

I know that Rasmussen (my fellow prisoner and closest friend) felt the same. Rass, who was always so much more religious than I.

He was now so weak that it was all he could do to stand. Yet I knew he lived too for that prayer in the evening.

Men were dying at the rate of twenty and thirty a day. Every morning their bodies were wrapped with rope and drawn up through the hold and dropped into the sea. Each day I watched the bodies going up into the sky through the open hatch. The rope swung out across the deck and I heard the sound of the bodies as they splashed into the sea.

One afternoon Father Cummings crawled over to pray for a dying boy and did not come back. Rass went to look for him. He found him unconscious through exhaustion, so white and still that when he brought him back and laid him near me, I was frightened. I know I could not hold on without him. I was afraid to ask Rass if he was dead....

I sat up and began to rub his arms and his hands and his face. Rass helped, and soon life returned. His eyelids flickered slowly and he opened his kind gray eyes.

"I'll be all right, boys." He smiled wanly. But he wasn't able to walk anymore. Rass cared for the two of us now. Father Cummings had been passing blood many days with dysentery. He was so weak that he could not walk. His lips were parched and cracked and his hands moved convulsively up and down his throat. I know that he couldn't make it much longer. I prayed silently to myself that I would die before he did, that I would not have to see him die.

But that evening, as it was growing dark down in the hold, and the faint light that came through the hatch was nearly gone, he begged me, "Can you lift your arm behind me? I can't stand, but my voice will carry. They will hear my prayer!"

I pushed my shoulder in behind him and put my arms around him and held him up. Faltering, he began to speak.

"Men! Men, can you hear my voice?"

Slowly he began to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name..."

"The cries of the men became still. I concentrated on the voice that soothed me and gave me strength and the will to live. Then I felt his body shiver and tremble in my arms. He gasped for air and there was a terrible pain written on his face. He gritted his teeth, signed, and went on.

"Thy will be done – on earth – as it is – in heaven."

I felt him tremble again as if he wanted to cough. His hands fluttered and his eyelids almost closed. Then with superhuman effort he spoke again: "Give us this day..."

I felt his body go tense all over. He relaxed and his hand fell by his side. I waited, but his eyes looked straight ahead. The eyelids no longer flickered. I knew he was dead, but I continued to hold him, afraid even to more. Rass crawled beside me. He lifted Father Cummings's hand and felt for his pulse.

"Lay him down, Sid," he said evenly. "He's gone. Lay him down. He's gone now."

I cradled his head against my shoulder. I didn't want to lay him down. I couldn't bear to face the fact that he was gone.

"Go ahead, Sid. Lay him down. Lay him down. He's gone," Rass said firmly.

I moved from behind him and laid his head gently on the floor. Then I noticed that the hold was quiet. The men had gone off into their exhausted, hungry sleep. Rass reached across the body and gripped my arm.

"Sid, he died like he would have wanted to, praying to the God that he believed in, to the God that gave him strength."

"Why did he have to die, Rass? What did he have to leave us?"

"Don't think of the fact that he is gone. Try to think of his last words. The last thing he tried to give us... You know his last words were, 'Give us this day.' We must try only to live until we can see the sun up in the morning, you and I, and we'll make it. Live only for one day, for just twenty-four more hours."⁴

None of us knows what a day will bring, but this we know: Whether the day is ordinary or whether it's horrendous, Your Father, who knows our needs in advance, tells us to pray for our bread daily, confidently, devotedly, and expectantly. Your Father knows your needs in advance, so pray every day, depending on His grace, devoted to His cause, and delighting in His care.

He invites us to come to His throne – bundle of needs that we are – and say: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread..."

1 <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/StoryofaNail/storyofanailtext.htm>. This story was told and retold by Hubert Mitchell and also popularized by Dr. Bob Pierce on his radio show. It was later told in booklet form and has been widely used as a flash story in children's curriculum.

2 Quoted by Curtis Rose in *The Lord's Prayer: A Collection of Historical Writings on the Lord's Prayer* (Castle Rock, CO: reNEW Publications, 2014), Kindle Location 161.

3 Adapted from numerous sources, including "Life's Reports: Bataan Nurses," by Annalee Jacoby in *Life Magazine*, June 15, 1942, 17-21. And Donald J. Young, *Fall of the Philippines: The Desperate Struggle Against the Japanese* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 112-115.

4 Sidney Stewart, *Give Us This Day* (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1956), excerpted by Gerald M. Costello in *Our Sunday Visitor's Treasury of Catholic Stories* (), 354-356. Costello's footnote says: "Used by permission of the copyright holder (Balkin Agency, Inc., P.O. Box 222, Amherst, MA 01004, agent for the estate of Sidney Stewart.) Also <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/05/us/sidney-stewart-is-dead-at78-bataan-death-march-survivor.html>.

Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts

Matthew 6:12

Today we're resuming our studies through the most famous prayer in history, the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave in Matthew 6 and in Luke 11. I've had two objectives in this series of messages. The first is to explain the content of the Lord's Prayer in a way that will help us become more fulfilled and effective in our personal times of prayer. The other is to give you examples of people who have done just that, so we can be encouraged by their example. During the last few months I've spent a good deal of time tracking down stories of men and women whose lives were impacted or changed by the power of the Lord's Prayer.

As I searched for these stories I came across an obituary in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. The name at the top of the obit was George Weiss, and he was European by birth. His parents were Germans who had moved to Hungary, which is where George grew up, in a village called Felsonana. As a young man, George was employed at various times as a musician, a farm worker, a mail carrier, and a bricklayer; and as he worked in various villages he would sometimes go to church. In this way, he became familiar with Christianity.

When the Germans marched into Poland in 1939, Weiss was drafted into the German army. He was seventeen years old, and for the next several years he was forced to fight under the German flag. He survived the war; but at the end of it, in May of 1945, he and some fellow soldiers were captured by the Russians outside Vienna and sent to a prison camp.

In this camp, a fence separated the Hungarians from the Germans. The Germans were treated much worse than the Hungarians. The Russians and the Germans hated each other. Well, Weiss was Hungarian; but he had been captured in a German uniform and so he was imprisoned with the Germans. His conditions were harsh and his future was bleak indeed. In fact, he was alarmed to hear that German prisoners would soon be shipped off to work in the Russian coalmines, and many such prisoners were never again seen alive.

Weiss went up to the Russian guards to try to persuade them he was actually Hungarian, not German; but they were wary. They didn't believe him. He persisted, and one of the guards finally proposed a test. George was commanded to recite the Lord's Prayer in the Hungarian tongue. If he was truly Hungarian, the guard knew, he should be able to recite the Lord's Prayer in that language.

Well, George had learned the Lord's Prayer while going to Hungarian churches in the villages where he had worked as a bricklayer. He recited the prayer word for word, and that's what saved his life. He was moved over to the Hungarian side and, shortly afterward he was released. After his release from the prison camp, he served in the Hungarian Armed Forces. In 1949, he immigrated to Milwaukee; and two years later he was drafted into the U.S. Army.

During his career as a soldier, said the obituary, George Weiss wore the uniform of three nations—Germany, Hungary, and the United States. But the most pivotal moment of his life came when he was spared because he knew the Lord's Prayer.¹

We may never have a crisis exactly like that, but as we go through life there will be innumerable moments when we need to know and to offer the Lord's Prayer. We will need to know every word of it.

That's why I've been pleading with you to learn it by heart and to teach it to your youngsters. In an earlier day in America, this was the best-known Scripture passage in the Bible. Everyone knew it, even if they didn't go to church or own a Bible. It was recited at

ballgames and council meetings and in classrooms and churches everywhere. That's obviously no longer true, so we have to be determined to make sure every child knows this by heart. To encourage that, we've created a chart that likens the Lord's Prayer to a palace. We've been going through this palace room by room—the nursery, the observatory, the throne room, the office, the kitchen; and today we're coming to the treasury where debts are processed.

Let's read the passage, from Matthew 6:5 and down to our key verse for today:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This then is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

The Nature of Debt

What does Jesus mean here by debt and debtors? Well, first of all let's clear up a little confusion about the terms debts and trespasses. In saying the Lord's Prayer, some people – especially Catholics and Lutherans and Methodists – use the word “trespasses”—Forgive us our trespasses. Presbyterians tend to use the word “debts.” I grew up saying “trespasses,” so that might be the most common version among Baptists.

But the divergence of translation literally goes back to the very beginning of the English versions of the Bible. Christians have been going back and forth between debts and trespasses since the beginning of the English Bible.

- The earliest English translation, which was done by John Wycliffe in 1395, used the word debts.
- Sometime later William Tyndale produced a major translation of the Bible into England, and he used the word trespasses.
- The Book of Common Prayer, in 1549, stayed with trespasses.
- But the King James Version in 1611 went back to debts.

It doesn't matter a great deal because the Lord is clearly talking about our sins, which can be likened to either debts or trespasses. But it's generally agreed that the best translation of the Greek term here in Matthew 6 seems to be “debts” and that's what we see in the King James Version, the New King James Version, the New International Version, and most of the current translations.

How, then, are our sins like debts?

Well, God has blessed us with a billion blessings. He created us. He gave us life. He has given us all that is necessary for life. As our Creator and as the God of the universe, He is entitled to praise and respect and obedience. He is holy and He is wholly perfect; and He expects the same from all He has made.

We owe God loyalty. We owe Him obedience. We owe Him purity and worship and wholehearted devotion. We owe Him a perfect life. He created us and placed us on this earth, and all He asks for in return is to render to Him a pure and perfect life. But we have not given what we owe Him, so we are in debt. We have failed to give God the obedience and honor that is due Him.

This is an interesting analogy, because the world is drowning in debt right now; and debt is behind many of the suicides we read about. People get trapped in the cycle of debt and it drives them crazy. I read an amazing article in the newspaper the other day, which reported that more than a quarter-million farmers have killed themselves in the nation of India because they've fallen deeply in debt due to years of crop failures. It has become a national crisis in India—farmers committing suicide due to debts incurred by crop failures.²

In the same way, millions of people are drowning in guilt and shame. It's as though we have a debt we can never repay, and it hangs over us all the time. We owe God a perfect life because of all He has done for us, but we can't give Him His due. That's the nature of debt.

The Nature of Forgiveness

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus told us there is one simple way of being released from our debt. We simply need to ask for forgiveness. We need to pray, “Forgive us our debts.” Four words—and our debts are all gone. That's the nature of being forgiven.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. Somebody had to pay our debt on our behalf, and the one who taught us to pray is the one who made the prayer possible.

Several years ago, someone wrote a song that was popular for a while, and it was on this theme. The words said: "He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay."³ That's the essence of the Gospel, and that's what every human on earth needs

Ephesians 1:7 says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

Even if they weren't baseball fans, everyone growing up in the 1960s knew about Mickey Mantle. His all-American smile appeared regularly on popular magazines, and everyone talked of his eye-popping homeruns, his team spirit, his World Series victories, and the wholesome image he presented to the world. Newspapers worked his name into the headlines—and not just on the sports pages. His friendly, optimistic voice was soothing in a world of Cold War tensions.

Behind the smile, of course, the truth was different. Mantle was a troubled man, severely addicted to alcohol. He was often drunk when he played for the Yankees, and his teammates were amazed he could hit the ball and run around the bases while inebriated. His family life was a sham, his language was crude and filthy, and he was a serial womanizer who neglected his wife and sons.

In the end, it all caught up to him; and in his final months, Mickey Mantle began looking for forgiveness. He asked forgiveness from his family and apologized to his fans in television interviews. "I'm gonna die," he said. "I've led a terrible life. I've done too many bad things."⁴ In his last press conference, he spoke of a lifetime of regrets and internal hell, a life squandered; and he had this message for the schoolchildren of the world: "Don't be like me."⁵

To everyone's surprise, Mantle began going to church and reaching out to the Lord. Friends like baseball legend Bobby Richardson witnessed to him, and Mickey Mantle reportedly invited Jesus Christ to become His Savior and Lord. His heart became tender and responsive to spiritual things. His friend, Roy True, later said, "When Bobby Richardson came to Mickey and said, 'You're dying, here is a way to make peace,' he embraced it. He wanted to be forgiven."⁶

At the end of life, none of the statistics mattered. His fame offered no comfort. His wealth was worthless, his trophies useless. Mickey Mantle just wanted to be forgiven.

So do we. Every human being is a sinner, for "there is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands... They have all turned aside... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10-12, 23). Our sins produce real guilt, which creates genuine feelings of shame in our hearts. We need forgiveness from others, but we especially need God's forgiveness. It's His laws we've broken, His character we've violated, and His holiness we've offended. Our sins disqualify us from His presence, so without forgiveness we live and die in misery, guilt, and hell.

That's why every human instinctively wants to be forgiven. We want our sins washed away. Only a merciful God can do that, and He does it only through the blood of Jesus Christ His Son. To quote Ephesians 1:7 again: "In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."

And so Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts."

The Nature of Being Forgiven

That's the nature of forgiveness, but let's also talk about the nature of being forgiven. It's important to live every day as if our debts were gone. Suppose I owed you a billion dollars, and that debt had reduced me to living on the street. I was homeless. I was living under the bridges. I was eating out of garbage cans. I was sleeping with rats and spiders. I had nowhere to bathe or wash my clothes. But suppose your heart went out to me. You didn't want me living under the bridges. You didn't want me eating out of garbage cans. You loved me and forgave the debt and credited a fortune to me in return.

It would dishonor you if I continued to live under bridges and eat out of dumpsters and walk around with body odor and muddy clothing. You would want me to have a little home somewhere, to keep food in my refrigerator, to have a food for every meal. You'd want me to live with dignity. You'd want my life to reflect your grace toward me.

In the same way, it dishonors God when we continue to wallow in the gutter of sin and shame when He has gone to such lengths to forgive our sins. He wants us to enjoy our freedom and our wealth in Christ.

I know that's hard to do. It's possible you've had some shortcomings or wrongdoings or mistakes in your past and they just haunt you. Sometimes you'll encounter some trigger that brings it all up again. You'll be going along and you'll see or hear or even smell something, and suddenly the secret wound is reopened. You hate yourself. You re-live those things that plague you and wear on your mind.

Let me give you a simple sentence for times like that: When you feel plagued by things you've confessed to God and placed under the blood of Christ, but they come to mind again, just tell yourself one thing: "I've put that behind me." That's all there is to it. "I've put

that behind me, and I'm not turning around to look at it again. Furthermore, God has put that behind Him and He has put it behind us. That's behind me and I'm facing forward."

That advice is based on a verse of Scripture found in the very heart of the Bible. Isaiah 38:17 says that when God forgives our sin, He puts them behind His back. Isaiah 38 is the story of Hezekiah's illness and the prayer he offers to God. In verse 17, he said, "In Your love You have kept me from the pit of destruction; You have put all my sins behind Your back."

I don't know what sins Hezekiah was referring to, but even a king has regrets and occasions of guilt and shame. But he was putting them behind him, for he understood that God had done the same. The Lord has put all – notice that all-inclusive word – all his sins behind His back.

What does that mean? I suppose it means this: Here is a man walking in a straight direction. He is going forward. He's on a straight and narrow path, which is leading him toward his desired destination. He is making progress. He comes to a piece of trash. He comes to something he doesn't like and he just picks it up and tosses it behind him. He throws it over his shoulder. He doesn't look back. He never sees it again. He just keeps going forward. From that moment, it is behind him and he never sees it again.

According to Isaiah 38:17, that's what the Lord does with our sins. He tosses it over His shoulder and behind His back. Now, if He has put our sins behind His back, that's where we should put them too. We should take that mistake, that regret, that haunting thing we did. In the name of Jesus we toss it behind us. And when Satan tempts us to turn around and look at all the litter and debris that has cluttered our past, don't do it. You just say, "I've put those things behind me. They're covered by the blood of Christ; they are forgiven; they are behind God's back and they're behind my back too. I'm not turning around. I'm going forward. I'm on a one-way trip to Glory; I'm traveling in one direction; I'm on the straight and narrow. So like the apostle Paul let me say I am forgetting what lies behind and pressing onward toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. That's the nature of being forgiven.

Now at the moment we receive Jesus Christ as Savior, we're forgiven of all our sins—past, present, and future. Yet on a day-by-day basis, we still need to come to the Lord with confession on our lips for we don't want anything to quench the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say: "And Lord, forgive my sins even as I forgive those who have sinned against me."

The Nature of Being Forgiving

That leads to the nature of being forgiving. It's impossible to miss how Jesus told us to pray for forgiveness. We're to say, "Forgive us our debts as we also forgive those indebted to us."

Now, the word "as" there does not mean "in the same way" but "at the same time." I would never want to pray, "Lord, forgive me my sins in the same way I'm forgiving those who sin against me." I can't forgive as well as God can do it. But I can pray, "Lord, forgive me my sins while I'm also trying to forgive those who sin against me." In other words, God's forgiveness doesn't end with us. It's passed on through us to those who have hurt us.

The Bible is full of people who learned to forgive.

- Esau is one of the great forgivers in the Bible. His brother Jacob had exploited and deceived and played him for a sucker. The whole story is told in the book of Genesis, and it's a story of sibling rivalry gone bad. But years later when the brothers were reunited and when Jacob feared his brother would try to kill him, Esau came instead with open arms and a forgiving spirit.
- In the same way, Joseph forgave the brothers who had betrayed him. In fact, perhaps he had learned from his Uncle Esau how to forgive others.
- Job forgave the friends who had tormented him.
- Hosea forgave the wife who had betrayed him.
- The prodigal's father is a picture of parental forgiveness.
- Stephen forgave his executioners.
- The early church forgave Saul of Tarsus.
- Philemon forgave Onesimus.
- And, of course, the greatest mastermind of forgiveness in the Bible is the Lord Jesus Himself who shed His blood to provide complete forgiveness of sins.

And it's His example we're to emulate. Is there someone with whom you should share the forgiving spirit of Jesus? Recently a nurse sent me a book she had written about her experiences in the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital where she worked. She said that on

one occasion a man was rushed to the hospital with a terrible stroke or heart attack (I can't remember which). His two children rushed to his bedside. These two grown children had been feuding for years. They had suffered a disagreement and had spoken such harsh words that the relationship had been broken. They were estranged from each other. The dying man tried his best to speak to them, but he couldn't get his vocal cords to work. He was almost desperate to speak, but it was impossible. But then he found a way to say what he wanted to say. He took the one brother's hand in his one hand, and the other brother's hand in the other, and he pulled them to him and united them on his chest as he died. His last dying action was an attempt to reconcile and restore his two angry children.

That's what the Lord wants to do between you and that person with whom you are so angry. He can enable us to forgive as He forgives us. Don't keep holding that grudge or clinging to that bitterness. Release it to the Lord. He died for you and forgave all your sin; He put it behind His back. He can help you to do the same with the offences of others.

This simple petition in the Lord's Prayer—"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"—is a very simple sentence, but it took the very death of the One who spoke it to implement it to reality. It's the crimson blood of the Savior who validates the nature of debt, of forgiveness, of being forgiven, and of being forgiving.

This then is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Endnotes

1 "Obituaries: George Weiss" by Jan Uebelherr, in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, at www.jsonline.com/news/obituaries/founding-member-of-german-fest-had-worn-military-uniforms-of-3-nations-b99310746z1-267312781.html

2 <http://fsrn.org/2015/05/farmers-in-india-crippled-by-debt-killthemselves-at-an-alarming-rate/>

3 Ellis J. Crumb, 1977.

4 Quoted by Jane Leavy in *The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 363-364

5 <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/58>.

6 Quoted by Jane Leavy in *The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 380

Lord's Prayer: Lead Us Not Into Temptation Matthew 6:13

As you know, there was another church shooting this week, this one in Charleston, South Carolina, and our whole nation has mourned and grieved that something like this could happen to a Christian congregation in America. In Washington last Thursday, members of Congress convened outside the capital building to hold a prayer vigil for the victims and their loved ones, and these congressional leaders joined their voices in unison to offer the words of the Lord's Prayer.

Also this week, six students at Berkley University were killed when a balcony collapsed, and as I read the account of the tragedy I was interested to learn that last Wednesday a tearful group of about 500 people gathered in a park near the scene of the tragedy and they bowed their heads in prayer and offered the words of the Lord's Prayer.

But something else happened this week. The University of Toledo, under pressure from secularists, announced that its head football coach would no longer be allowed to say the Lord's Prayer with his football players before games.

It seems like our society has a love-hate relationship with the Lord's Prayer. But not for us!

For several weeks now we've been in a series of studies on the subject of the Lord's Prayer, which is finishing up today and next Sunday. In this series, I've likened the famous Lord's Prayer to a palace. God has invited you into His palace, and, in fact, He has given you the keys. He has turned ownership over to you. The Lord's Prayer is available for immediate occupancy, and each petition and phrase is like a different room. We began with the nursery (Our Father), went to the tower (Who art in heaven; hallowed be Your name); to the throne room (Your kingdom come), and to the business office where matters are settled (Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven). All that was on the upper floor; those are the "Thou" petitions.

For the last several weeks, we've been wondering around on the lower level, starting with the kitchen (Give us this day our daily

bread), and the treasury (And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors). Today we're coming to the armory, where the weapons are stored, as we come to Matthew 6:13:

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (or from the evil one).

The Petition

Now, this petition has perplexed interpreters more than any other in the Lord's Prayer because at first glance it seems to conflict with something that James said in the first chapter of his epistle. Our Lord Jesus had a younger half-brother, James, the son of Joseph and Mary, who became a leader of the early church and who wrote a letter, which we call the letter or epistle of James. Undoubtedly James knew the Lord's Prayer and I assume he often offered it as a prayer of his own, but in his own letter he said this:

"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed" (James 1:13-14).

Jesus told us to ask God not to lead us into temptation; and James said that God never tempts anyone to evil. So how do we reconcile the writings of these two brothers?

Fortunately 2000 years of scholarship and thought have gone into the Lord's Prayer, and the general consensus of many Christian commentators through the ages is that Jesus is telling us here to ask God to keep us from testing, from temptation, from sin, and from spiritual attack.

In the early 200s, Tertullian suggested that the best interpretation of this sentence would be

"Do not allow us to be led into temptation."¹ A few decades later, Cyprian agreed with that interpretation in his classic work on the Lord's Prayer.²

Augustine agreed that the petition had no other meaning than

"Do not permit us to be led into temptation."³

In Martin Luther's Small Catechism, published in Germany in 1529, he explained it like this:

"God, indeed, tempts no one; but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, nor seduce us into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice; and though we may be assailed by them, that we may finally overcome and gain the victory."

Shortly afterward John Calvin, in his Institutes, said that this is a prayer for God to furnish us with armor, and defend us by His protection, that we may be able to obtain the victory. He said that some temptations strike up from within, from our internal nature; and other temptations come from outside us, from the world and the devil.

"To both these kinds of temptations which assail us, whether kindled within us by our concupiscence, or presented to us by the craft of Satan, we pray our heavenly Father not to permit us to yield, but rather to sustain and raise us up with His hand, that, strong in His might, we may be able to stand firm against all the assaults of our malignant enemy, whatever imaginations he may inject into our minds; and also, that whatever is presented to us on either quarter, we may convert it to our benefit..."⁴

Calvin said,

"Our petition therefore is, that we may not be overwhelmed and conquered by any temptations, but that we may stand, strong in the power of the Lord, against all adverse powers that assault us."⁵

When the Heidelberg Catechism was formulated in 1563, its entry on this verse asked the meaning of the petition and answered it like this:

"In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies – the devil, the world, and our own flesh – do not cease to attack us. Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory."

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which I've referred to earlier, explains it this way:

"In the sixth petition, which is 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,' we pray, That God would either keep us from being tempted to sin, or support and deliver us when we are tempted."

One of my favorite writers from earlier generations is J. C. Ryle, an Anglican bishop who lived in the 1800s. His writings are very engaging. In his treatment of the Lord's Prayer, he put it this way:

"(This petition in the Lord's Prayer) teaches us that we are liable, at all times, to be led astray, and fall. It instructs us to confess our infirmity, and beseech God to hold us up, and not allow us to run into sin. We ask Him, who orders all things in heaven and earth, to restrain us from going into that which would injure our souls, and never to allow us to be tempted above that which we are able to bear."⁶

One of the ways we arrive at this interpretation is by noticing how Jesus gave us this petition using parallelism. This is a Hebrew technique of poetry. It's a form of expression in which the same idea is expressed with two very similar statements. We see this all the way through the Bible, especially in the book of Psalms. For example, Psalm 27:1 says:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear? / The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

There is a repetition of the idea in order to enhance and reinforce it, and we can therefore understand the first phrase by comparing it with the second. The second phrase helps clarify and interpret the first.

So when Jesus said, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," He was expressing one thought in two different phrases. He was teaching us to pray specifically that God will keep us from temptation, from spiritual attack, and from falling into evil and from the attacks of the evil one.

And that brings us to something else. The Greek word for evil here is not used in a neutral or generic sense. It is rendered in the original Greek in the masculine sense and this very same term is used elsewhere in the Bible to indicate the evil one, or Satan.

So when you put the whole petition together, what I believe it means is: "Don't let us come under spiritual attack. Keep us safe from the lure of temptation and the schemes of the devil."

The Enemy

And that brings us to the whole subject of our enemy. I'm convinced we underestimate the role that Satan and his demonic forces play in our everyday lives. He and his forces live and operate in the unseen realms, but they see us and target us with all kinds of schemes. We know this from the Bible. The devil shows up in the third chapter of Scripture and doesn't disappear until the third from the last chapter of Scripture. He's not in the first two chapters of the Bible and he's not in the last two chapters of the Bible, but he's everywhere in-between.

- In Genesis 3, he tempted Adam and Eve and led them into rebellion and sin.
- In the book of Job, Satan orchestrated all Job's disasters and troubles in a way designed to destroy Job's spirituality.
- In 1 Chronicles 21, Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to sin.
- In Zechariah 3, Satan attacked the high priest of Israel, Joshua, and tried to tear him down in his own sight and in the sight of others, all to hinder the work of the rebuilding of the temple.
- In Luke 8:12, Jesus said that when the Gospel is preached, Satan is waiting like a bird of prey to swoop in and snatch the message from the hearts of those who hear.
- In Luke 22:31, Jesus warned the disciples, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat."
- In Acts 5, Peter asked Ananias and Sapphira why Satan had filled their hearts to lie to the church and to the Holy Spirit.
- In 1 Peter 5:8, Peter warned us that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.
- In 1 John 3:8, we're told that the one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.
- In 2 Corinthians 4:4, the apostle Paul said that the devil is like the god of this age who has blinded the minds of unbelievers.
- In Ephesians 6, he told us to put on the whole armor of God that we may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.
- In 1 John 5:19, the apostle John made an incredibly sweeping and dramatic statement. He told his readers,

who were Christians: “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”

- And let me show you one last passage that goes along with this. At the beginning of His ministry in Matthew 6, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” And at the end of His earthly time, He prayed that very thing for us in His high priestly prayer in John 17:15. Praying for His disciples and for us, Jesus said: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.”

The Strategy

That leads to my points of application. What strategy should we employ to remain strong and solid in our spiritual lives and to ward off the attacks of Satan? Let me give you three suggestions.

First, Arm Yourself with Scripture.

I’ve come to the conclusion that memorized Scripture is our most powerful defensive weapon. In Ephesians 6, the Bible tells us to go into each day like a warrior dressed in his armor, and most of the armor is defensive. But one piece of armor is offensive – the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Every temptation comes to us via our thoughts. You think about sinning before you actually do it. Our thought-lives represent the battleground of the soul. And by memorizing Bible verses that fit our areas of weakness and temptation, we’re conditioning our minds for victory.

Second, Make Up Your Mind, then, to Resist Satan and His Traps.

I’m a little reticent to share this experience with you, but it fits perfectly into what we’re saying. Earlier this month, we took a group on a tour to Israel, and we had a couple of days in Istanbul on the way back. I like Istanbul; I’ve been there before. But on this trip I woke up sick and very fatigued. In fact, I could hardly get out of bed, so I stayed at the hotel all day and stayed in bed much of that time, which is very unusual for me.

In the early evening I started feeling a little better so I thought I’d go out for a walk and find something to eat. There is a great, broad pedestrian thoroughfare in Istanbul and in the evenings it’s always clogged with about 50,000 people. I went walking through that mass of humanity, and a fellow came up to me and joined me in my walk. He was very friendly and started making conversation. I didn’t feel like conversation, so I didn’t say much. But he was persistent, and I tried to be friendly. Then he stopped me and asked if I wanted to go somewhere and get a beer with him. Well, of course, I’m a friendly guy but nothing about that sounded right to me, so I begged off and got rid of him (in a nice sort of way). I continued my stroll.

No more than five minutes later another friendly young man came up alongside me and did the same thing. I must have looked like an easy target. He was very conversational and asked where I was from and told me where he was from and asked how I liked Istanbul. Then he said, “Why don’t you come with me. I know where some girls are. I can get you a girl.”

I stopped and turned to him and looked right in his eyes. I said, “I would never do that. I am a married man and I love my wife, and besides that I’m a Christian and I’m committed to Jesus Christ, and I would never do that. You’re wrong to ask me. I’m a follower of Christ!”

You’ve never seen anyone scamper as quickly as he did.

Well, I continued my walk and found a restaurant with a balcony overlooking that mass of tens of thousands of people and I had supper. I thought to myself, “If that happens again how can I more clearly present the Gospel?” So I thought through a little impromptu sermon I could give the next solicitor.”

Sure enough, on my way back to the hotel I was accosted by a third fellow and he went through the same spiel. I stopped and looked at him and told him I would never do that, and that it was wrong of him to even suggest it, and that trafficking and prostitution were great evils, and the only reason he was involved in that was because he was empty on the inside and needed Jesus Christ. I quoted John 3:16 and did my best to explain the condition of his heart and the love of God. I’ll have to say he didn’t seem to take offense. He laughed, but in an embarrassed way, not in a mocking way. And he got away from me as fast as he could, but I’ve prayed that God used that encounter to plant the seed of the Gospel in his heart.

I thought about walking around some more to see if another fellow would come up whom I could evangelize, but I thought better of it so I went back to my room and called it a night. But my point is – the Bible says: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” That strategy actually works. We have to make up our minds that we’re going to say, when tempted: I will not do that.

Third, Take This Petition of the Lord’s Prayer Seriously.

This is a serious thing to pray about. When you pray, make it a practice to add this request. For a number of years, I've had a page in the front of my prayer journal with certain Bible verses I like to pray into my own life. I'll have to tell you that I've not habitually done what I'm telling you today, but I've been convicted by this study of the Lord's Prayer. And so in my prayer journal I've added this verse as one of the daily requests I make to the Lord. Father, keep me from sin and keep me from sinning. Don't let me be led into temptation. Deliver me from the evil one.

According to Jesus, we ought to pray something like this on a regular basis: "Lord, keep me strong in the face of temptation; help me to resist; don't let me keep giving in; and deliver me from the traps and devices of the devil."

We ought to pray for our children what Jesus prayed for us: "Father, I don't ask you to take them out of this world, but protect them from the evil one."

Jesus said, "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41).

Adoniram Judson was the first American missionary to be sent out in an organized way, and he ended up in Burma in the early 1800s. One of the most horrendous stories you'll read in missionary history is how he was captured and imprisoned when he was 36 years old. Judson had always kept himself in the prime of health and he had always been somewhat fastidious about hygiene and sanitation. But now he was thrown into prison for nineteen months. It was a virtual death prison. He was one of perhaps a hundred prisoners – men and women – who were stretched out on the bare floor of an unlit building about forty feet long and thirty feet wide. The victims were shackled in long rows of stocks, with no ventilation and no sanitation. There was very little food or clothing. The prisoners were reduced to living skeletons. Often at night a bamboo bar, which ran through the shackles of the rows of prisoners, was lifted. This suspended their feet in the air, forcing them to try to sleep on their shoulders. But Adoniram he did not go insane and he did not die. Instead, he meditated day and night on the Lord's Prayer, and he even refashioned it into a hymn to be sung. After his release it was published and sung around the world. It was a popular hymn for several generations.

Our Father, God, who art in heaven,
All hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come; thy will be done
In heaven and the earth the same.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And as we those forgive
Who sin against us, so may we
Forgiving grace receive.
Into temptation lead us not,
From evil set us free;
And Thine the kingdom,
Thine the power
And glory, ever be.⁷

God answered his prayer, and at length Judson was released from prison and reestablished in his work. Adoniram Judson reportedly explained it like this: "Our prayers run along one road and God's answers by another, and by and by they meet."⁸

I believe if you pack your mind with Scripture, memorizing it and meditating on it; and if you make up your mind that you're going to live a holy and pure life, resisting the devil; and if you pray regularly this petition of the Lord's Prayer, you'll go through life with a strength and stability that Satan cannot ravage or ruin. That's the power of the Lord's Prayer. That's the privilege of saying: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Endnotes

1 The Complete Works of Tertullian, location 18328.

2 Gerald O'Collins, *The Lord's Prayer* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 99.

3 St. Cyprian on the Lord's Prayer: An English Translation with Introduction by T. Herbert Bindley (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904), p.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume 2* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1844), 115.

5 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume 2* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1844), 116.

6 J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St Matthew* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1870), 58.

7 Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson, Volume 3* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1883), 271.

8 Widely attributed to Adoniram Judson, but I do not know the original source of the quote.

Lord's Prayer: The Doxology

Matthew 6:13

John Mahony is a graduate of West Point and a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who was in a meeting on the 19th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The story I'm going to tell you took him ten years to relate. For many years he just couldn't bring himself to talk about what happened. But recently in a series of interviews, he described how, during his meeting, the skyscraper suddenly jerked and threw everyone off balance. It felt like an earthquake, but John's experience in the armed forces told him that something more sinister was happening. He smelled smoke and engine fuel. He immediately directed coworkers toward the stairway. "As I stepped into that smoky stairway," he recalled, "the Lord's Prayer ran through my mind over and over and over: 'Thy will be done.' At first, I could only get through part of the prayer. But after a few floors, prayer relaxed me and I was able to say it completely." They trudged down the stairway floor after floor in a frightened parade of confusion, but Mahony praised the Lord that the lights and ventilation remained on. Then they began passing people going in the opposite direction—firefighters, panting hard, going up. Mahoney later said it was the rhythm of the Lord's Prayer that kept him going and that gave him calmness and courage. Somehow, he said, it brought to his mind the feeling he had as a child when he pulled himself out of the swimming pool and his mother wrapped him in a dry towel. "As I walked down those stairs," he said, "somewhere between the 12th floor and the 10th, somewhere between 'Our Father' and 'Thy will be done,' the same feeling came over me. Suddenly I was wrapped in warmth and love and comfort. In that smoky, wet stairway in a burning building, surrounded by a thousand frightened people. I felt wonder. I felt God's peace, and I knew that regardless of the physical outcome, everything would be all right."

Getting to the ground floor, he was told he couldn't exit the front of the building as people on the higher floors were jumping from the windows, as many as 200 of them, creating a terrible danger for those below. John passed through a side exit amid burning cars and falling debris. Just as he crossed the street, he heard the roar of a jetliner and looked up just in time to see the second plane crash into the other tower. Mahoney found himself trapped at the tip of Manhattan at Battery Park, where all he could do was to watch as the towers burned and then collapsed as he continued to pray the Lord's Prayer.

He later said "When I walked from those ruined towers, I took two priceless gifts with me. First I carry God's peace with me every day. Even if I get distracted, Christ's love is all around us. It takes just a few lines from a simple prayer for it to wrap itself around me once again. Second I know, with a certainty that my words cannot possibly convey, I know what will happen to me when I die. I will rise from this shell, like a child fresh and clean from a bath, and I will be wrapped in the warmth of His love and His forgiveness and His peace."¹

This is the power of the Lord's Prayer. This is the legacy of the words Jesus gave us. The nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister, John S. Hart, said, "The Lord's Prayer is, to my mind, a sort of standing miracle—a self-evidencing revelation of the divine intelligence."²

Well, sometimes I wish sermon series could go on forever. I don't expect you to feel that way with me, but I become so attached and so engrossed in a subject or a passage that I don't want to leave it. Nevertheless today we're coming to the end of our series of studies into the Lord's Prayer, and we're coming to that last dramatic phrase:

For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

The History of This Doxology

Now, before we look at the meaning of this phrase we need to look into its background for a moment. Last week a woman came up to me with a question. "I was in Chicago," she said, "and I visited a church that said the Lord's Prayer in unison. I joined in, but when we got to the last sentence I kept going with 'For Thine is the power...' but nobody else did. I shut up real fast! Why do you think they ended the prayer before its conclusion?"

Well, we call this closing sentence a doxology. When you hear the word "doxology" you might think of the anthem we sing by that name, which begins with the words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." That is one doxology. But a doxology is any refrain that expresses praise to God. The word comes from the Greek term *doxa*, which means "glory."

So a [doxology](#) is any expression of praise to the Lord that gives Him glory, splendor, and praise. The Lord's Prayer, as we

traditionally know it ends with the doxology that we're coming to today: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

But here's the thing. This final sentence does not appear to have been in the earliest manuscripts we have of the writings of the New Testament. It probably was not part of the original text and Jesus probably did not actually include these words in the prayer as He gave it. In fact, in my New International Version, it's not even given in the text although I can find it down in a marginal note at the bottom of the page. It says: "Some late manuscripts have...For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

So how do we explain this?

Well, what our Lord was doing in this passage was teaching us to pray with sincerity and simplicity. That was His main point. We know that because of the way He introduced the prayer up in verses 5 through 8.

Look at Mt 6:7:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.... And when You pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

And then He gave us a sample of how we should pray with sincerity and with simplicity – and that's the Lord's Prayer.

But, of course, people began praying these words verbatim, because, after all, this is the best-worded prayer in history. But they also found that when they offered this prayer verbatim and said it aloud, it seems to end abruptly, with the words, "... deliver us from the evil one."

Well, most of us have a way of signing off on our conversations, don't we? We'll say, "Goodbye" or "See you later" or "Take care." In the same way, we have a way of signing off on our prayers. We don't just end abruptly, but we say things like, "In Jesus' Name, Amen."

Well, in the Jewish tradition, they typically ended their prayer with a doxology, with an expression of praise and worship to God. When people began repeating the Lord's Prayer, they needed a simple doxology with which to end it. And they found one. Where did they find it? They found it in the Old Testament. In 1 Chronicles 29, King David had just finished a great stewardship drive to raise funds for the building of the temple. All the needed money had come in, and He was full of praise. He offered a prayer of praise, which is found in 1 Chronicles 29:10-11. Let's look at that passage:

David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, "Praise be to You, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.

He went on for a couple of more verses along those lines, praising God for all He had done. Well, David's prayer of praise was too long for the closing to the Lord's Prayer. In fact, his total doxology in 1 Chronicles 29 is longer than the entire Lord's Prayer. So they condensed it. They pulled out the words, Yours are the power and the glory... Yours is the kingdom. And from very early in Christian history, variations of David's doxology were deemed a fitting conclusion for the Lord's Prayer.

You may remember that in an earlier message I spoke about a document called the Didache. To me, the Didache is just about the most fascinating manuscript in all of Christian history. It's one of our very earliest post-apostolic papers. It dates to about A.D. 100, to the period right after the apostles; and it is a teaching guide for new Christians and for church members. Part of the Didache instructed the early believers to offer the words of the Lord's Prayer, and in that version, which dates so very early in Christian history, the rendition of the Lord's Prayer ended with these words: For Thine is the power and the glory forever. That tells us that probably within the lifetime of the apostles, they were ending the Lord's Prayer in a way similar to what we do today.

In the eastern half of the Roman Empire, among the Byzantine and Orthodox churches, when the Lord's Prayer was recited, it was a more elaborate doxology: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto all ages. Amen."³

Another version of the Lord's Prayer in Orthodox circles says: "For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."⁴

The more traditional ending that we know first showed up on a manuscript of the Bible dating from about the year AD 400. It was found in Egypt, probably in a monastery near the Pyramids, and it was purchased in 1906 and taken to Washington, D.C., where it now resides in the Smithsonian Institute. For that reason, it's called the Washington Codex, or Codex Washingtonianus. It's described as the third oldest Bible in existence. It has the doxology as we recite it today: "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and

the glory forever. Amen.”

Nevertheless, this the ending doxology didn't catch on with the Western church until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when it made its way into the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. In 1611, it was included in the King James Version. And from there it came down to us. Our newer translations are based on Greek texts that predate the Washington manuscript, and so in versions like my NIV the doxology doesn't appear in the text, but down in the margin.

Nevertheless, I have no hesitation accepting the doxology. After all, it is Scripture. Even if it wasn't in the original versions of Matthew's Gospel, it is taken almost word for word from the prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29, and so it's biblical. And it's also beautiful and it serves as a fitting conclusion to our prayer. So I accept it fully and appreciatively. I've gone into a bit of detail here, but I think it's important to know these things in these days when critics are attacking the Bible about everything. If someone says to you, "Do you know that verse isn't really in the Bible?" you can say, "Well, actually, it is. The words are taken from 1 Chronicles 29, and the early Christians added David's doxology to the Lord's Prayer as a fitting conclusion to it. And what's wrong with that?"

So with that history lesson behind us, let's look at this verse phrase by phrase.

For...

Let's begin with that that conjunction that begins the phrase: For... It means, "Because." That's a very important word because it links the doxology with everything that precedes it and explains why we are praying to begin with. Why do we pray for God's name to be hallowed, for His kingdom to come, for our sins to be forgiven, and for our bread to be provided day by day? We ask these things because God can answer. He can do as we request. He can do it because He wills it as a King; He backs up His royal will with divine power; and He desires glory for Himself from the results.

It's like saying, "Father, will you give me my allowance today because you own the bank."

It's like saying, "Friend, will you drive me to town today because you have a car."

It's like saying, "Brother, will you make this decision, because you have the wisdom to do it."

It's like saying, "Lord, we pray these things because You can grant them. You are the king, and the entire universe is Your kingdom; You have the power, and Your power is unending and undiminished; and to You belongs the glory and the praise that comes from answered prayer.

Matthew Henry, the commentator, said that this concluding verse refers especially back to the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

- We pray "Thy Kingdom come" because Thine is the kingdom.
- We pray, "Thy will be done," for Thine is the power.
- We pray "Hallowed by Thy Name" because Thine is the glory.

To put it differently:

- The Kingdom represents God's jurisdiction over all things that were ever created.
- The Power represents His ability to oversee this Kingdom and to enforce His divine decrees.
- The Glory represents the praise that's due Him as He does so.

That's why we pray. It's because we have Someone worth praying to. We ask all the prior petitions in the Lord's Prayer because we have access to the One whose jurisdiction covers all of time and space, whose power can back up His government; and whose glory is our ultimate purpose and pleasure.

Thine is the Kingdom

Earlier in the Lord's Prayer we studied the concept of the Kingdom in the Bible. In Daniel 2, God promised to establish a divine kingdom that would shatter the kingdoms of this world and would stand forever. Jesus came the first time and set that kingdom in motion, as we see in the church. You and I, when we come to Christ, are citizens of an eternal kingdom. When He comes again, He will consummate the kingdom; and as we read in the book of Revelation: "The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever."

When we say, "Thine is the Kingdom," we are acknowledging that He is the absolute monarch of the ages, the King of kings and Lord of lords. The world may not yet acknowledge the universal and absolute rule and reign of Jesus Christ, but we, His children, do; and that's why we pray.

That's also why we don't become unnerved when kings and presidents and supreme courts say and do foolish things. We know

someone else is in charge.

Several years ago, my son-in-law, Joshua, and I spent a day in Windsor, England, and it was at a time when Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were in residence there. We were walking down the lane in front of the castle when a horse-drawn carriage came through the gates. I watched it very carefully, and as it drew nearer I recognized Prince Philip. I knew what he looked like, and I was tremendously excited. I jumped and down and waved and shouted my greetings. He looked at me, and I'll have to say he looked at me oddly and drove on. "We've just seen Prince Philip," I told Joshua.

But later in the day, we saw the same fellow in the same carriage carting around tourists, and I realized the man I thought was Prince Philip was simply a fellow who drove tourists around town. I'd been overly impressed by someone who wasn't nearly as famous or powerful as I thought.

Sometimes our kings and presidents and judges think they are big shots, that they hold the reins of power, that they're in the driver's seat of history. They forget who really sits on the throne; they forget they are no more than coachmen traveling down roads that will end one day as the Lord decrees and as the Bible predicts.

Only one person holds the reins of history in His hand, and that's the King of kings and Lord of Lords. His is the kingdom. That's why we pray to Him.

And the Power

And His is the power. He has the power to enforce all the perfect decrees connected with His eternal kingdom. If you want to spend some time in a thrilling Bible study, just study this theme through the Bible. I recently looked up every time the word "power" occurred in the writings of Paul, and this is what I found:

- (Jesus Christ) was appointed the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead—Romans 1:4
- I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation—Romans 1:16
- For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen Romans 1:20
- For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power—1 Corinthians 4:20
- By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also—1 Corinthians 6:14
- His incomparably great power... That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead... —Ephesians 1:19-21
- The power the enables Him to bring everything under His control—Philippians 3:21
- To Him be the power forever and ever. Amen.—1 Peter 5:11
- Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God Revelation 19:1

Because He has the power to answer our prayers, to meet our needs, to resolve our issues, to work all things for our good, we pray to Him, saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven."

And the Glory Forever — Amen.

And finally, to Him belongs the glory. To Him belongs the praise. We pray and ask Him for our needs so that we can praise Him and give glory to Him as He answers. The word "glory" is a biblical term that describes the brightness and splendor and perfections and praise that surrounds the Lord perpetually and eternally.

- Moses prayed, "Lord, show me Your glory" – Exodus 33:18
- The Psalmist said, "Declare His glory among the nations" – 1 Chronicles 16:24
- The Bible says, "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name" – 1 Chronicles 16:29
- Psalm 34 says: "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt His name together"—Psalm 34:3
- Psalm 66 says: "Sing the glory of His name" – Psalm 66:2
- Psalm 72 says: "May the whole earth be filled with His glory" – Psalm 72:19
- Psalm 115 says: Not to us, Lord, not to us but to Your name be glory, because of Your love and faithfulness – Psalm 115:1
- Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the Lord; that is My name! I will not yield My glory to another."

- The heavenly angels over Bethlehem cried, “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:14)
- Jesus said that He would come again in power and great glory (Matthew 24:30)
- The worshippers in the book of Revelation sing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11)

When we glorify God, our lives are in their proper symmetry. Our personalities are balanced and aligned with the rhythm of the universe. Everything is in its right order when God receives our glory and honor and praise. And so we present our requests to Him that we might give Him the glory for all He has done.

The final word of the prayer, “**Amen**,” means, “So be it.” It’s a closing word of faith and affirmation. When we say, “Amen,” we’re saying, “Now I have told the Lord what I need; I have laid my requests at His feet. I’m going to leave it with Him and trust Him with the results.” In our picture of the Palace of Prayer, this is the drawbridge that leads us into our day.

Conclusion

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon had an interesting way of looking at the Lord’s Prayer. I’m not sure how I feel about his analysis or if I even agree with him; but it’s worth thinking about. In his sermon “Lead Us Not Into Temptation,” Spurgeon suggested that the Lord’s Prayer is like a ladder going downward, rung-by-rung.

- We begin at a very high and lofty place, saying, “Our Father,” and acknowledging that we are princes and heirs, members of the royal family.
- Then we say, “Thy kingdom come,” and that puts us in the role of subjects and citizens of the kingdom. Still a high position, but not quite like being members of the royal family.
- Then we say, “Your will be done,” and we put ourselves in the role of a servant, willing to do whatever the Lord desires.
- When we say, “Give us this day,” we’re speaking as beggars in need of our daily provision.
- When we say, “Forgive us our debts,” we are acknowledging that we are sinners.
- And when we say, “Lead us not into temptation,” we acknowledge that we are sinners in danger of being still greater sinners without the intervention of God.

But then we come to the last phrase, and we’re lifted back up as if on wings like eagles. We are worshipping children, thrilled with a God whose kingdom, power, and glory satisfies us forever. The Lord’s Prayer comes back in a full circle, opening and closing with praise and worship and glory and honor for Him who is and who was and who is to come.

I opened today’s message by talking about what happened on September 11, 2001. On two or three occasions in the last few years, I visited the September 11 Memorial in New York and looked at all the names engraved around those two solemn recessed pools in the footprints of the two towers. I didn’t really recognize the names, although I was aware each one represented a life with value and with loved ones; each name represented a tragedy. But then I came to a name I recognized because his story has been so widely publicized—Todd Beamer. He was on United Flight 93 when it was hijacked by the terrorists. When he realized what was happening up in the sky over Pennsylvania that day, he reached for the air-phone on the back of the seat. He got an operator and told her what was going on. He then asked if she would pray the Lord’s Prayer with him, and there in the seat of that doomed jetliner, he spoke the words, “Our Father, who art in heaven....” Todd was a dedicated Christian, and after finishing the Lord’s Prayer he went on to add a specific prayer request for the Lord Jesus to help him. He then gave the operator his wife’s name and phone number and asked her to call her, to tell her he loved her. Then he left the phone dangling in the seat and famously said to others near him, “Let’s roll.” The operator stayed on the line for ten more minutes before the flight went down. But Todd and his fellow passengers saved our nation from an additional unimaginable disaster.

I’ve come to realize that the Lord’s Prayer is always available, always appropriate, and always accessible to guide us in our daily prayers. It’s a palace we can inhabit right now; it’s a prayer we can take with us from childhood to old age, from the cradle to the grave.

Thank God no power on earth or under the earth can ever rob us of the simple words that mean so much to us in all the vacillating moments of life:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your Name.

Your kingdom come; Your will be done,
One earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory
Forever.
Amen.

Endnotes

1 The gist of this story comes from Kay Campbell, Religion News Service, in an article on September 11, 2012, at www.religionnews.com/2012/09/11/how-the-lords-prayer-saved-a-9-11-survivor/.

Also see www.theredstonerocket.com/around_town/article_504d1926-1ae2-11e3-a939-0019bb2963f4.html; and http://www.thealabamabaptist.org/print-editionarticle-detail.php?id_art=29017&pricat_art=1.

2 John S. Hart, *The Golden Censer: Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1864), 6.

3 <http://stsophia.net/our-church/orthodox-prayers/>

4 <http://www.orthodoxwriter.com/2010/12/lords-prayer-orthodox.html>

When We Pray Matthew 6:5-13

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
For yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.
Matthew 6:5-13

I sometimes wonder -- don't you? -- who is smarter, human beings or animals. A tiny spider, for example, smaller than the end of my little finger, knows enough to design and build a web of silk as tough and perfect, proportionally speaking, as the Golden Gate Bridge. Yet it never attended college or studied mathematics or engineering. A loathsome bat in a darkened cave has a more advanced radar system than our most modern military technology. A humble bird can fly from Tennessee to Brazil and back each year, from nest to nest, needing neither maps nor charts nor sophisticated guidance systems. Animals have an instinctive knowledge about things like that -- it comes to them naturally, automatically.

We're not so blessed. Very little comes to us automatically or instinctively or naturally. We have to learn to walk. We learn to talk. We learn to ride bicycles and say our alphabets and put together words into sentences. We learn to count and calculate, and we learn to cook meals and set the table properly.

Most of our behavior consists of things that must be taught us, things we must learn -- and this is true of prayer. While we may

instinctively feel a need for prayer, the actual process of praying doesn't come to us automatically. We need someone to teach us exactly how to do it. That's why the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

And that's why in this passage, Jesus gives us two very practical truths about prayer, both of them beginning with the words "When you pray..." And from those two truths, I'd like to give you eight suggestions about prayer.

A Presence To Enjoy

In Mt 6:5-6, Christ gives us a presence to enjoy. He tells us that prayer is primarily the act of meeting alone with our heavenly Father.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you...

Now, Jesus wasn't telling us that public prayers are wrong, for there are many wonderful public prayers in the Bible. But he was warning us against the practice of some of the Jewish religious leaders. They enjoyed quoting great and elaborate prayers in public - at the synagogues and on the street corners -- but privately they didn't really connect with God at all. There was no sense of his presence, no sincerity in their hearts.

Jesus said that such prayers are a waste of time. When we pray, we shouldn't worry about how we sound before other people; we should recognize only the presence of our heavenly Father. And the very best way to do that is to be alone with him. So find an empty room, go into it, close the door, and talk to your heavenly Father.

For the last couple of weeks, I've quoted a series of verses in the Bible about drawing near to God. For example, James 4 says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." But how do we draw near to God? Deuteronomy 4:7 tells us: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"

Prayer is the act by which we draw near to God. Through the years, I've collected wise and pithy quotations about prayer, like:

Prayer is the key to the morning and the bolt of the evening

A day hemmed in prayer is less likely to come unraveled.

Daniel would rather spend a night with the lions than miss a day of prayer.

(Editorial Note: See Prayer Quotes)

But the best thing I've ever read about prayer came from the pen of Andrew Murray who said, "The chief purpose of prayer is to recognize the presence of the heavenly Father."

Charles Finney said the same thing with different words: "Prayer bathes the soul in an atmosphere of the divine presence." So with all that in mind, let me offer four suggestions:

Suggestion #1: Have a quiet place and go there every day.

Perhaps there's a spare room in your house. Perhaps in the basement. Perhaps a secluded spot in the yard or a near-by park. Maybe at the kitchen table early in the morning before anyone else is up. Perhaps in your office with a do-not-disturb sign on the door. Perhaps in your car.

Jesus didn't have a house of his own during his earthly ministry. He stayed with Peter's family when he was in Galilee, and with friends like Lazarus when he was in Jerusalem. But every day, early in the morning, he'd leave and walk to a secluded spot to pray. In Galilee, he hiked into the mountains above the Sea of Galilee. In Jerusalem, he'd go to a private garden on the western slope of the Mount of Olives.

Daniel had an upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. He went there three times a day, got down on his knees, and prayed.

In the book of Acts, we're told that Peter went up on the flat rooftop and there found a quiet place of seclusion to pray.

Suggestion #2: Maintain an alert posture.

People in the Bible assumed many different postures when they prayed. Sometimes they knelt. Sometimes they fell facedown on the ground. Sometimes they were standing or walking. Sometimes their faces were turned toward heaven.

But fatigue is a great enemy to prayer, and if we just try to say a prayer at night after we go to bed, or in the morning before arising,

we aren't going to be alert enough to really put our heart into it. The disciples snoozed in the Garden of Gethsemane when they should have been praying. So sit up straight, or kneel, or pace back and forth across the floor; keep an alert posture.

Suggestion #3: When you get to your private spot and assume an alert posture, spend a few moments thinking about the fact that you're drawing near to God's very presence.

Don't primarily think about your prayer list or the things you need to ask for. Think about the fact that the next few minutes will be spent in fellowship and conversation with your heavenly Father. As Brother Lawrence used to say, "Practice the presence of God."

Suggestion #4: Pray out loud, even if it's just in a whispered voice.

Very few of the prayers in the Bible were silent prayers. Hannah prayed silently in 1 Samuel, but even then her lips formed the words she said.

Now let's go on with the passage. We've found a quiet spot, established a pattern of going there every day, positioned ourselves alertly, and have reminded ourselves that we're drawing near to God's presence. Now we're going to open our mouths and pray, but what words should we say? What should we talk about with God?

Well, verses 5 and 6 give us a presence to enjoy in prayer. Mt 6:7-13 give us a pattern to employ.

A Pattern To Employ

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
For yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.

Jesus doesn't mean for us to just pray these sixty-five words over and over, day after day. But in these sixty-five words is a pattern to guide us in our daily prayer.

First, we begin with praise and worship: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

The word hallowed (hagiazo) means holy, sacred. And the form of these words is like an exclamation -- How holy! How sacred is your name! Begin your prayer with exclamations of praise and adoration. Now, there are several ways of doing this. Sometimes you can begin your prayer by reading one of the Psalms, like Psalm 146 that begins: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

Or you might begin your prayer time with a hymn, like A Mighty Fortress is our God A bulwark never failing. / Our helper He amid the flood / Of mortal ills prevailing./

Or you might just begin your prayer by counting your blessings and thanking God for all that He has done for you during the past twenty-four hours.

Now, the next logical thing -- having worshipped God's greatness and glory and goodness -- is to express your submission and total availability to his will: Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

It's interesting to me that Jesus uttered these words both at the beginning and at the end of his ministry on earth. Here at the beginning of his ministry in his inaugural sermon he told us to pray, "Thy will be done..." And at the end of his ministry, as he was praying earnestly in the Garden, he said, "Not my will but your will be done..."

What a wonderful habit to daily rededicate yourself to Christ in prayer. Lord, in my life today may your will be done even as the angels perform your bidding in heaven.

Then what? Then we bring our needs to God. What do we need? We need provision, pardon, and protection.

We need provision -- our financial and material needs supplied. Give us today our daily bread.

We need pardon -- forgiveness of sins we may have committed: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

We need protection from temptation and trouble: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

And after we have praised the Lord, and rededicated ourselves to his will, and asked him to meet our needs for provision, pardon, and protection... after all that, what do we do? We end our prayer as we began it -- in worship.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Now, based on all this let me give you three more suggestions.

Suggestion #5: Use this sequence as a guide for your daily prayer time:

Praise, Submission, Needs, Praise. Begin and end your prayer time with praise and worship and thanksgiving. In between ask God for his will to be accomplished in your life for that day, and ask him for your needs.

Suggestion #6: Talk to God naturally, just as you would talk to a friend.

You don't have to use fancy language of the king's English. The Lord's prayer is made up of sixty-five words. Of those sixty-five words, forty-five of them are one-syllable words; sixteen of them have two syllables; and the other four -- forgiven, deliver, temptation, and forever -- are three syllable words. You don't have to use fancy language. Just speak honestly, as though you were talking to Jesus face to face.

Suggestion #7: You may want to keep a prayer and praise list.

Many Christians keep a small notebook near at hand, and they jot down their praise items and keep a record of their prayer requests. Sometimes it's a good idea to write your prayer out in letter form and read it to the Lord. The Psalmist evidently did that, and his collected, written prayers make up the largest of all the books in the Bible.

Suggestion #8: To establish it as a habit, choose the same time and place every day.

You may begin with a five-minute or ten-minute prayer time, for you might want to devote a longer amount of time to Bible reading and prayer each day. Whatever the length, work on making it a habit. Someone said, "A bad habit takes 21 days to break; a good habit takes 21 days to make." So keep at it.

Jesus said in the very next chapter:

"Keep on asking, and the gift will be given you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will open to you. For everyone who keeps on asking, receives, and everyone who keeps on seeking, finds, and to the one who keeps on knocking the door will open. What human father among you, when his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a snake? So if you, in spite of your being bad, know how to give your children what is good, how much more surely will your heavenly Father give what is good to those who keep on asking him?" (Williams). (Matthew 7:7-11)

PROMISES

MATTHEW 6:33 ROMANS 8:28

Today we're beginning a new series of sermons entitled "Promises" on the Precious Promises in the Bible. This is a part of our ongoing ten² Project of Scripture memory, and the promises of God are essential memory verses for healthy Christians. They are tightly-wrapped, power-packed, portable capsules of Scripture, prescribed by God Himself and designed to meet specific needs in our lives at specific times and in ways that correspond perfectly to His all-sufficient grace. Today we're beginning with two of the most beloved promises in the Bible—Matthew 6:33 and Romans 8:28:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him.

The famous Christian, George Müller, once said, “Many times when I could have gone insane from worry, I was at peace because my soul believed the truth of God’s promises.” The promises of God are the biblical antidote to anxiety and worry. And we need them now more than ever, because we’re living in very anxious times. Through the years, I’ve collected some definitions about worry. I’m an anxious person by nature, but I find that I can deal with worry a little better if I understand what it is and how it’s defined.

- The best definition of worry that I’ve ever found is this one: Worry is a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.
- In his book, *In the Arena*, President Nixon quoted Winston Churchill as saying: Worry is an emotional spasm which occurs when the mind catches hold of something and will not let it go.” (Quoted by Richard Nixon in *In the Arena*, p. 163.)
- Once on a church sign I saw these words: Worry is the darkroom where negatives are developed.
- George Washington reportedly said: Worry is the interest paid by those who borrow trouble.
- Someone else said: Worry is today’s mice nibbling on tomorrow’s cheese.
- Someone else put it very well when he said: Worry is a complete cycle of inefficient thought revolving around a pivot of fear.
- And the great American doctor, Charles Mayo, said that worry is the disease of doubt. He said it affects the circulation, the heart, the glands, the whole nervous system. I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who have died from doubt.

Well today I want to show you what the Bible says about worry and anxiety in Matthew 6 and Romans 8. Matthew 6 is the middle portion of our Lord’s great Sermon on the Mount, and here, in His very first sermon, Jesus tackles the subject of worry. We read this passage earlier in the service, but let’s review it along these lines.

1. Worry Indicates a Defective Value System

Matthew 6:19-25

The first thing Jesus tells us is that worry indicates a defective value system. It indicates we may be suffering from a false set of values, that we’re more preoccupied with our temporary problems than we are with God’s eternal promises; or even more serious: that we’re more concerned about our money than we are about our Master. Let’s start reading in Matthew 6:19:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also....No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

In other words, life is more important than physical things. We obviously need food and clothing and shelter; God knows that. But life is much more than those things. As Jesus said elsewhere, “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” There are more important issues than the food we eat, the beverages we drink, the clothes we wear, the houses in which we inhabit, the sports we play, and the entertainment we enjoy. There is a walk with God—a relationship with the Almighty—that we need to think about. There’s the redeeming work of Christ in our lives. There are the purposes for which He made us, and the eternal home He is preparing for us. There’s the Word of God in our hands that offers promises for all the days and ways of life.

Anxiety indicates that we are letting our temporary problems become more real to us than our eternal blessings.

2. Worry Indicates a Defective Self Image

Matthew 6:26

Second, worry indicates that we have a defective self-image. It’s a signal to us that we are underestimating how valuable we are to God. Look at the next verse, Matthew 6:26: Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

I’ve been noticing this spring how many birds there are in my lawn and yard and trees. We have starlings, of course, but I’ve seen redbirds, cardinals, doves, robins, and mockingbirds. I read the other day that experts estimate that there are somewhere between 200 billion and 400 billion birds in the air. And every one is an ordained minister, a preacher, praising the Lord in song, showing us how wonderfully God cares for His creation. On several occasions, Jesus told us to notice how God provides food for the birds of the air and to remember that we are more valuable than many birds.

Notice those words in Matthew 6:26:

Are you not much more valuable....

He is telling us: You are valuable! You are very valuable. You are more valuable.

We are valuable to God, more valuable than anything else He has made. And when we realize that we have a God who loves and values us—and that we are worth something to Him, everything to Him—than it reduces our anxiety. If we're that valuable to Him, we can rest assured He cares for us.

3. Worry Indicates a Defective Way of Thinking

Matthew 6:27

Third, anxiety indicates a faulty way of thinking. Look at the next verse—Matthew 6:27: Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

Now, let me work through this verse a little. Some of you may have translations that say, "Which of you by worrying can add a single inch to his height?" Others say, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" The New Testament was written in Greek, and what this says, literally, in the original is: Which of you can add any length to himself or herself."

The Greek word might be translated as "cubit" or as "hour." Both are plausible. Jesus was saying: Which of you by worrying can add any length to himself—length to his lifespan or length to his height. In other words, we can worry all we want to, but anxiety doesn't do any good. It's a waste of mental energy. It doesn't add one hour to our lives or one cubit to our height. It's a defective and inefficient way of thinking.

4. Worry Indicates a Defective Trust in God

Matthew 6:28-30

Forth, worry indicates a defective trust in God. Let's keep reading:

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Jesus was always measuring people's faith. He'd look at one person and marvel, saying, "I haven't seen such great faith in all of Israel. That person really trusts Me." Then He'd see His own disciples in a panicked state, and He would say, "Where is your faith? Why don't you trust Me, O you of little faith." Faith in the ability to maintain inner calmness and strength by trusting in the promises of God amid the problems of life. Jesus illustrates this with the flowers. Earlier He had talked about the birds, and now He references the flowers.

Botanists estimate that there are over a quarter-million species of flowering plants, but no one can number the flowers that decorate and dot the planet at any given moment. There are untold billions of them—some of them in your yards or patios or flower pots. Every flower is an ordained preacher, telling us how creatively and effortlessly God can provide clothing. One of the reasons God created birds and flowers is as a testimony, showing us how wonderfully He can care His creation, including (and especially) us!

We might even say that the greatest testimonies we have of the love of God are: Birds, Bulbs, and Bibles—and, of course, the Blood of the Lamb. If God so cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, will He not much more care for us? Therefore we shouldn't be of little faith but of great confidence.

5. Worry Indicates a Defective Purpose in Life

Matthew 6:31-33

Fifth, worry and anxiety indicates a defective purpose in life. Look at the series of statements Jesus makes in Mt 6:31-33:

So do not worry saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

In other words, if we take care of the things that are important to God, He will take care of the things that are important to us. I think a lot of people read Matthew 6:33 in reverse. They say: I'm going to try to add all these other things to my life, and then with my leftover time and energy, I'll seek the Lord. But it never works that way. You have to put Jesus Christ first in your life. If you put Christ first, He'll worry about all the rest of it. If you don't put Him first, you have to worry about all the rest of it.

One of my favorite stories about this passage involves a man named Richard Greene of Cary, North Carolina, who was a student in college. One day he was fretting over bills, trying to balance his checkbook. He grew agitated and afraid. "Where will the extra money come from?" he asked aloud. "Please, Lord, help me pay these bills." As he finished balancing his checkbook, he noticed the final digits on his pocket calculator—6.33. He had six dollars, thirty-three cents left. Suddenly he remembered Matthew 6:33. He laughed, and took it as a message from the Lord. (Adapted from Richard S. Greene, "Where Will the Money Come From?" in Decision Magazine, May, 1997, pp. 32–33.)

It's a message for all of us: Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

6. Worry Indicates a Defective View of Tomorrow

Matthew 6:34

But there's one last verse to this chapter. Matthew 6:34 tells us that worry indicates a defective view of tomorrow:

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

In other words, Jesus specifically tells us here to deal with today's issues and don't worry about tomorrow's. Many years ago, the great motivational speaker, Dale Carnegie, wrote a book entitled *How To Stop Worrying and Start Living*. It's been in print ever since and has sold millions of copies. The very first chapter is entitled, "Live in Day-Tight Compartments."

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't prepare for tomorrow. But it does mean that the best way of preparing for tomorrow is by handling today's work with enthusiasm, wisdom, faith, and obedience.

The Psalmist said, "This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it."

Jesus said, "Give us this day our daily bread."

We can't change the past; it's under the precious blood of Jesus Christ. We can't know the future; it's in the capable hands of God. We live day by day, moment by moment, and step by step.

Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.

7. Worry Indicates a Defective Memory

Romans 8:28

Finally, worry indicates a defective memory. It indicates that we have completely forgotten about one other verse with which I want to end this message—Romans 8:28. This is perhaps the most all-inclusive and over-arching promise in the Bible. It adds a postscript to what Jesus said in Matthew 6. Romans 8:28 tells us that worry indicates a defective recollection of God's providential care.

For we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to His purpose.

How does the worrier quote this verse? The worrier says: For we have forgotten that all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

The worrier has a defective memory. A couple of years ago, I wrote a book about this verse. It's called *The Promise*, and a woman wrote to me afterward, telling me about her mother, who is battling Alzheimer's. She said, "My mom's favorite Bible verse is Romans 8:28. She can't remember to take a bath or make toast now, but she can still quote that verse of Scripture."

Romans 8:28 is a powerful verse when it sinks its roots down into our hearts and minds, and it covers not only the great disasters and setbacks that we face, but even the daily stresses and strains of life. Like a broken-down vehicle.

Recently I read with great interest a book about spiritual revivals that have occurred in the past, especially during those wonderful days when the fire of God fell on Scotland. One of the chapters told of a preacher's kid named John Livingstone, who was born in 1603. He grew up to know and to love the Lord Jesus, and he decided to become a physician. But one day while he was by himself near a cave near the Mouse Water River, God spoke to him about going into the ministry. After studying at Glasgow College, John Livingstone began preaching, and his message was so evangelistic and so evangelical that the bishop and the church leaders in Scotland wouldn't give him the freedom to preach as he desired. This was during the day of the staid and somber state church. Preaching with evangelistic passion and evangelical truth was frowned upon. And so John Livingstone found the churches closed to his ministry and message.

Meanwhile there was a group of women, very wealthy and influential Christian women, who were traveling one day by carriage. They had been praying for revival. As they came to the little town of Shotts, Scotland, which is midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, their vehicle broke down. The accident just happened to take place beside the parsonage where the town pastor lived. His name was Rev. Hance. He invited them into his house and provided hospitality for them until their carriage was repaired.

These women were appalled at the parsonage. It was poverty-stricken and dilapidated. And after their return home, they decided to undertake their own capital stewardship campaign, and they provided enough money to buy a new piece of land and build a new parsonage for the church.

Well, the pastor was overwhelmed, and he traveled to see the women to thank them with all his heart. He asked if there was anything he could do to express his gratitude.

Well, yes, as a matter of fact, there is, he was told. There's a young man who needs some places to preach. His name is John Livingstone. Do you think he could preach in your church in the little town of Shotts. Of course, he said yes and they set the date—June 20, 1630. Everyone turned out and it was a tremendous service as the inhabitants of that part of Scotland heard the Gospel preached in plain, clear terms. They asked the young man if he would stay and preach the next day, too, and he agreed.

Something was stirring among the people, and many of them felt too excited to sleep that night. Some of them formed little bands of prayer warriors and prayed through the night. Livingstone himself was overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy, and his friends gathered around him to encourage him.

The next day, June 21, 1630, John Livingstone stood in the Courtyard in Shotts and preached from the book of Ezekiel, chapter 36, about having a new heart and a new spirit; and for an hour and a half, as he preached, not a person moved. They seemed rooted to the ground in great stillness. Five hundred people were converted that day, men and women, from every rank of society, from the wealthy to the beggarly, and a revival began that day that spread throughout Scotland.

And what was the occasion? Some ladies were traveling through a little town and their vehicle broke down. But it was no accident, for there are no accidents in the pathway of the Christian. Their vehicle "just happened" to break down in front of the parsonage of a man who held the key to the location where revival could begin. God used a broken carriage to trigger a chain of circumstances leading to the great Scottish Revival of 1630. (John Shearer, *Old Time Revivals: How the Fire of God Spread in Days Now Past and Gone* (Hagerstown, MD: Christian Heritage Publishing, 2008), chapter 2.)

Not long ago I preached in another church on Romans 8:28. A man came up to me afterward and told me about an event that had happened in his own life. He called it the worst single day of his entire life. This man was suddenly faced out of nowhere with a great threat that could have wrecked his life. It had to do with tax problems and legal issues and agents from the justice department. The situation looked very dire, but this man committed it to the Lord in simple faith and dealt with it as best he could day by day.

Within three years, he told me, through an odd set of circumstances, that very set of circumstances had turned around and resulted in this man making literally hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"So, you see," he said to me, "it's impossible to evaluate an event when it occurs. It might seem like a very good thing, but only time will tell if it's good or bad. It might seem like a tragedy, but time may prove it to be a great blessing."

Well, worry is an indication that we have forgotten all about Romans 8:28. Worry is forgetting that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord and who are called according to His purposes.

Worry indicates a defective value system, a defective self-image, a defective way of thinking, a defective trust in God, a defective purpose in life, a defective view of tomorrow, and a defective memory. We're all prone to worry about ALL THESE THINGS.

But the Bible says:

Your Heavenly Father knows that you need ALL THESE THINGS. But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and ALL THESE THINGS will be given to you as well.

And ALL THESE THINGS will work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His righteousness.

Consider The Lilies
Matthew 6:19-34

We've begun a series of messages entitled Reducing Your Stress By Renewing Your Strength, a series designed to investigate some of the chief passages in the Bible relating to the strength, peace, and inner calmness that Christians are to cultivate. In such a series as this, it doesn't take very long to bump into the subject of our personal finances, because much of our stress is related to money issues. People often find themselves under financial pressure through no fault of their own. Sometimes we do the very best we can to handle our money and to provide for our families, only to find the breaks going against us. We lose a job, or we face an illness, or our car blows a transmission.

At other times, our financial problems may be brought on by mismanagement. Last year in America, over 2 billion unsolicited approved credit card applications were sent out from one end of the country to the other, most of these cards charging between 18 and 22 percent on accrued balances. So we rack up the balances on our credit cards and when they get too high we get consolidation loans; but even after we've consolidated our debt, we tend to keep using our credit cards at the same rate. Then what? We get home equity loans and bet our very houses on our dubious abilities to manage our credit cards.

In any event, financial stress can just break us down us emotionally. Nothing can get us down more than checkbook problems. Married couples tend to fight about money more than about any other single thing. It can be very stressful... so stressful, in fact, that Jesus Christ chose to address this issue in his very first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount.

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

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothes you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:19-34)

Notice this reoccurring thought:

- Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life... — Matthew 6:25
- Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? — Matthew 6:27
- And why do you worry about clothes? — Matthew 6:28
- So do not worry... — Matthew 6:31
- Therefore do not worry... — Matthew 6:34

Five times Jesus tells us we should not worry about the material things of life--food and clothing and shelter. He is saying that these issues should not be a source of stress to us, that we should not waste one minute worrying about them. That is such a departure from the way in which we live that it raises a question. Is Jesus serious? Does he know what he is talking about?

Well, yes. He is seriously commanding us to adopt a radically different approach to money and finances than the "pagans" around us. One of the things that sets Christ's disciples apart is their whole perspective regarding the material affairs of life. Once we adopt our Lord's approach and get it working in our lives, it dramatically reduces the stress levels we feel regarding finances. First, he tells us that our primary investments are eternal.

Our Primary Investments Are Eternal

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in

and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

When we study the Bible, we must compare Scripture to Scripture; and by comparing this passage to other passages we know that Jesus is not forbidding us from having savings accounts or from making prudent provisions for the future.

What he is saying instead is that our primary focus should be on living so simply and so inexpensively that we are able to invest much of our income in those things which will result in men, women, boys, and girls gaining eternal life. When I have an extra hundred dollars and I spend it on some new item that I would like to enjoy, it will serve me for a few months or for a few years. I may relish it for awhile, and I might even brag about it and show it to others. But sooner or later, it will become obsolete and end up in the trash. But when I invest that hundred dollars in the Lord's work, some of it will go to pay the bills at a church that is trying to bring people to Christ. Some of it will be used for Sunday School literature for a new generation of children. Some of it help send a youth minister into the high schools of our area, seeking students for Christ. Some of it will be used to help finance a summer camping program in which children and teens will be saved. Some of it will beam the Gospel by short-wave radio into the People's Republic of China. Some of it will provide food in Jesus name for starving millions in Bangladesh. Some of it will support a church-planting effort in Brazil. That hundred dollars will be transmuted into souls saved into God's eternal kingdom.

When I get to heaven, which of those investments is going to matter to me?

Jesus went on in this passage to put it even more bluntly. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. These words are a little difficult to interpret, but the context here helps us determine what Jesus meant. The verses before this and the verses after this are devoted to materialism, to money. The eye is that part of us that sees the possessions of life. The Bible talks about "the lust of the eyes." I believe that Jesus is saying, "If your eyes are fixed on materialism, on the acquisition and accumulation of things so much that you invest little or nothing in the Lord's work, how great is the darkness. But if your vision is on missions, on international evangelism, on local church growth, on supporting those things that bring people into the kingdom—how great is the light that floods into your whole life." So to sum it up, this passage is teaching, "One of the ways to best reduce financial stress in your life is not to become overly enamored with accumulating a lot of possessions. Make up your mind to downscale your life. Live so simply and modestly that you can invest heavily in those things that are going to bear eternal rewards. Your primary investments are eternal.

Our Primary Blessings Are Spiritual

Second, not only are our primary investments to be eternal, but our primary blessings are to be spiritual.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

In other words, when money is your master and your focus in life is external, then you are living a life in which your primary blessings are temporal, physical, fleeting, and ultimately unsatisfying. But when Christ is your master, you realize that the best things in life are spiritual. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses.

One day I would like to prepare a series of sermons entitled "Richer Than Money, Sweeter Than Honey," on those blessings which the Bible says are beyond price.

- The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold—Psalm 119:72
- (Wisdom) cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed in silver—Job 28:17
- Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies—Proverbs 8:10-11
- Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred—Proverbs 15:17
- A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold—Proverbs 22:1

Our inner lives are more important than our outer ones, because the outer man perishes, but the inner man is being renewed day by day.

Our Primary Care-Giver Is The Lord

Third, Jesus is telling us to relax about the material needs of life because our primary care-giver is the Lord. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who by his worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how

God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Several years ago in an old bookshop in Naperville, Illinois, I found a book entitled *We Thought We Heard The Angels Sing*, written by Lieutenant James Whittaker who was one of seven men whose plane crashed into the Pacific Ocean on October 21, 1942. Their leader was the famous Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, and these seven men found themselves stranded on three rafts with no water and only four oranges. Tying their boats together, they drifted day after day without food or water, sometimes delirious, tortured by the relentless sun, and constantly encircled by the triangular dorsal fins of sharks. It seemed impossible for them to survive, but one of the men, Private Johnny Bartek, was a dedicated Christian who always carried a little New Testament with him so that he could have his daily devotions. It was a pocket-sized, khaki-bound Testament with a zipper arrangement that made it waterproof.

Even there, in the middle of the heartless Pacific, Bartek had his devotions; but it wasn't very private and immediately the other six men wanted to know what he was doing. When he explained to them about his daily Bible reading and prayer, they asked him why they couldn't all share in that. And so the men started having their daily devotions and they started at the beginning of the book, in the Gospel of Matthew. Soon, of course, they came to this very passage, to 6:31-34. It immediately became their hope, inspiration, and prayer: What shall we eat? What shall we drink? —Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

As the men read those verses day after day, a remarkable series of miracles started happening. Provision arrived in the nick of time, often in bizarre ways. Just when they were near starvation, for example, a bird would inexplicably land on Rickenbacker's head and they would grab it, carve it up for food, and use its innards for fishing bait. Just when they were near death by thirst, a cloud would drift over and fill their raft with water. Day after day as they read these verses, prayed, and claimed these promises, God would somehow send food and water, sometimes even a fish jumping into their raft.

For 21 never-to-be-forgotten days they drifted under the blazing sun in the middle of the vast Pacific. Through that experience, Lieutenant James Whittaker, for one, the author of the book, gave his life to Jesus Christ. "I don't think there was a man of us who didn't thank God for that little khaki covered book," he said. "It led us to prayer and prayer led us to safety."

I know that some of you are having serious financial struggles right now; and I know that in some cases it is due to circumstances beyond your control. But the Psalmist has said, "I have been young and now I am old, and I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread." Paul said, "My God shall supply all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." If he feeds the birds and clothes the lilies of the field, he will surely take care of you.

Our Primary Pursuit Is The Kingdom

But finally, in this passage Jesus tells us that financial peace comes when we realize that our primary pursuit is the Kingdom. Matthew 6:31-33 says:

So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Some people seem to read this verse backward, as though spiritually dyslectic: "Add all these things to your life, and if you have any leftover time, seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness." But blessed are those who read it as Jesus intended. As one missionary put it, "If you take care of the things that are important to God, He will take care of the things that are important to you." Richard Greene of Cary, North Carolina learned this lesson while in college. He was fretting over bills one day, trying to balance his checkbook. He grew agitated and afraid. "Where will the extra money come from?" he asked aloud. "Please, Lord, help me pay these bills." As he finished balancing his checkbook, he noticed the final digits on his pocket calculator—6.33. He had six dollars, thirty-three cents left. Suddenly he remembered a verse he had just discovered: Matthew 6:33. He laughed, and took it as a message from the Lord. Shortly afterward, he received an unexpected scholarship. A little later a friend handed him a check for his month's rent. God provided his needs throughout college, and today Richard is director of public relations for Trans World Radio, beaming the message of Scripture around the world.

In this passage Jesus isn't just offering us a few platitudes, nor is he just giving us a little pat on the hand when our spirits are down. He is offering us a way of looking at the stuff of life, the materialism, the money, the financial affairs of life in a way that is radically different from the perspective of the pagan world. He tells us five times not to worry about money. Instead, he said, remember that for the Christian...

- Our primary investments are eternal
- Our primary blessings are spiritual
- Our primary Care-giver is the Lord
- Our primary pursuit is the Kingdom

So you take care of the things that are important to God, and he will take care of the things that are important to you. Begin today. Begin this week to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness—and all these other things will be added to you.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TOLERANCE

Matthew 7:1

Today we're nearing an end to this series of messages entitled, "What's Wrong With...?" in which we have tried to analyze certain issues and elements of our popular culture from the perspective of the Bible. We'll finish our series next week with a message entitled "What's Wrong with Success?" This morning's topic is "What's Wrong with Tolerance?" I'd like to begin by describing three different situations that have been in the news recently.

Case 1: Not long ago, a dean at Stanford University began to pressure evangelical Christian groups on campus to stop sharing their faith and evangelizing other students--"proselytizing" as he called it. What angered the dean was not the content of the Gospel message, but the practice of sharing it. He believes that in approaching someone with the Gospel, you are implying that the person's beliefs are inferior to your own, and such an implication, he says, is self-righteous, biased, bigoted, and intolerant.

Case 2: Graduate student Jerome Pinn checked into his dormitory room at the University of Michigan to discover that the walls of his new room were covered with posters of nude men and that his new roommate was an active homosexual who expected to have partners in the room. Penn approached the Michigan housing office requesting to be transferred to another room. Penn later reported what happened: "They were outraged by this (request). They asked me what was wrong with me--what my problem was. I said I had a religious and moral objection to homosexual conduct. They were surprised; they couldn't believe it. Finally they assigned me to another room, but they warned me that if I told anyone of the reason, I would face university charges of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation." They viewed Jerome as self-righteous, biased, bigoted, and intolerant.

Case 3: Recently the Southern Baptist Convention published a series of pamphlets on how to win Jews to Jesus Christ, how to witness to Muslims, how to witness to Hindus, and so forth. The media got wind of it, and you would have thought that the Baptists had advocated dropping nuclear bombs on those groups of people. How dare Christians target other ethnic or religious groups, screamed the headlines. What makes them think their beliefs are superior to anyone else's? They are self-righteous, biased, bigoted and intolerant.

Christians today, especially evangelical Christians, are finding themselves on the defensive over the tolerance issue. So today's question is "What's wrong with tolerance?"

I have two answers. The first is: Nothing! Nothing is wrong with tolerance if, by tolerance, you mean loving people and respecting their opinions. I may not agree with a Communist or a Muslim or even another member of my own denomination or my family. But I love them and respect their right to their opinion. I don't agree with my staff all the time. I don't agree with my wife all the time. But I love all these people and I respect their right to have their opinion.

As Christians, we don't seek to force our opinions on others. It was Christians, after all, who worked the hardest to insure Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Religion in our early national history.

But that isn't what many people mean anymore when they use the word "tolerance." A funny thing has happened to this word. It used to mean being patient with other people, recognizing and respecting their beliefs. But in the last few years the cultural pundits have forged a new meaning. Tolerance is not longer viewed as recognizing and respecting the beliefs of others. It means considering everyone's beliefs as being equally valid.

James Dobson put it this way in a recent newsletter: Because our nation is composed of people from widely diverse cultural and ethnic groups, each having its own unique value system or ethical code, we must conclude that there is no such thing as "truth" or moral certitude. In the final analysis, "anything goes." Somehow, the existence of many different standards proves that there is no standard. For obvious reasons, amoralists and atheists are attracted to that position and promote it with vigor. Nothing, they say, is really right or wrong. What is true depends entirely on one's point of view. The highest form of good, therefore, is tolerance to anything and everything except traditional Christianity, which is the chief source of what they call "intolerance."

Judge Not?

The apostle Peter warned that in the last days there would be ignorant and unstable people who take the words of Scripture and twist them, distort them, to their own destruction. And along the lines of our topic today, there is one verse of Scripture more than any other that is being twisted by ignorant and unstable people. It's from the sermon on the Mount, and it is Matthew 7:1:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Recently People Magazine was interviewing a well-known actor who was defending the moral indiscretions of our President. "Why should we be upset over such a thing?" asked the actor. "We're all sinners, and it just shows that President Clinton is just like the rest of us. The Bible says, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'"

Whenever Christians warn against or condemn a particular sinful tendency in our society, someone is liable to throw this verse back in our face. But such use represents a twisting and distorting of this passage.

What did Jesus mean when He said, "Judge not that ye be not judged"? I want to say two things about it. First, He obviously was not forbidding us from making moral evaluations about things. That's the way the world wants to interpret this verse. Do not judge. Do not make moral evaluations. Do not condemn anything. But we know that isn't what Jesus is commanding here, for all the way through the Gospels He tells us that we must continually and constantly be making moral judgements about both issues and people.

Just look down at Matthew 7:13. He says: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them."

If we interpreted Matthew 7:1 the way the world wants us to interpret it, we couldn't obey Matthew 7:13 the way Jesus expects us to obey it. In order to obey Matthew 7:13, we have to look at another person and do a moral and spiritual analysis. It involves a certain kind of judgment on our part if we are to conclude a person to be true or false. Jesus told us to beware the Pharisees and hypocrites. How can we obey that without exercising some kind of judgement.

What, then, did Jesus mean by His words in verse 1? Well, the number one rule of good Bible study is that you study a verse in its context. So let's read the entire paragraph and see if we can locate our Lord's emphasis:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Some people go around with a judgmental, critical, fault-finding attitude, always being negative, always carping about things, always being aware of minor problems in the lives of others while oblivious to the major fault they are demonstrating in their own attitude. Jesus said, "Don't be that way. You can make Spirit-led moral judgments, but never be unloving. You are never to despise others or regard them with contempt.

We are to make sound moral judgments, but we must be humble and loving in our attitudes as we do it. Nothing is more harmful to the cause of Christ in our society today than Christians who march around with a shrill voice using harsh language and condemning others with an angry, unkind attitude.

But having said that, I also want to say with equal vigor that, given the right attitude in their hearts, Christians are called upon to unashamedly confront the world, the flesh, and the devil with the truth of Jesus Christ and with the Word of God. As we do that, we're going to be persecuted. And in America at the present time, that persecution is going to be the sort that I referred to at the beginning of the message. We may be labeled as being self-righteous, biased, bigoted, and intolerant.

Two Objections

There are two things about our message that the world cannot stand and that the media will call intolerant. The first is our belief in moral absolutes. Christians believe that there is a Creator-God who is perfectly and infinitely good, morally good. And we believe that whatever does not conform to the goodness of God is evil. But our society no longer believes that. I read recently of a sociology textbook being used in America's public high school which contains this sentence: "Everything is right somewhere, and nothing is right everywhere." In other words, there are no absolute moral standards in the universe. Everything is relative.

A recent poll estimated that 72% of Americans between the ages of 18-25 do not believe in absolute truth or in moral absolutes. Daniel Taylor, a professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, put it this way: "(Relativism) takes the clearly observable fact that we have a multitude of views and values and practices in the world--pluralism--and draws the illegitimate conclusion that there is no justifiable way of choosing among them. Truth is merely opinion, goodness only what the majority says it is."

So when Christians say, either publicly or privately, that certain things are wrong, what happens? Something akin to what is happening right now to the Boy Scouts. We are censured as being self-righteous, biased, bigoted, and intolerant.

But we will not be silenced. Some things are truly wrong. And some things are truly right. There is a moral law in the universe, and

that moral law flows from the character of God Himself and is reflected in the teachings of the Bible.

The second Christian distinctive that produces cries of intolerance is the insistence that Christ is the only way of salvation. Some time ago, the Vatican announced a papal visit to India, and you should have heard the outcry. Hardline Hindu leaders demanded that the pope cancel his trip unless he was ready to publicly disavow Jesus as the only means of salvation.

Recently a young man named Scott Scruggs, a student at Stanford University, had a conversation with a friend about Christianity. The response was bombastic. "You're just being too closed-minded," said the man. "Jesus works for you, just like Buddha works for someone else. So if you want people to respect what you have to say, you need to be more tolerant of beliefs unlike your own." The pressure of that argument is causing some Christians to back away from the exclusiveness or exclusivity of the Christian message. Recently I read a quote in the Wall Street Journal. Rev. Bruce Robbins is the ecumenical staff leader for the United Methodist Church, and he was explaining that Methodists are encouraged to share their faith in the community in which they live. But, he said, we must be very careful about trying to target other groups for evangelism. He said, "We have to honor diversity. We believe that God's call through Jesus is universal and that other people know God through their religious traditions."

But the whole message of the Bible is that God loves us all. And, knowing that we are separated from Him by our sinfulness and moral failure, He Himself became a man to die in our place on the cross, so that by His shed blood we may be forgiven. And the Bible teaches: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Look on down from our text today, at the end of Matthew 7:13-14:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Jesus was so narrow-minded on this point, that he used the word narrow here to describe the one and only pathway to eternal life.

And later, in Matthew 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Apparently the Lord Jesus did not assume everyone was going to heaven carte blanche. This is one of the most frightening verses in the Bible to me, for it tells us that even many people who profess to be followers of Christ are self-deceived. It isn't a matter of outward profession, but inward faith and obedience, that saves us.

John 14:6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus said there are not many roads to the top of the mountain. He said, "I am the only pathway."

Romans 3:10ff says: There is no one righteous, no not one; there is none who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 3:11 says: For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. There is no other foundation for a holy or happy life. No other basis for an abundant or eternal life. Only Christ.

1 Timothy 2:5-6 says: For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men... How many mediators are there? How many who can forgive our sin and reconcile us to God? There is one-Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 2:3 says: How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

Neither Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Mohammed, nor any other founder of a religion ever claimed to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. They couldn't even pay for their own sins. They are still in their graves. Only Christ died and rose again for the sins of the world.

What would you think of someone who said this: "Mathematics can not possibly be true because it is too narrow-minded, too restrictive, and too dogmatic. It claims that two plus two equals four. Always four, and never three or five. It claims that its laws are universally true. It claims absolute precision. And I refuse to believe anything that is so dogmatic, narrow-minded, and exclusive. Therefore mathematics must be false."

David Hunt wrote, "Sincerity won't get astronauts to the moon, nor will it prevent arsenic from killing the person who ingested it by

mistake. Yoga won't even pay a traffic ticket. It makes no sense to set out from Los Angeles to New York without a map. What folly it would be to refuse to follow a map because maps are so restrictive, and to insist that any road in any direction will do! How much greater is the folly of insisting that any road sincerely followed will take one to heaven!"

On the other hand, this narrow, exclusive, blood-bought message can take a person's life and change it forever. This narrow, exclusive, blood-bought message can make bad people good, and good people better. This narrow, exclusive, blood-bought message is designed to fit perfectly into that vacuum in the middle of your heart. It is exclusive, but it's exclusively powerful.

Exclusively Powerful

The current issue of the Gideon Magazine contains one of the most interesting stories I've read. It was by a man named Bill Saye who wrote that he grew up very poor and in a very bad environment. When he was 13, he joined a neighborhood gang, and as a young man he became involved in organized crime. During the next 15 years he was shot twice, stabbed a number of times, and had six murder attempts made on his life. Two of his homes were burned completely to the ground. His daughter was nearly beaten to death, and his son was kidnapped. He became the head of a five-state prostitution ring and then the leader of a drug organization which developed into the largest of its type in the United States.

Finally he became so miserable that he tried to detach himself from the organization and get out of organized crime. But the mob stuck back and murdered his wife. Then Bill Saye himself was charged with murder and imprisoned.

But in prison he remembered that his mother and father, who were Christians, had been praying for him for over 40 years and one day he seemed to hear the voice of the Lord saying to him, "Son, you've had everything the world has to offer and look where it got you. Now, turn your life over to Me. I'll set you free." He took the Bible that had been placed in the prison and turned to the only verse he knew about--John 3:16 and read it, putting his name in the verse: For God so loved Bill Saye that He gave His only begotten Son, that if Bill Saye would believe in Him, he should not perish but have everlasting life.

From that moment, something wonderful happened inside of him. He began spending every spare moment reading and studying the Scripture. And today he is a free man in every sense of the word, and a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We're to be tolerant people in that we are called on to love others, to bear with them, to forgive easily, and to respect the rights of others to hold opinions different from our own. But we also know that the Bible teaches that there are moral absolutes that stream from the character of God Himself, and His Word teaches us that only Jesus Christ can save a man or woman from sin and give them eternal life. That message may not be politically correct, but it's true.

And it's a wonderful truth, and it's for you and me.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

What Amazes Christ

Matthew 7:28-29

I've found through the years that I often prepare sermons with myself in mind; that is, I'm often preaching to myself, with the audience just eavesdropping, as it were. That's going to be the case today. Even as I prepared this message, I kept saying to myself, "This message is for me." I just hope that it will also offer some encouragement for you as well, for I'd like to speak today about one word in the Bible, and that word is: Amazed. It occurs 31 times in the Gospels, and it usually describes the responses of the crowds to our Lord Jesus Christ. We've even incorporated it into our hymnology, saying:

I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me,
A sinner, condemned unclean.

And...

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saves a wretch like me.

Our Celebration Choir sometimes sing a soul-stirring anthem, the words of which say:

I stand amazed in all of His glory.

Well, that was true of the actual observers of His ministry in First Century Israel. It's almost funny to picture the crowds in Jesus' day. Everything He said left them slack-jawed and rubbing their eyes.

What Amazed The Crowds

They were amazed, first of all, at His teaching. Notice in Matthew 7 the response He received to His first sermon:

28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Imagine that kind of response from a person's first sermon. Most of us are amazed to even get through our first sermon. I remember reading about Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary statesman. He was called to be a missionary when he was eight years old. He saw a picture of a big tiger standing beside a small Indian boy, and underneath was the caption, "Who will tell me about Jesus?" And Stanley Jones said, "I will." But he was almost derailed a few years later when he stood to preach for the first time.

He said, "The little church was filled with my relatives and friends, all anxious that the young man should do well. I had prepared for three weeks, for I was to be God's lawyer and argue His case well. I started on rather a high key and after a half dozen sentences used a word I had never used before and I have never used since: indifferentism. Whereupon a college girl smiled and put down her head.

"Her smiling so upset me that when I came back to the thread of my discourse it was gone. My mind was an absolute blank. I stood there clutching for something to say. Finally I blurted out 'I am very sorry, but I have forgotten my sermon,' and I started for my seat in shame and confusion.

"As I was about to sit down, the Inner Voice said: 'Haven't I done anything for you? If so, couldn't you tell that?' I responded to this suggestion and stepped down in front of the pulpit—I felt I didn't belong behind it—and said, 'Friends, I see I can't preach, but you know what Christ has done for my life, how He has changed me, and though I cannot preach I shall be his witness the rest of my days.'

"At the close a youth came up to me and said he wanted what I had found. It was a mystery to me then, and it is a mystery to me now that, amid my failure that night, he still saw something he wanted. As he and I knelt together he found it. It marked a profound change in his life, and today he is a pastor, and his daughter is a missionary in Africa.

It's only a miracle of God that anyone is ever helped by our first sermon. I remember my first sermon. It was on the subject "The Golden Opportunities of Youth," and the best thing about it is that it wasn't taped (at least, I don't think it was). I wouldn't want to listen to it today.

But here the Carpenter of Nazareth leaves his woodworking shop, hangs up his apron and hammer, treks out to the lakeside, and his first public utterance is the greatest sermon the world had ever heard. The people were amazed and said, "He speaks as one having authority—as though He had written the Scriptures Himself, as though He were the author, not just the interpreter or commentator of the Word of God."

A little later we read in Matthew 13, following His message on the Parables of the Kingdom:

53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. 54 Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. 55 "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? 56 Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

Later in Matthew 22, even our Lord's critics were amazed at His teaching.:

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" 21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

These are only a few examples. We could go into Mark, Luke, and John and find reference after reference to various groups being amazed at our Lord's teaching ministry.

Now through the years, I've heard some of the finest English-speaking preachers in the world. When I was a student at Columbia Bible College for three years, the finest preachers from all denominations and para-church groups from all over the world came to speak in chapel. I've traveled many miles to hear some of the world's greatest preachers and teachers and speakers. I've listened to them on tape and on television and in person. I've been impressed; I've been blessed; I've been enriched; and sometimes, frankly, I've been disappointed. But I don't think I have ever been caught up in the kind of mind-boggling, jaw-dropping, eye-rubbing amazement that we read about in the Gospels.

How I would have loved to have heard Christ in person! And yet, every day I have that opportunity, as I read His words in the Gospel and as the Holy Spirit serves as the amplifier. He teaches us as one having authority. He gives unto us the words of life. He tells us how heaven wants us to live. He sets before us the ways of life and death, of the narrow path and the broad road. He speaks with one having authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees. And we stand amazed at the life-changing power of His teaching ministry to our own hearts.

One day this week, I felt subdued and care-worn, and my energy level was low. But in my Bible reading I came to these words of Jesus in John 15: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. The Greek word for "complete" is *plhroww*, meaning: "To cram in, to level up, to supply, to fill, to perfect." The Amplified Version says: I have told you these things that My joy and delight may be in you, and that your joy and gladness may be full measure and complete and overflowing.

If His joy within me is to be crammed in, overflowing—a full measure—why then, was I subdued, care-worn, and energy-less? Responding to that, I felt a surge of stamina, and immediately left my desk to tackle a project that had been neglected too long. I found myself singing from Nehemiah 8:10: The joy of the Lord is my strength. Realizing that Jesus' complete joy was within me made all the difference in my attitude.

The teachings of this uneducated itinerate, Jesus of Nazareth, have been having that kind of daily power and impact and authority for over twenty centuries. No wonder those who heard Him, even His enemies, were left mind-boggled and amazed.

Second, the people of our Lord's day were amazed at His miracles. Look at Matthew 9:

27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" 28 When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied. 29 Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you;" 30 and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." 31 But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. 32 While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. 33 And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

And Matthew 15:

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. 30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

And Mark 6:

45 Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. 47 When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. 48 He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, 49 but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, 50 because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." 51 Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed.

The Greek word for "amazed" here is *existhemi*, which comes from the prefix *ejk* which means "out of" and *i{sthmi*, which means "to stand." Literally, to stand outside of oneself. It's very similar to our phrase, "he was beside himself," and it has the idea of jumping out of your skin, to be astonished.

And after all, if Jesus of Nazareth is "God in Flesh Appearing" we would expect to be amazed, and the sad thing is that too many of us too easily lose the sense of wonder and amazement which is essential to genuine worship. We need to mean it with all our

hearts when we say, "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene."

What Amazed Jesus

But now, I'd like to shift gears and share with you two occasions in the Gospels in which the tables were turned and it was Christ who was amazed. These are the only two times when I've been able to find this word applied to the Lord Jesus, and after all, you would expect it to take a lot to amaze the Omniscient One.

The first occurrence is in Luke 7:

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3 The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." 9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10 Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

A centurion was a Roman army officer. Israel at that time was under foreign occupation. The Romans had invaded and defeated the nation and were hated by the Israelites as a brutal occupying force. So this man was an exception. He had compassion on the Jewish people and had even given of his personal funds to build the synagogue in Capernaum, the foundation of which is still extant. He was also moved with pity when a servant of his contracted a deadly illness, and he sent word to Jesus: "Just say the word and I believe he will be healed."

The simplicity and reality of his faith amazed Jesus, who said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

The second time Jesus was amazed is in Mark 6:

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. 2 When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! 3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

4 Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." 5 He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. 6 And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

Now, notice the lesson in these two passages. It is faith that astonishes Jesus, either its presence or its absence. In one instance, He found faith where it wasn't expected. In the other, He didn't find it where it should have been. Both cases amazed Him. Jesus isn't impressed with status, wealth, power, or abilities, but He's amazed when we trust Him as we should—and equally amazed when we don't.

Last week I referred to a book entitled *None of These Diseases* by Dr. S. I. McMillen. He told a story in that book about a time when he, his daughter, Linda, and his wife, Alice, were on a fishing trip in Canada. They arrived at their cabin around 5 p.m. on Saturday. To catch fish for their Sunday meals, Dr. McMillen and Linda rowed up the treacherous Matawan Rapids while Alice stayed at the cabin to unpack. Then she sat down to await their return. Eight o'clock came, but there was no sign of Dr. McMillen or Linda. It was lunacy to be on the Matawan Rapids past dark, and had I been Alice I would have begun to seriously worry. But instead, she was reminded by the Lord of a verse of Scripture they had been memorizing, Psalm 34:4: I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. Alice sought the Lord in prayer and refused to give into panic.

There she sat alone in the dark, the lantern by her side. The rapids roared nearby. Nine o'clock came, and still no husband or daughter. She prayed and rested her trust in the Lord. At ten o'clock, she heard a voice. It was Linda: "Daddy sent me by land. He didn't want to bring me down the rapids in the dark. The fish were slow in biting; but once they started, they bit like a house afire."

Still more waiting followed. Ten-thirty came, and still no boat. Only the roaring of the river. Alice knew that at any moment her husband's hat might float by, but the Lord had given her peace. In her faith, she had power over panic. At eleven o'clock, her

husband showed up at the dock. Alice had lived in victory over panic, for she placed her faith in the promise God had given her in a verse she had just memorized, Psalm 34:4.

Jesus is wonderfully amazed when we trust Him like that, and equally amazed when we don't. What's bothering you today? Are you trusting the Lord Jesus? Are you resting in His promises? Why not trust Him fully today. He'll be amazed, and so will you.

Trusting as the moments fly,
Trusting as the days go by;
Trusting Him whate'er befall,
Trusting Jesus, that is all.

This Is The Savior! **Matthew 8:23-27**

Preaching, a bimonthly magazine, has compiled a list of the greatest preachers of the 20th century. In the number one spot, according to this magazine, was James Stuart Stewart, a Scottish preacher and New Testament professor. I have never heard a sermon by James S. Stewart, but I have a couple of his books in my library, and he truly was a gifted expositor of the Bible. Second on the list was Billy Graham. Third was the late George Buttrick, an English-born Congregational preacher who served almost 30 years as pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. Next were listed Martin Luther King Jr. and the late Harry Emerson Fosdick, a pastor of New York's Riverside Church.

The rest of the top 10 are, in order: the late G. Campbell Morgan, an English-born evangelical minister who served in the United States and England; the late William Sangster, an evangelical Methodist preacher who had the largest Sunday-evening congregation in London during World War II; John R.W. Stott, a popular evangelical preacher who is rector emeritus of All Souls Church in London and director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity; the late D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a Welsh preacher who served as pastor of Westminster Chapel in London from 1943 to 1968; and the late Clarence Macartney, who served as pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh.

For the most part, I think that's a pretty good list. But if we were to extend it to cover the whole millenium, we'd have another set of preachers to include, such as Martin Luther, Savonarola, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Charles Spurgeon.

If we extended the list to cover the entire 2000-year sweep of Christian history, we'd need to consider names like Aurelius Augustine and John Chrysostom.

But what if we asked this question: "Who is the greatest preacher in all of human history? Whose sermons changed the world like no one else's?" -- there is only one answer.

The 30-year-old village carpenter of Nazareth, without training in rhetoric or theology, one day hung up his apron, put down his hammer, stepped out of his shop, walked down to the lakeside, opened his mouth, and preached the greatest sermon the world has ever heard.

It was said about Jesus Christ: Where does this man get these words? He teaches as one having authority and not as the teachers of the law. And perhaps the central question of all history is: "What manner of man is this?"

Today I would like to speak about that man and preach about that preacher. Our Scripture reading is from Matthew 8, beginning with verse 23:

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"
He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was perfectly calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

And His Disciples Followed Him

This is one of those beautiful stories, every sentence of which is meaningful to study. For example, notice how the passage begins in verse 23:

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.

The reason this is important is because of the previous paragraph. Jesus had just warned that following him was a costly affair. Notice verse 18ff:

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

In other words--if you're going to follow me, be prepared to sleep out under the stars. Be prepared for hardship and privation and sacrifice. Reading on:

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, let me go and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

There has been a lot of discussion about what Jesus meant by that, but we know he wasn't being disrespectful to someone whose father had just died. There are several ways of looking at these words of our Lord, but it all comes down to the same thing. Jesus was saying: If you're going to follow me, I must be the most important thing in your life. You've got to really mean it. I must be first. In all things I must have the preeminence.

And read the next phrase: Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. The teacher of the law didn't follow him. The man concerned about his father didn't follow him. The crowds didn't follow him. But these ragged disciples had counted the cost, had made up their minds, and had decided to follow Jesus.

We are not saved or born again--nor do we become true followers of Christ--just because we were baptized in infancy or just because we occasionally go to church. We are not saved or born again just because we donate some of our money to good causes or try to live a morally acceptable life. We are only saved by grace through faith, by means of the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. And we must come to him, count the cost, make up our minds, and decide to put Christ first in our lives.

Without Warning, a Furious Storm...

But noticed what happened to these disciples as a result. Verse 24 says: Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat.

And that evening while the teacher of the law slept peacefully in his bed, while the man concerned about his father sat by the fire, while the crowds from the afternoon's services went about their nocturnal activities, the poor disciples struggled with levels of fear they had never known before.

They were exhausted, and some of you are utterly exhausted and worn down by life. They were in trouble, and some of you are in trouble today. They were straining at the oars, on the precipice of caving in to sheer panic. They were drenched and cold and scared and tired and about to lose control of their emotions. And some of you, too, are about to give way to terrible levels of fear, panic, and anxiety. I know what that's like. Sometimes I think I'm never far from it myself.

But read the last phrase of verse 24:

But Jesus was sleeping.

How often the Lord goes to sleep and allows the storm to come.

The aforementioned Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said,

"The fact that God permits (storms and trials) and that he often appears to be quite unconcerned about it all really constitutes what (is described) as the trial of faith. Those are the conditions in which our faith is tried and tested, and God allows it all, God permits it all."

What happened? The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

You of Little Faith

But verse 26 continues:

"You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

It wasn't the storm that bothered the Lord Jesus. It was the unbelief of his disciples. Notice how he answered a question and asked a question all in the same sentence--You of little faith, why are you so afraid. The first phrase answers the question poised in the second phrase. We could paraphrase it like this: "The reason you allowed yourself to lose control of your emotions... the reason you

gave in to sheer panic was because you weren't trusting me as you should have been. You don't really think I'm in control of all these things, do you? You think the waves are stronger than I am, don't you. Don't you realize...

...that whether a ship on a storm-tossed sea
Or demons or men or whatever it be,
No storm can swallow the ship where lies
The Master of ocean and earth and skies.
...that whether a ship on a storm-tossed sea
Or demons or men or whatever it be,
No storm can swallow the ship where lies
The Master of ocean and earth and skies.
They all shall sweetly obey my will
Peace, Peace be still!

Now I think it is very interesting to notice the order of things here. Notice that he deals with the disciples before dealing with the storm. Verse 26 says: He replied,

"You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

There is no question that the Lord Jesus Christ deliberately set up the entire sequence of events just to teach the disciples to trust him. He was strengthening and growing their faith. He was wanting them to learn to trust him.

He sometimes does the same things to us, and it may be that some of you are in a storm right now which the Lord has deliberately sent because he loves you so much he wants to strengthen you and to increase your faith.

What Manner of Man?

The response is given in verse 27:

The people were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

And that's the question with which I'd like to end this message. What manner of man is Jesus Christ? Through the years, I've tried to collect the best answers I could find to that question, and I'd like to read you a few of them.

S. D. Gordon put it simply in one sentence: Jesus is God spelling Himself out in language that man can understand.

The great fourth century preacher, John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, wrote one of the finest summations of Christ that has ever appeared in print: I do not think of Christ as God alone, or man alone, but both together. For I know He was hungry, and I know that with five loaves He fed 5000. I know He was thirsty, and I know that He turned the water into wine. I know he was carried in a ship, and I know that He walked on the sea. I know that He died, and I know that He raised the dead. I know that He was set before Pilate, and I know that He sits with the Father on His throne. I know that He was worshipped by angels, and I know that He was stoned by the Jews. And truly some of these I ascribe to the human, and others to the divine nature. For by reason of this He is said to have been both God and man.

Aurelius Augustine said:

He it is by whom all things were made, and who was made one of all things; who is the revealer of the Father, the creator of the mother; the Son of God by the Father without a mother, the Son of man by the Mother without a father; the Word who is God before all time, the Word made flesh at a fitting time, the maker of the sun, made under the sun...

The Council of Chalcedon said this about Christ in A.D. 451:

We... confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ...truly God and truly Man, in all things like unto us without sin; ... existing in two natures without mixture, without change, without division, without separation; the diversity of the two natures not being at all destroyed by their union, but the peculiar properties of each nature being preserved...not parted or divided into two persons, but one Lord Jesus Christ.

John Donne (1573-1631), English poet and clergyman, said:

The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first as his cross at last. His birth and death were but one

continual act, and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day.

A. T. Pierson, 19th century Bible teacher, wrote:

There is nothing like it in history, not even in fable. How can we understand...? A man with human infirmities, without human sin or sinfulness; poor, yet having at His disposal universal riches; weak and weary, yet having the exhaustless energy of God; unable to resist the violence and insults of His foes, yet able to summon legions of angels at a word or wish; suffering, yet incapable of anything but perfect bliss; dying, yet Himself having neither beginning of days or end of years?

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis wrote,

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg--or else he would be the devil of hell; you must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a mad man or something worse. You can shut Him up for a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. He hasn't left that alternative open to us. He did not intend to."

But perhaps the most beloved summation of the Lord Jesus Christ is this one, attributed to Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), American Episcopal minister:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He never went to college. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race, and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as has that One Solitary Life.

What manner of man is He?

He is both God and Man, both divine and human, the Son of God and the Son of man who came from heaven to die on the cross, to rise from the grave, to seek and to save those who are lost.

Are you willing to follow him? It may not be smooth sailing; there may be some storms along the way. But there's no finer voyage and no better destination.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.

BE OF GOOD CHEER! YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN!

Matthew 9:1-8

One evening last year when I was battling a nasty little bout of fatigue, I sat down at a table and scribbled a few woe-is-me lines in my journal, and then, as I've learned to do, I turned to the Bible for my regular reading for that day expecting the Lord to speak to me with reassurance. The passage I came to that day happened to be Isaiah 9, where the prophet described a people who, walking in the darkness, would see a great light, and on those in the valley of the shadows a light had dawned. It was a prophetic passage and a Messianic chapter in which Isaiah described the coming of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.

Closing my eyes, I visualized a broad, dull valley, draped with clouds. It was bleak and depressing. But in the distance the clouds were cracked and through them several brilliant columns of sunshine descended like golden beams. In my mind's eye, I saw a lone figure in the horizon—me—around whom the beams were converging like circles. In my notes, I listed four different, distinct blessings I counted from the Lord that day, and I labeled them "Columns in the Clouds." My spirits revived, and I went on to bed and

rested peacefully.

Some days later that phrase—columns in the clouds—came to mind again as later I pondered a totally different subject in my Bible studies. I came across a wonderful phrase that Jesus used on five occasions. It was a very short phrase. Only one word in the original Greek, but our English versions take four words to describe it. These four words are part promise, part commandment. They are more than a greeting and nothing less than an authoritative declaration. The four words are: Be of Good Cheer. That phrase only occurs only five times in the New King James Version of the Bible, and on all five occasions it was spoken by Christ Himself.

- Ø Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you—Matthew 9:2
- Ø Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well—Matthew 9:22
- Ø Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid—Matthew 14:27
- Ø In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world—John 16:33
- Ø Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome—Acts 23:11

Now consider this: Those words are not just dusty inscriptions from antiquity. They are given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and recorded in the living Scriptures for us. They are intended for you and me, just as surely as they were spoken to the individuals who originally heard them.

Exercise your imagination for a moment. It's possible for us to imagine sound, just as we can visualize scenes from our past or the faces of our loved ones. If we practice a little, we can hear sounds inwardly almost as clearly as hearing them audibly. See if you can imagine just now, with very little effort, the cawing of a crow, the blast of a jet, the crunch of autumn's leaves, or the strains of your favorite song.

Now listen to the deep, resonate voice of the Son of Man calling your name and saying directly to you: "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven; your faith has made you well. It is I; don't be afraid. I have overcome the problems you face; I have overcome the world. I want you to testify of me, so be joyful. Be happy. Change your mood, and be of good cheer!"

There's no message we need to hear more. One of our society's greatest afflictions is the disease of depression, which envelops us like the darkening clouds of our imagined landscape. Peter D. Kramner, in his recently book, *Against Depression*, warns that depression is at epidemic levels, and it is an affliction that destroys us in both body and soul. Depression endangers nerve cells, disrupts brain functioning, damages the heart and the blood vessels, alters personal perspective and judgment, and interferes with parenting and family life."^[1]

Another recent book on the subject of depression defines it as "a state of existence marked by a sense of being pressed down, weighed down, or burdened which affects a person physically, mentally, spiritually, and relationally."^[2] According to experts, at this very moment somewhere between 14 and 28 million Americans are suffering from depression, but multitudes of others of us are battling other related mood disorders that stem from many causes and require many courses of treatment.

The most powerful antidote for discouragement is the life of joy bestowed by Jesus Himself, for the Bible says that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10). The new Christian Standard Version translates that verse like this: "Do not grieve, because your strength comes from rejoicing in the Lord."

How do we rejoice in the Lord? Why not begin by hearing His voice saying to you over and over and over: Be of good cheer! Be of good cheer! Be of good cheer! Be of good cheer! Be of good cheer!

As we begin this year of 2006 in this month of January with its five Sundays, I'd like to share with you the five times when Jesus uttered those four wonderful words that we need to hear as though He were speaking them just to us: Be of Good Cheer!

As I mentioned, the actual Greek term used by the authors of the New Testament was only one word: *θαρσέω* (*thar-se-ō*). It is a single intense, dynamic word in the Greek. The NIV uses two words to translate it—Take heart! The older translations use four words: Be of good cheer! According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the word in its original usage meant "to dare" or "to be bold." In fact, a variation of this word is often translated using the words "bold" and "confident" in the New Testament. The lexicons and Greek dictionaries I've consulted say that the meaning is "Take heart! Take courage! Cheer up!" It occurs eight times in the Greek New Testament; and, as I have said, it is translated five times in the New King James Version, using the words, "Be of good cheer." It is a ringing declaration of the attitude that Jesus Christ expects us to have in this world.

The first time is found in Matthew's 9:1-8, which comprises our Bible study for today:

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" But Jesus,

knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

This is a story of paralysis, pardon, power, and cheer. It took place in the city of Capernaum, and it probably occurred in the house owned by Simon Peter. The ruins of this very house are still visible today, and visitors to Capernaum are impressed with how well preserved is this little town. It is located right at the edge of the water of Lake Galilee, and we can identify the ruins of Peter’s house by archaeological and historical documentation. It was in this little town and probably in this very house that the paralytic man was healed.

This story is also told to us by Mark and Luke, who add some fascinating details, such as the fact that four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus and because of the crowds they made a hole in the tile roof of the house where Jesus was teaching and lowered him on a pallet, interrupting our Lord’s sermon. But for the sake of simplicity, I’m just going to deal today with the story as Matthew gives it to us.

Sin Can Paralyze Us

Here was a man with two heartrending problems. Most people saw only one problem, but with a single glance Jesus took them both in. This man had a visible problem and an invisible one. He had an exterior dilemma and an interior one. The inner, invisible problem was by far the worse of the two, but most people saw only the lesser, external problem.

On a physical level, this man was paralyzed. We don’t know if he was a paraplegic or a quadriplegic, but at the very least he was paralyzed from the waste down; he may have been paralyzed from the neck down. But that wasn’t the worst of it.

The worst of it was the fact that this man was paralyzed in his heart. He felt guilty, at fault, culpable, to blame, wicked, ashamed, and self-condemning.

I have a theory that his two problems were intertwined. I think he was a relatively young man who had been goofing off and had caused an accident. We read about this all the time in the newspapers. People who cross what police officers call the ‘Stupid Line.’

This man in Matthew 9, in my speculative opinion, had crossed the stupid line and had caused an accident that had resulted in his own paralysis, and it has perhaps hurt someone else, too. In the notes of his study Bible, John MacArthur makes the same observation, writing, “Jesus’ words of forgiveness may indicate that the paralysis was a direct consequence of the man’s own sin.”

The old divine, R. C. Trench, in his famous Notes on the Miracles of our Lord, put it this way: “Perhaps in his own sickness he recognized the penalty of some especial sin whereof his conscience accused him.... In the sufferer’s own conviction there existed so close a connexion [sic] between his sin and his sickness, that the bodily healing would have been scarcely intelligible to him, would have hardly brought home to him the sense of a benefit, unless in his conscience he had been also set free.”[3]

Now whether my speculation is true or not, we can say this—this man was paralyzed on the inside just as much as one the outside. He was paralyzed by sin. But Jesus said to him, “Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven.”

I read the other day, for example, about a group of high school and college students who went to Florida for Spring break. They arrived too early in the day to check into their hotel, so they sat in their cars and started drinking alcohol. They decided to play football, but the parking lot became too crowded, so one of the members of their group went off to find another place and presently he came back with the exciting news that he had discovered access to the roof of the 11-story hotel. They all went up there to play football, intoxicated as they were, and they played football until one of them ran for the ball, fell off the roof, and was killed.

It was a somber, sober group that brought their dead friend home. They had crossed the Stupid Line, and it was a moment of pleasure they would all regret as long as they lived.

Several years ago, an 18-year-old named Leah Betts died in England as a result of complications with the abuse of the drug Ecstasy. It became huge news in the United Kingdom. Her father was a police officer and her mother was a nurse, and it was an ordinary, everyday family. But somehow the media got hold of the story and it stayed in the headlines for days. The public was gripped by a picture of Leah in a coma, breathing with the help of a respiration, in a losing battle for her life.

Ten years passed, and recently for the first time her best friend, Sara Cargill, granted an interview with a reporter for the Guardian. She said that she and Leah were putting the finishing touches on their makeup and outfits before going downstairs for a party. Four tiny white tablets lay on the table like pearls, and Sarah said, “Perhaps we should take only half.”

“Don’t worry,” Leah said, “We’ve had a whole one before.” And both girls swallowed one each.”

Looking back at that moment, Sarah told the reporter, “We were so young and so curious. We never thought for one minute that anything bad might happen to us.... Until Leah died, I thought we were invincible. Like all teenagers, I thought bad things only happened to other people....”

She went on to say, “My life changed forever that day. For a long time afterwards I just existed in a state of shock. One minute my best friend was there all the time. The next she was gone. It was very hard and I felt very lonely for a long time.... I felt so guilty for her family... I also felt so ashamed. My family thought I was a good girl. We both had good upbringings. We weren't stupid or deprived kids. But I felt I'd let everyone down....”

Sarah told the reporter for the Guardian that for years she has been crippled by guilt—notice that phrase—and that every weekend for five years she visited her friend's grave, taking flowers, chocolates, letters, and poems she had written for her.

Guilt can cripple. It can paralyze. It can alter your personality and relationships. It can erode your self-image and sap your morale. I read the other day about a man who described himself as being paralyzed by alcoholism and by sexual addiction, and I was intrigued by his use of that term—paralyzed by addiction.

It might be that you had an affair in the past, or you were promiscuous at some point in your history. Nobody knows about it; but the guilt of it is affecting your marriage or your relationships now.

It might be you had an abortion in the past, and almost no one knows of it; but the guilt of it is affecting your life right now.

I've had people who told me about a same-sex encounter they had in the past, just a momentary incident, but over the years the memory of it has tormented them. Some people feel a powerful sense of illogical and invalid guilt because they were sexually abused as a child or because they were physically abused by a parent or a spouse.

One man—I forget who it was; it was many years ago—told me that when he was a teenager he got into a raging argument with his father, and he stormed out of the house, jumped in the car, squealed out of the driveway, and took off in a blazing rage. He drove around a few minutes, passed by his house again, and an emergency vehicle was there. His father had died from a heart attack, and the guilt of it has descended like a shadow over the man's life.

Well, this is where the Bible shines. This is where Jesus Christ excels. He is an expert in dealing with these matters, and in our passage today He deals with the problem headlong, and His words are for you and me just as much as they were address to the paralyzed young man lying on the cot before Him.

What does Jesus say? What answer does He give to our guilt? He speaks eight words: “Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus Can Pardon Us

There are two things to notice about this. First, Jesus pronounces forgiveness. He told the man just as He tells you and me: “Your sins are forgiven.” But Matthew does something very unusual in His recounting of the story. He shifts the camera away from the man before we can gauge his reaction, and he turns the lens toward the other people sitting in the room, specifically some of the Jewish authorities. Verse 3 said, “And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, ‘This Man blasphemes!’”

Well, they were right about that—if Jesus were no more than a mere man. The Bible teaches that you and I have the capacity to forgive sins only in an extremely limited and secondary sense. If you get angry at me or I with you, we might say something hurtful to one another. But if we come and sincerely apologize, we should forgive one another. Ephesians 4:32: “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” But our forgiveness of another person is limited to what they did or said against us, and it is restricted to simply duplicating the forgiveness we ourselves have received from God. But we cannot forgive sin in a general sense. We cannot absolve anyone from guilt. Only God can do that.

In an ultimate, primary sense, only God can extend true forgiveness because it is His law that has been broken whenever we sin and it is only against Him that all sin occurs. Even when King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, arranged the death of her husband, and lied about it to the nation, he confessed in his prayer to God in Psalm 51: “Against You and You only have I sinned.” It was God's holy law that He had broken and God's holy character that he had violated.

So when Jesus said to the man, “Your sins are forgiven,” He was claiming to do something that only God could do. He was acting on a prerogative that only God Himself could exercise.

Nothing about this passage makes sense if you don't accept the biblical premise that Jesus Christ is wholly and fully God. He is not just “The Son of God,” He is “God the Son.” He is the Second Person of the Trinity, a member of the Three-fold Godhead. He is both fully human and fully divine. He is Himself absolutely and utterly and eternally God.

Look at it from another perspective. In this passage we can recognize our Lord's divinity in three ways. We see His:

- Omniscience. He knew the need of the paralytic, and He read the minds of the scribes.
- Omnipotence. He can speak the words "Rise up and walk," and suddenly the man's paralysis falls away and he is instantly healed.
- Authority to forgive sins, which is a prerogative of God and God alone. Psalm 103 says: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases..." (NKJV).

Only God can do those things.

And so from this we learn that Jesus Christ pronounced forgiveness. He has power on earth to forgive sins. He can forgive your sins and mine.

But the second thing to notice is something that is implied in this passage but not overtly stated. Jesus not only pronounces forgiveness, He provides it. The act of forgiving that man his foolish sins was very costly to our Lord, and it was going to require that He Himself be paralyzed on the cross, that He be nailed to the wood until His very life's blood drained out of Him and stained the ground at the foot of Calvary.

In Matthew 26:28, Jesus said, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Romans 3:23ff says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation (an atoning sacrifice) by His blood.

Ephesians 1:7 says, In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins....

Colossians 1:19-20 says, "For it pleased the Father... by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross."

Hebrews 9:12 says, "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

You may remember reading last year about the commuter train in Los Angeles that struck a sport utility vehicle parked on the tracks. The train derailed and stuck another train, causing eleven deaths and over 200 injuries. There was one story coming out of that accident that gripped Southern California. It involved a man who was on that train. Normally, he later said, he would not have taken the train, but he was called in early to work at an aerospace plant in Burbank. He was sitting upstairs in the double-decker car, asleep, when the wreck occurred. He recalled waking up to find himself trapped under the debris and covered with blood. He realized he had been badly injured, and using the blood that was oozing from his own body, he used his finger to write a note to his family, telling them that he loved them.[4]

That is what Christ did for us. Using His own blood, He wrote a message of love for you and me, and the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses us from all sin. So sin can paralyze us, but Jesus can pardon us. He pronounces forgiveness because He provides it.

Faith Can Prove it to Us

You say, "Well, how do I know? Can I really accept the reality of this total and complete and ultimate forgiveness?" Yes, faith can prove it to us. Look at the rest of the story.

And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!"

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."

And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

The man could have said, "What a bunch of rubbish. I don't believe a word of it; I'm not going to accept it. This is a waste of time, boys, carry me home." But he didn't do that. He flexed his muscles, stretched his legs, took a deep breath, and rose from his stretcher.

And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

Isn't it time for you to rise up and walk? Isn't it time for you to say, "I've wallowed around in guilt and sin and shame long enough. I'm going to embrace God's forgiveness. I'm going to forgive myself. I'm going to live a life set free"?

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
(Robert Lowry, 1876)

[1] Peter D. Kramer, *Against Depression* (New York: Viking Press, 2005), from the dust jacket.

[2] David B. Biebel and Harold G. Koenig, *New Light on Depression* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 19.

[3] R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), pp. 126-127.

[4] "Train Passenger Recalls Blood Message" by Greg Risling (AP) in *NorthWest Cable News*, at <http://www.nwcn.com/sharedcontent/nationworld/nation/020405ccjccwNatTrainBlood.75ec0d82.html>, accessed November 7, 2005

BE OF GOOD CHEER! YOUR FAITH HAS HEALED YOU!

Matthew 11:20-22

My wife, Katrina, and I recently read the memoirs of former first lady, Barbara Bush. It was a fascinating account of her life as the wife of the man who served in many different roles in American life. George Bush was Congressman, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Chairman of the Republican Party, Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador to China, Vice President, and President of the United States. Through it all, it was a team effort and Barbara was right there at his side.

One of the most surprising revelations in her book had to do with a period of depression she suffered. Following their return from China, Barbara put together a slide show and traveled around the country giving a talk to civic groups, school, churches, and various gatherings. She rejoined her clubs, played tennis regularly, entertained many guests, and kept busy. Yet, she said, she became very depressed, lonely, and unhappy.

She told no one about it and hid it from everyone, except for her husband. He suggested she get professional help but that sent her into deeper gloom. He was working incredibly long hours at his job, but when he came home at night she would tell him all about it and he would hold her weeping in his arms.

Sometimes the pain was so great, she said, that she felt strong urges to drive her car into a tree or into oncoming traffic, and she would pull over to the side of the road until she felt okay.

Most people go through difficult times when depression and gloom—in their many shapes and forms—swallows us up like thick gray clouds. But there are columns breaking through the clouds. And in our current sermon series we are looking at five rays of brilliant sunshine that emanate from the teaching ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Great Physician specializes in hope. Over and over, He dispensed the medicine of hope as a treatment to what ailed the people of His day. Multitudes of people were literally healed by hope. I'd like to show you one of His cases that brings that home to us—the Case of the Bleeding Woman—as recorded in Matthew 11:20-22:

Suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, "If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well." But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour (NKJV).

Mark and Luke give us this story in more detail, but we also an extra-biblical source of information about this woman from a man named Eusebius of Caesarea, who was a church historian who wrote a history of the church in AD 300 (roughly speaking).

Eusebius is called “The Father of Church History” because of his wonderful volume that gives us incredible insight into the early church of the apostolic and post-apostolic age. I don’t know of any book besides the Bible that I’ve enjoyed reading more than Eusebius.

Eusebius tells us that this woman in Matthew 9 was a Gentile from the town of Caesarea Philippi, which is in the far north of Israel, up in the mountains above the Sea of Galilee amid the foothills of Mount Hermon. She had been hemorrhaging for twelve years and had spent all her money going to physicians seeking a cure. Her affliction had ruined her life, and she had given up hope. Then she learned of Jesus the Nazarene, and somehow she intuitively and instantly knew that He was the answer to her deepest needs. She journeyed down to find Him, touched the hem of His garment, and returned home a cured woman.

Now here’s the fascinating thing. According to Eusebius, this woman and her thankful townspeople left a legacy that, if it were discovered today, would be the greatest archaeological discovery of all times—a statue of Jesus.

We know that the Jews did not make statues because of the Old Testament prohibition against graven images. But non-Jewish peoples in the Roman era, such as those in Caesarea Philippi, had perfected statuary to a fine art. The area of Caesarea Philippi was Gentile, and according to Eusebius, at some point after this woman returned home with the thrilling news of her miraculous healing, the city fathers commissioned a statue of her with the Lord Jesus Christ, and it stood in front of her house for many years. It was there during the lifetime of Eusebius. It is the only known statue of Jesus, and if we could uncover it today we would be able to see His features. No one knows, however, what happened to this image of Christ.

Let me read you the passage in which Eusebius tells of this:

The woman with a hemorrhage, who was cured by our Savior, as we learn from the holy Gospels, came from here (Caesarea Philippi), they claim. Her house was pointed out in the city, and amazing memorials of the Savior’s benefit to her were still there. On a high stone (base) at the gates of her home stood a bronze statue of a woman on bent knee, stretching out her hands like a suppliant. Opposite to this was another of the same material, a standing figure of a man clothed in a handsome double cloak and reaching his hand out to the woman. Near his feet on the monument grew an exotic herb that climbed up to the hem of the bronze double cloak and served as an antidote for diseases of every kind. This statue, they said, resembled the features of Jesus and was still extant in my own time: I saw it with my own eyes when I stayed in the city. It is not surprising that those Gentiles, who long ago were benefited by our Savior, should have made these things, since... ancient Gentiles customarily honored them as saviors in this unreserved fashion.[1]

There’s something about reading that passage in Eusebius that makes this story real to me. This was an actual woman who lived in a real village and owned a home in the northern regions of Israel. She wasn’t a Jew, but somehow she knew that the Jewish Messiah had appeared on the pages of history and that He could help her if only she get to Him and touch the hem of His garment. She did, and she returned home with thrilling news. For hundreds of years, her home was shown to pilgrims, and a statue of Jesus was erected in front of her house.

This is a story we can embrace for ourselves. It is real and valid and full of lessons for each of us. As I studied this, I came away with several insights I’d like to share with you.

Some Things Can Drain the Life Out of Us

First, there are things that happen to us that drain the life out of us. This woman had been losing her life’s blood for twelve years, and with it the iron and minerals and vital fluids that she needed to live. Her affliction was more than an inconvenient disability; it was literally draining the life right out of her. As far back as Leviticus 17:11 we read, “The life of the flesh is in the blood.” Later on the cross, the life-blood of the Lord Jesus would slowly drain from His body, being offered as an eternal atonement for sin.

Well, in another sense, things happen to all of us that drain the life right out of us. As I was preparing this message, I received an e-mail from a woman whose child was molested, and she described the anguish—not only of her child—but that she herself was feeling. At the same time, another mother told me of her child who had run away from home and was very troubled and depressed.

The patriarch Job, beset with more troubles than any man can bear, said:

“Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For sighing comes to me instead of food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil” (Job 3:23-26, NIV).

This kind of stress drains the life out of us, and it is very destructive. Last week, Newsweek Magazine devoted a cover story to the subject “Stress and Your Heart.” I was just mesmerized by the article, and I read it and re-read it and underlined it and highlighted it. The article began by recalling the powerful earthquake that struck near Los Angeles at 4:30 on a January morning in 1994. There were two waves of deaths from that earthquake. The first wave was from those who were trapped in buildings and crushed by

debris. But then paramedics were busy with a second wave of deaths—those who died from heart attacks. On any given day, 15 people in Los Angeles will die from a heart attack, but in the days following the earthquake, those two digits reversed to 51. The number of cardiovascular deaths jumped from 15 to 51. The New England Journal of Medicine explained it by saying, “Emotional stress may precipitate cardiac events in people who are predisposed to such events.” In other words, people were scared to death.

The very words “anger” and “angina” are related. Newsweek went on to say:

“For a long time, cardiologists resisted the idea that the heart, the sturdy wellspring of life, can be fatally deranged by a mental event. But it’s not just sudden shocks like earthquakes that kill. Mounting evidence suggests that chronic emotional states such as stress, anxiety, hostility, and depression can take a far greater toll.... The risk of psychological and social factors are almost as great as obesity, smoking, and hypertension, the traditional medical markers for cardiovascular disease.... In fact, doctors are finding that psychosocial factors pose far greater risks than previously realized.”[2]

Life events can drain the life out of us, and that was happening to this woman. But there’s a second aspect to this.

When We Touch His Hem, We Touch Him

When we touch His hem, we touch Him. This woman wasn’t just touching the hem of His garment; she was touching Him who wore the garment.

In Bible times, a person’s clothing represented him. People in biblical days didn’t typically have the extensive wardrobes we have today. They had one or two garments that they wore every day, and in the course of time they became identified with those garments. Their clothes absorbed the distinctive odors of their bodies. For example, Jacob wanted to steal his brother’s blessing, and while his brother was out hunting, he put on his clothing and went to see their blind old father. The old man grabbed the young man and felt his clothing and smelled it, and it was the clothing and the smell of Esau, and he was tricked into blessing the wrong son.

Young Joseph in the book of Genesis was known by his robe of many colors. Aaron the high priest was known by his priestly garments. John the Baptist was known by his rough clothing of camel’s hair with a leather sash around his waist. The two men in Acts 1 were identified as angels because of their bright and shining garments.

Even today, this is true to a certain extent. We have more extensive wardrobes than in Bible times, but we can still tell a great deal about a person by the way he or she dresses. It sometimes reveals a great deal about character.

Furthermore, in the Bible clothing becomes a metaphor for what is inside us. Psalm 30:11 talks about being clothed with gladness. Psalm 74:3 says that violence covers the evil man like a garment. The writer of Psalm 109:29 said, “Let my accusers be clothed with shame.” Isaiah 61:3 says that God wants to give us the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, and Isaiah said later in the same chapter, “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” In the New Testament, Peter tells us to be clothed with humility.

Now, there are several passages in the Bible that use clothing as symbols of the attributes of God Himself. Psalm 65:2 says that He is clothed with power. Psalm 93 says He is clothed with majesty and He girds Himself with strength.

Psalm 104:1-2 says: You are clothed with honor and majesty, who cover Yourself with light as with a garment,

In Matthew 17, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was glorified and His clothing became as bright as sunshine, whiter than any cleaner on earth could make them. His garments literally glowed with luminescent glory.

And Revelation 1 describes Jesus being dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet with a golden sash around His chest, and He is radiating glory like the sun in its noon-hour zenith.

So in touching the hem of His garment, this woman was touching Him, for she knew that His glorious Person contained all the healing she would ever need. The great African-American song-writer, Charles P. Jones, wrote a little song in 1906 I learned as a young person. It said:

Jesus Christ is made to me,
All I need, all I need.
He alone is all I plea,
He is all I need.
Wisdom, righteousness, and power,
Holiness forevermore.

My redemption full and sure,
He is all I need.

Perhaps he was inspired by another hymnist, Thomas Hastings, who had written a little hymn fifty years before that contained this beautiful line:

All I need, in Thee I see; Thou art all in all to me.

Yet another hymnist wrote:

Jesus! Name of wondrous love,
Human name of God above!
Pleading only this, we flee,
Helpless, O our God, to Thee.

That's the way I feel. I'm preparing this message while in Atlanta, and it's on a blue Monday when I'm about as low as I can be. It's only my awareness of the presence of Christ here in this room that lifts my spirits and keeps me going. He is here, beside me, near me, with me, in me. I can touch the hem of His garment, and in touching His hem, I touch Him.

We Touch Him by Faith

How do we touch Him? We do it by faith. This is one of the great themes of Matthew's Gospel. Let me take you on a little tour of this first Gospel of the New Testament:

Jesus brings up this subject in His very first sermon in the Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount, when he says:

"O you of little faith... do not worry"—Matthew 6:30-31

When the Roman Centurion came to Jesus, trusting Him to heal His servant, Matthew says, "When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following Him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith'"—Matthew 8:10

When the disciples panicked in the storm, Jesus said to them, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"—Matthew 8:26

In Matthew 9, in the story we looked at last week, we read, "Some men brought to Him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven'"—Matthew 9:2

Here in our story today, He told the woman, "Be of good cheer, daughter, your faith has made you well"—Matthew 9:22

And look down at verse 28: "And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then He touched their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith let it be to you.' And their eyes were opened"—Matthew 9:28-30

Then the disciples found themselves in another storm on the Sea of Galilee, and we read that Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Peter wanted to join Christ on the waves, but taking his eyes from Jesus, he began to sink. Jesus reached out His hand, caught him, and said, "You of little faith... why did you doubt?"—Matthew 14:31.

Later Jesus encountered a Canaanite woman who begged Him to heal her daughter. Jesus said, "O woman, great is your faith. Let it be to you as you desire"—Matthew 15:28

In Matthew 16, He rebuked His disciples for their lack of faith, saying, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand?"—Matthew 16:8

In the next chapter, the disciples asked Jesus why they had been stymied about casting out a demon, and Jesus answered, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you"—Matthew 17:20.

Jesus gave His followers a similar lesson in Matthew 21 when He cursed the fig tree, telling them, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer"—Matthew 21:21-22

The answer really is faith. The Bible says that this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. Trusting Christ and abiding in Him in restful dependence is the greatest antidote to stress the world has ever seen—and really it is the one and only cure.

Jesus is very observant and very concerned about whether or not we are trusting Him with the draining problems of life—and He notices and measures our faith.

Power Goes out of Him to Heal Us

The fourth thing to notice about this story is that when we touch Him by faith, He imparts healing. He has promised to heal us body, soul, and spirit. Now, I think it's important to realize that there are three different kinds of healing—immediate, gradual, and ultimate. Sometimes God heals us immediately. I've known people who were miraculously healed of a physical disease or illness. I've also

known people who were alcoholic or drug-addicted, and the moment they came to Christ that addiction left forever.

Other people experience a gradual healing. And sometimes we have to trust God for His ultimate healing when we get to heaven.

That's the way miracles are. When Jesus performed His miracles in the New Testament, He was not telling us that He would always perform a miracle, but that He possessed all authority and that nothing would ever be impossible for Him. I think it is C. S. Lewis who pointed out that Jesus turned water into wine in John 2, but that He actually does that all the time. He sends the rain from heaven, it is absorbed into the ground, drawn up into the vine, and it fills the grapes with rich, red fluid which is crushed into grape juice and ferments into wine through the natural processes that God built into the natural world.

In John 2, Jesus simply accelerated the process. Sometimes God accelerates the process and gives us immediate physical or emotional or spiritual healing; sometimes it is gradual, sometimes it is ultimate. But we never have to put our head on the pillow at night worried the condition of our lives when we are in His hands. The Bible says that by His stripes we are healed.

And that leads to the fifth thing to notice:

Because of This We Can Be of Good Cheer

Some things can drain the life out of us, but when we touch His hem we touch Him. We touch Him by faith, and He bestows healing. And because of that we can be of good cheer.

Years ago there was a skeptic and infidel named Robert Ingersoll. He was born in New York, the son of a Congregational minister. Ingersoll became a lawyer, served in the Union army during the Civil War, and later served as attorney general of Illinois. Ingersoll was a tremendous orator, and he became famous for traveling around the nation giving speeches attacking the Christian faith.

One day he was to speak in a town where a former schoolmate of his lived. This old friend had started out with great promise in life. Like Ingersoll, he had entered the legal field. He married a beautiful woman and became the father of two precious children. But things had gone against him, and this friend had started drinking. Alcohol had ruined his life and he had lost his character, his good name, his job, and he was on the verge of losing his family. A Christian slum-worker found him one night in an ally, hopelessly drunk, and he took him to a home where he was washed, fed, given hospitality, and told of a Savior who could save to the uttermost. The man was gloriously saved, and he was instantly delivered from alcohol. He rebuilt his shattered home and his broken life. When he saw in the newspaper that his old friend Ingersoll was going to lecture in the city against Christianity, this friend wrote a letter to him, and this is what he said:

My dear, old friend, I see that tonight you are to deliver a lecture against Christianity and the Bible. Perhaps you now some of my history since we parted, how I disgraced my home and family, lost my character, and all that a man can hold dear in this world. You may know that I went down and down until I was a poor, despised outcast; and when I thought there was none to help and none to save, there came one in the name of Jesus, who told me of His power to help, of His loving-kindness and His tender sympathy; and through the story of the cross of Christ I turned to Him. I brought my wife back to my home, and gathered my children together again, and we are happy now, and I am doing what good I can. And now, old friend, would you stand tonight before the people of Pittsburg, and tell them what you have to say against the religion that will come down to the lowest depths of hell and find me, and help me up, and make my life happy, and clothe my children, and give me back home and friend—will you tell them what you have to say against a religion like that?

To his credit, that night Ingersoll read the letter to his audience and then said, "Ladies and gentleman, I have nothing to say against a religion that will do this for a man..."[3]

Some things can drain the life out of us, but when we touch the hem of His garment we touch Him. We touch Him by faith, and power flows out of Him for the healing of our lives. And because of that we can be of good cheer

[1] Eusebius: The Church History – A New Translation with Commentary by Paul L. Maier, pp. 264-265.

[2] Annie Underwood, "The Good Heart" in Newsweek, October 3, 2005, pp. 49-50.

[3] J. Sidlow Baxter, God So Loved (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), pp. 157-158.

The Devil's Carnivorous Side

Revelation 12; Matthew 13; John 10; 1 Peter 5:7

This week as we began preparing for Advent, I started rummaging through the closets, finding and setting up my nativity sets. I

collect them from various places in the world, and most of them have the same set of characters—Mary, Joseph, the Christ child, the Shepherds, the Magi. There's a camel here and a cow there, and several head of sheep.

But no dragons. Not a single nativity set in my possession contains a dragon. Yet there was a dragon there, in Bethlehem, that night, according to the book of Revelation. Revelation 12 speaks of a woman, pregnant, about to bear a child who will someday rule the nations with an iron scepter. And standing there ready to devour this infant is an enormous red dragon. Who is this dragon? In our Bible study today I'd like to show you how the Bible compares the devil to a dragon, and in other passages to four other animals. In other words, in the Bible the Lord uses five different animals to represent the nature and activities of Satan.

A Dragon Trying To Destroy God's Son

Let's begin with the passage and with the picture I've already referred to. According to Revelation 12, Satan is a dragon trying to destroy God's son. Let's begin with verse 1:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in the heavens: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. A great and wondrous sign appeared in the heavens: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

This woman, the mother of the child who will rule the nations with an iron scepter, is not so much a picture of the virgin Mary as it is a picture of the nation of Israel, who is described in the Bible as the bride of Jehovah. Her being clothed with the sun and having the moon under her feet implies her dignity and glory in her position as God's chosen bride, and it reflects the dignity and glory of her bridegroom, the Lord of hosts. The twelve stars on her head represent her 12 tribes.

She was pregnant...

The nation of Israel was about to give birth to whom? To the Messiah. The Old Testament had repeatedly predicted that a Messiah would come forth from Israel to bring salvation to all the world.

She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

She was not only pregnant, but she was at the moment of delivery. The nation of Israel as represented by the virgin Mary was great with child, crying in the pain of childbirth, and the Messiah was about to be born. This is the nativity. This is the birth of Christ, surrounded by the sheep, camels, donkeys, and sheep. But who else is there? Verse 3 continues:

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his head. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.

In other words, this is the one who had previously led a third of the angels of heaven in a rebellion against Almighty God, as we read in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28.

The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, that he might devour her child the moment it was born.

The devil was there, seeking to destroy God's Son, orchestrating world events, moving King Herod to slaughter all the baby boys of Bethlehem in a desperate attempt to do away with God's Son, with God's channel of redemption for the world. Verse 5 continues:

She give birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne...

...referring to the ascension of Christ at the end of his earthly ministry. Over and over again, the devil tried to defy and deny the Messiah. He tried to kill him as a baby. He tried to tempt him as a young man. His demons sought to distract the Lord Jesus during his ministry at every turn. In the end, Satan sifted Christ's followers like wheat, took possession of one of his disciples (Judas), and had the Son of God nailed to a cross and sealed in a tomb. But three days later Christ burst from the tomb, and 40 days later he was snatched up to God and to his throne at the Ascension, he ascended to heaven in astounding beauty and absolute victory.

A Serpent Trying to Deceive God's People

But now I'd like to show you another face of Satan, here in this very chapter. He is not only a dragon trying to destroy God's Son; he is a serpent trying to deceive God's people. In the remainder of this passage in Revelation 12, the writer accelerates to the end of history, to a time yet to come, to a description of the Great Tribulation and the Battle of Armageddon. Verse 9 says:

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.

This name—that old serpent—harkens back to the beginning of the Bible, to the book of Genesis. There the devil appeared as a

serpent who led Eve astray; here he is called a serpent who leads the whole world astray. He is the one who deceives.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul worried aloud for the Corinthians, afraid they were getting in with the wrong crowd and being influenced by the wrong teachers. He said:

I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

How does the devil deceive us and lead us astray. Part of his plan involves reversing the values of life, changing the price tags, turning our moral standards inside out.

I read the other day in the Washington Post about a new play on the life of Christ called "Corpus Christi." It has just opened off Broadway. In this play Lord Jesus is portrayed as a homosexual who becomes involved in an affair with Judas Iscariot which culminates in a very passionate kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ is also pictured as a gay activist who offends the Jewish establishment by conducting a same-sex, double-ring wedding on behalf of two of his other apostles, James and Bartholomew. In the play, Jesus concludes the ceremony by saying, "I bless this marriage in your name, Father. Now let's all get very, very drunk." How could someone conceive of and write something so blasphemous? The devil is behind it. It is all diabolical trickery in which the Deceiver of our souls is trying to reverse the values of the popular culture, so that good is viewed as evil and evil viewed as good. Holiness is discounted while homosexuality is popularized. Our society is buying it; and in a million such ways, Satan is deceiving multitudes of people today.

A Bird Trying To Despoil God's Harvest

There is a third animal in the Bible to which the devil is compared—a bird. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the story of a farmer who went out to sow. Some of the seed fell here, some there. Some seeds fell on the pathway where the ground was hard and packed down. The birds promptly came, carried it off, and ate it up.

Later in the chapter, Jesus explained the parable to the disciples, saying that the seed represents the Gospel, which is being broadcast here and there. Sometimes the message of the Gospel falls on a resistant human heart, and before it can accomplish anything the devil comes and snatches it away. Thus the devil is compared to a bird that snatches the Gospel from human hearts before it can accomplish its purpose.

We need to be aware that Satan will do anything to keep you from hearing and acting on the Word of God. How many times have I seen someone just starting to become interested in the Gospel, just starting to attend church. And what happens? Their hours of employment change, and he has to start working Sundays. How many times has a young man come to me in a crisis, wanting to get right with God? We pray together, and often the person weeps. But as soon as the crisis passes, he lapses back into his old habits, back into his old ways.

The devil is behind that.

A Wolf Trying To Defeat God's Flock

Fourth, the devil is pictured in Scripture not only as a dragon, a serpent, and a bird, but as a wolf. In John 10, Jesus said,

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it."

How does the devil attack the church? In several ways. He does it through false teachers. The apostle Paul, speaking to the church leaders of Ephesus, said,

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth..."

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

But the devil also attacks like a wolf through persecution, as we saw a couple of weeks ago during the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. As Jesus sent the twelve out to preach, he said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves...."

Hans Bret was a young man in Antwerp in the sixteenth century. He was a Christian who belonged to a small Protestant group and spent his spare time studying the Bible and teaching new converts, preparing them for baptism. He supported himself and his mother by working in a bakery. One day he was arrested for his faith, and for several months authorities alternately questioned and tortured him. From his dark isolation hole, he managed to smuggle letters to his mother, and in one of them he said: From him alone

we expect our strength to withstand these cruel wolves, so that they have no power over our souls. They are really more cruel than wolves—they are not satisfied with our bodies, tearing at them; but they seek to devour and kill our souls. Hans was shortly afterward burned at the stake in the heart of Antwerp. Who was behind it? That diabolical wolf called the devil.

A Lion Trying To Devour God's Children

So the devil is compared to a dragon, a serpent, a bird, a wolf, and finally, a lion. 1 Peter 5:7 says,

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

How does the devil devour us? Well, what is the first thing a carnivorous animal does if he wants to devour you? He sinks his teeth into you. The devil is always looking for a way to sink his teeth into God's children. He looks for soft spots, areas of compromise and carelessness. The New Testament is quite specific about this and I'd like to show you some verses:

- 1 Corinthians 7:5 says that married people give the devil an advantage over them when they don't maintain meaningful intimacy in their marriages. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.
- 2 Corinthians 2 deals with someone who had sinned against God and hurt the reputation of the church and relationships within the body of Christ. This person had apparently been very antagonistic toward the apostle Paul. But the man had evidently humbled himself, repented of his sin, sought forgiveness from God and from the people in the church. The apostle Paul indicated that under those circumstances failure to forgive the man would give the devil room to sink his teeth into that man and into that church. Look at verses 10-11: If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.
- There is a similar warning given in Ephesians 4:27: In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. We give the devil a foothold, or, to change the figure, we let him sink his teeth into us when we stay angry with someone too long. We all get angry from time to time, and sometimes we get angry with those we love the most. But we need to shake it off, to resolve it quickly. If we let the anger linger, it eat at us until we become embittered and we fall into the devil's trap.
- According to 1 Thessalonians 3, the devil also uses discouragement to sink his teeth into us. As we read through the book of Acts, we find that Paul had no sooner started the church in Thessalonica than he was torn away from it in a firestorm of persecution. The fledging church there could well have grown discouraged and given up. Paul wrote: We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.
- As we saw last Sunday night, we must also be careful about the men we place into positions of leadership in the church, especially those who are ordained as pastors. 1 Timothy 3:6-7 says, He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited.... He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Now think about all this. Consider the areas of your life and mine that are referred to in these passages. The devil isn't just some impersonal force of evil. He is a personal enemy who is probing for weak spots in your sex life, in your attitudes about forgiveness, in your angry spirit, in your discouragement, in your ego.

The devil is very real, very near, and very dangerous. He is Apollyon (the Destroyer); he is the accuser of the brethren; he is the adversary; he is Beelzebub (ruler of demons); he is the deceiver of the whole world, the enemy, the evil one; he is the god of this world; he is Lucifer, the prince of the power of the air; he is the tempter.

He prowls around like a dragon trying to destroy God's Son; like a serpent trying to deceive God's people; like a bird trying to despoil God's harvest; like a wolf trying to defeat God's flock; like a lion, seeking someone to devour.

But he is defeated. He was conquered by Jesus Christ at the cross of Calvary; he was routed at the empty tomb. And there in the cross do we find a place of safety where we can escape the wiles of the devil.

I read this week in People Magazine that actor Sean Connery and his wife were robbed recently in their hotel in Manhattan. They had dressed quickly for dinner, and she had left her jewelry scattered on the bed. They ducked to a nearby restaurant for supper, and when they returned the jewels were gone. Missing was a \$200,000 emerald ring and a Cartier gold watch. But the greatest loss of all was a diamond-studded cross that Sean had given his wife 20 years before. She said, "I love that old cross. It's so important to me."

That is just how I feel about the cross of Jesus Christ, the symbol of death with which the Son of God destroyed death. Hebrews 2 says that by his death he destroyed him who held the power of death—that is, the devil. 1 John 3:8 says,

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."

Without the cross of Jesus Christ in your life, you are fair game, naked prey, for the dragon, the serpent, the bird, the wolf, the lion. Our only place of safety is in Christ. And so we love that old cross. It is so important to us.

I want to ask: Are you in Christ? Is he your Savior and Lord? And are you self-controlled and alert, living close to the Savior today? Then the prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for, lo, his doom is sure.

For greater is he that in us than he that is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

THE FOURTH WATCH

Matthew 14:22-33

I read this week about a successful businessman who learned one day that he had a particularly nasty form of cancer. Though he survived it, he endured months and years of uncertainty and of difficult treatment. I also read this week of a well-known Christian whose 16-year-old son ran away from home, plunging the family into months and years of painful waiting. All of us know from experience how difficult it is to face circumstances that will not accommodate simple solutions or quick fixes. There are some problems that will not be resolved in a hurry. Sometimes all we can do is to wait and pray. For us in this instant society, that is painful and hard to accept.

Recently I've been encouraged by the "delays" of Jesus in the Scripture, those times when He seemed to tarry, to show up late. Last week we looked at the apparent delay in His arrival on earth. From the perspective of the ancient rabbis it appeared that the Messiah was slow in fulfilling the promises made about Him; but Galatians 4:4 tells us that from God's perspective Jesus came at just the right time. The seeming delay allowed God to align the circumstances of world history for His own purposes.

Today, I'd like to show you another occasion in which Jesus took His good sweet time. It's a well-known Bible story in Matthew 14, but we may not know it as well as we think:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd. After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," He said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:22-33).

As I studied this story in Matthew's Gospel and in the parallel accounts in Mark and in John, I learned I'd been looking at this story incorrectly. I've always imagined there were winds and waves and clouds and lightning and thunder and rain and storm, that the disciples were in danger of perishing, that they feared for their lives.

Well, there is another storm in which those things were true, but not this one. Let's look at the story very carefully.

In Matthew 14, Jesus and His disciples were hit with the jarring news that their co-laborer, John the Baptist, had been assassinated

by the government. Verse 13 says: When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Three words here indicate Jesus wanted and needed to be along—withered, privately, solitary.

But it wasn't meant to be: Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd He had compassion for them and healed their sick.

Now, look at Mt 14:15: As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said....

What time do you suppose this was? Probably past the half-way point in the afternoon. The disciples came to Him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

And here, in the late afternoon, we have the miraculous feeding of five thousand with the loaves and fish. Verse 21 says: The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Now, Mt 14:22: Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side while He dismissed the crowd.

What time is it now? Probably about five or six o'clock. They had barely finished supper when Jesus hurried them down to the lakeside and told them to get into the boat. The older translations say that He compelled them or constrained them to get in. You almost get the idea that they didn't realize they were going to take a boat trip that evening, they didn't think it was a very good idea weather-wise, and suddenly Jesus hurried them down to the dock and virtually forced them into that boat. The evangelistic meeting isn't over yet, but He told them, "I'll go back and dismiss the people. I just want you to get moving across that lake."

So at about twilight, Jesus went back, dismissed the crowds, and climbed upon a hillside to be alone and to pray. Mt 14:23: After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there along....

...but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against them.

That's all it says about the weather. There was no mention of rain. There was no thunder. There was no lightning. There was no storm. Just a strong wind that made the sea choppy and hindered their progress. Mark's Gospel puts it this way: When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and He was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.

Notice that Christ saw them. Now, this may imply a miracle. It may mean that He used some sort of divine X-ray vision to pierce the darkness and see what a mere mortal could not have seen. But according to the Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim, this scene occurred quite shortly before the Passover when the moon would likely be shining in a clear, unclouded sky, all the more brightly on a windy spring night, lighting up the waters far across. I myself have been to the Sea of Galilee, which is about seven-and-a-half miles across at its widest point. It's easy to see across the lake, and at night when the air is clear and the moon is bright, Jesus could easily have looked down and spotted that little boat making slow headway against the wind.

There is nothing in the three accounts to indicate that the disciples were alarmed by a storm or in danger of losing their lives. That occurred on another occasion when Jesus was with them, asleep in the boat. On this occasion, it was a clear, bright night, but windy, and the persistent wind rocked the boat and kept it from making forward progress. The disciples were straining at the oars.

Jesus, meanwhile, on the mountain, was keeping watch over the little boat as He prayed from afar. Now look at Matthew 14:25:

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them walking on the water.

The ancient world divided the night into four parts, and the fourth watch began at three a.m. and extended until daybreak, or six a.m. Jesus had put these men on that boat at perhaps five or six o'clock in the afternoon, and they had started off. But the driving wind had stalled them at mid-lake, and now it was three or four or five o'clock. They had been straining at the oars for ten hours or so! Count it up. Five-to-six-to-seven-to-eight-to-nine-to-ten-to-eleven-to-midnight. Then on until three or four o'clock.

Finally He rose from His place of prayer, walked down to the shoreline, stepped onto the water, and walked miraculously over the waves the three or three-and-a-half miles to them.

Now, why did He tarry until three in the morning? He could just as easily have come to them at nine o'clock, and by ten they would have been safely tucked into their warm beds. Why wait until nearly dawn? Why make them struggle all night long? As I pondered this question, three truths came to me. The first has to do with the disciples' condition.

Our Condition

We can say that the disciples had three problems on this evening. First, they were buffeted. The wind was blowing against them.

They were facing the adversity of a contrary wind. How often do we have to row against the wind. How often circumstances seem to be blowing against us, in our faces instead of to our backs.

Second, they were exhausted. In the middle of a very busy and draining ministry they learned that their compatriot had been assassinated by the government, and, seeking some solitude, they had encountered a multitude of thousands and had spent all day tending to these people. Then Jesus had hustled them onto a boat, and they had spent ten hours straining at the oars.

Have you ever tried to row a canoe upriver? I have. It's exhausting business. My muscles were aching after five minutes; I can't image doing it for ten hours. Now, these were sturdy fishermen, well acquainted with rowing. But even if they were taking turns, they must have been utterly exhausted. I don't know why the Lord allows His servants to become so tired. Paul spoke to the Corinthians about how hard he had worked and about how tired he had been. He said, "I have often gone without sleep."

I remember hearing Billy Graham's associate, Grady Wilson, tell about the famous 1957 New York City Crusade in Madison Square Garden. It was supposed to run for six weeks, but it went on for sixteen weeks. Later, according to Grady, Mr. Graham said that something had gone out of him during that crusade that never came back.

Missionary Amy Carmichael once said, "Sometimes I think the kind of tiredness that comes after such years as those that lie behind can never be rested anywhere but There (referring to heaven)."

Third, these disciples were not only buffeted and exhausted, they were stalled. Despite their mightiest efforts, they made no forward progress. It is mighty discouraging when you're trying your very best, working your very hardest, straining at the oars in the face of contrary winds, and you can't see the least bit of progress. That was their condition, and it is so often ours.

Our Savior

But now I want you to notice three things about their Savior. First, when they couldn't see Him, He could see them. All they could see from their perspective was the black façade of a mountain against an even blacker sky. But from His perch on that mountain, Jesus could see their little boat, a speck on the lake, illumined by the moonlight against the choppy waters. When we can't see Jesus, He can still see us. When we think He's forgotten about us, He is still watching closely.

Second, when they didn't know it, Jesus was praying for them. The books of Romans and Hebrews tell us that Jesus is now at the right hand of God, making intercession for us. He prays to His Father for us. What does He pray? We have only to study the Gospels and see how He prayed for His friends while on earth. The longest and greatest of these prayers is in John 17, the High Priestly prayer of Jesus for His followers. But in Matthew 11:25, He offered a prayer of thanksgiving for those who were His; in Luke 22, we read of His prayer for Simon Peter; in John 11, He prayed for those standing around Lazarus' tomb. In Luke 23:34, He even prayed for those who were crucifying Him.

When we can't see Him, He can see us; and when we don't know it, He is praying for us. Third, when we can't come to Him, He comes to us. At just the right time from His perspective, He rose from prayer, hastened down the hillside, stepped onto the blue liquid of the Galilee, and walked across the waves to His disciples. He promises us, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Our Focus

But there is a final aspect to this—their focus. When Jesus came to them walking on the water, Peter immediately wanted to step out onto the waves and come to Him. Jesus allowed it. But when Peter saw the waves and wind, he began to sink. Jesus caught him, but the lesson remains: When we become more aware of our circumstances than we are of our Savior, we begin to sink. But when, despite our circumstances, we keep our eyes on our Savior, we can live above them and be victorious. We can share our Lord's supernatural ability to live above the circumstances and to walk on the waves of life.

Some time ago I was deeply troubled about something, and I went to bed with little hope that I'd sleep. But I had been studying this passage, and that night I decided I would visualize the Lord Jesus, walking on the water, coming toward me. I would see myself in my mind's eye leaving the boat and walking toward Him. It was indeed a windy and difficult night, and all through the evening I would awaken and a sudden fear would nearly seize me. But I resolved that my mind would be stayed on the Lord. I had never before realized how difficult it was for Peter to ignore the blowing wind, the spray from the water, and the blustery waves. How tempted I was to glance to one side or another, as if to anticipate being smacked in the face by an unexpected wave. But all night long, as I slept and as I lay awake, I forced myself, in my mind, to keep my gaze fixed on Christ without glancing to the left or the right. I was on that Sea of Galilee all night long, but throughout the night, I kept my focus on Christ and it made all the difference.

Now, this is a parable for us. Right now, Jesus is up in heaven, praying for us. We can't see Him, but He can see us. He's preparing to come to us. But for a season, we're left, as it were, alone, on the choppy seas of this world, straining at the oars, oft discouraged, buffeted by contrary winds, and sometimes exhausted. But He see, He prays, and He is preparing to rise from His place of intercession and, at just the right time, when the darkness is deepest, to come to us.

Our job for now is to persevere, keeping our eyes on Jesus. Why did Jesus tarry? Why did He wait until three or three-thirty or four o'clock in the morning? This, I think, was the reason: He was teaching the disciple to persevere, keeping their eyes on Him.

Turn with me to Hebrews 12. The Hebrew Christians were facing a very discouraging period of renewed persecution. What does the Lord say to them. Look at the last part of verse 1 and the first part of verse 2: Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Persevere, and keep your eyes on Christ. Don't give in to discouragement. Don't despair. Don't give up. Persevere, and keep your eyes on Christ. Jesus tarried in order to teach them that lesson which the Bible indicates is a mark of great maturity.

- We...rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He has given us—Romans 5:3-5
- Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature...--James 1:2-4
- But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop—Luke 8:15
- May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance—2 Thessalonians 3:5
- Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised—Hebrews 10:35-36
- Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him—James 1:12

It's all summed up nicely in Fanny Crosby's little poem:

O child of God, wait patiently when dark thy path may be,
And let thy faith lean trustingly on Him Who cares for Thee;
And though the clouds hang drearily upon the brow of night,
Yet in the morning joy will come, and fill thy soul with light.

O child of God, He loveth thee, and thou art all His own;
With gentle hand He leadeth thee, thou dost not walk alone;
And though thou watchest wearily the long and stormy night,
Yet in the morning joy will come, and fill thy soul with light.

BE OF GOOD CHEER! IT IS I; DO NOT BE AFRAID

Matthew 14:22-33

We're currently in a series of five messages on the subject: Breaking Through: Columns in the Clouds." Our mission is to study the five different occasions in the Bible in which Jesus spoke four powerful words: "Be of Good Cheer," and to imagine (and rightly so!) that He is speaking those words to you and me just as surely as He spoke them to the individuals we're studying in the Bible. "Be of good cheer" is a powerful phrase. It was more than a salutation or causal greeting. It was an authoritative blessing, commandment, and promise—all rolled into one. In the Greek New Testament (the original language of the authors) only one word was used--*θαρσέω* (*thar-se-ō*). It literally meant to take heart, to take courage, to take cheer, to deliberately eject the emotions of gloom and doom and choose instead to let the joy and strength of Jesus shine through. Some translations say: Cheer up!

But if you're not too interested in the Greek, let's just take that English word cheer, which has an interesting etymology. It comes from the archaic word *chere* which meant face or facial expression. The word cheer literally means, in its original sense, to have a hopeful expression, a joyful countenance on your face. (Now look at the person sitting beside you and see if they qualify for that description)!

Well, Jesus told us five times to be of good cheer. He said it the first time to the paralytic man: Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven. He said it the second time to the woman with the issue of blood. Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has healed you. Now today He is going to draw on that same expression a third time and the setting is dramatic and wonderful. Let's look at the story in Matthew 14:22-33.

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on a mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was there alone. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come!" And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got back into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

I've preached on this text before, and it's one of those stories I count among my very favorites in the Bible. There was one particular night, January 1, 2002, when I had a night very much like Peter had on the evening recorded in this chapter, and I can tell you I almost literally lived this story all night long. It was a night of personal storm, and it was as though the Lord picked me up and transported me to this very scene and dropped me right into this story, right into the boat with these disciples.

That night I learned two things. First, it is hard to keep your eyes focused on the face of Jesus when your peripheral vision detects waves and spray and wind-driven surf coming at you from the left and right. Second, though hard, it is possible to keep your eyes focused on the face of Jesus when your peripheral vision detects those things. It is hard, but it is possible.

We have to learn to keep our eyes on Christ despite the splash and spray of the surf—either that or we'll sink like a rock, the way Peter almost did. So I have a deep love and affinity for this story.

But as I read and studied it this time, I saw some things I had not previously noticed; and I think I can best express it by pointing out four different factors in this story that create an attitude of cheer in our lives, even in the midst of storms. There's a popular television program called "Fear Factor." Well, think of this story under the title "Cheer Factor." There are four factors here that, joined together, can make us cheerful people.

The Multitude Factor

First, there is the multitude factor. There's got to be purpose and meaning in our lives if we're going to be of good cheer. For Jesus and His disciples, that meant ministering to the multitudes. Look at how Matthew tracks it:

Matthew 4:25: Great multitudes followed him—from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

Matthew 5:1: And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.

Matthew 8:1: When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him.

Matthew 8:18: And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side.

Matthew 9:8: Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

Matthew 9:36: But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.

Matthew 12:15: He withdrew from there. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all.

Matthew 12:23: And the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

Matthew 13:1ff: On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitudes stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables.

Those multitudes represented the millions of men, women, boys, and girls whose lives He intended to change. And for you and me to sustain a sense of joy and fulfillment in our lives, we've got to be doing something to reach the multitudes. That may involve a very large ministry. It might mean a small ministry which, unknown to us, will have very large results.

It's not enough for us to earn a paycheck, to enjoy a vacation, to buy a new car, to play video games and go to movies, to live an ordinary life and die an ordinary death without having changed the world. We are placed here to make a difference, and God intends for each of our lives to have significance.

Jesus was willing to spend and be spent on behalf of the multitudes, and if we're going to have joy and cheer and purpose in our lives, there must be the multitude factor. We must be involved in something that is reaching others with the Good News.

The Solitude Factor

But there must also be a solitude factor, for we need frequent breaks from the multitude; we need time alone with ourselves and alone with God. Ministering to multitudes is extremely draining. It literally drains the life out of you. Ministering to just one other person can be exhausting, or to your family members, or to your Bible study group or Sunday School class; and Jesus' ministry spanned the gamut between individual ministry and mass ministry. Though He was evidently in prime physical and spiritual shape, He needed rest, and so did the disciples.

Notice how He sought to safeguard His time alone. In Matthew 13:36, we read, "Then Jesus sent the multitude away." And then in chapter 14, when Jesus receives the tragic news of the murder and martyrdom of His closest associate, John the Baptist, He sought some time alone. Matthew 14:13 says: When Jesus heard (this news), He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out He saw the multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick.

He did more than that. The next verses tell how He fed them by multiplying a little lad's supper. Then in Matthew 14:22, we read:

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on a mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.

He sent the disciples away and He dismissed the multitudes. He needed solitude, alone time, time for replenishment. When I was a student at Columbia Bible College, I had several mentoring sessions with Dr. H. Edwin Young, who was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Columbia. One day as we were sitting in his office, I said, "Dr. Young, sometimes you're very hard to see. It took me a solid month to line up this appointment with you." He smiled and apologized for that, but then he said something I've never forgotten. He said, "Rob, I've learned that if I'm always available, I'm never available." I asked, "How so?" He said something to this effect, "Because if I'm always available I become so drained and so tired and so depleted that I don't have anything to give when I am available. I need time to recharge, to replenish, to cultivate my own soul, to stay fresh for the ministry God has given me."

Well, it doesn't take a month for someone to see me—I don't want to give you the wrong idea. But Dr. Young's principle is important for all of us. We need time to ourselves and time when we're shut away just with the Lord. I can't get enough of those times.

The Fortitude Factor

But now, notice this. While Jesus was up on the hillside enjoying His leisure time with the Father, the disciples were in crisis—and this brings us to the third factor in having a cheerful attitude—the fortitude factor. Look at Matthew 14:24, 25

But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea.

In Roman times, they divided the night into various segments or watches. The fourth watch of the night comprised the hours between three and six in the morning. Jesus allowed His disciples to struggle from perhaps seven or eight o'clock until maybe four o'clock in the morning. He didn't solve their problem instantly. He wanted them to learn something. It was a teaching time for them just as surely as when they were sitting at His feet listening to a sermon. The Lord doesn't always solve our problems instantly. He lingers and delays and watches, as it were, from a distance, praying for us in the mountains as we struggle on the stormy sea below. He's more interested in developing our faith than He is relieving our distress, although He will do that, too, in His own timing.

The Bible tells us on 34 different occasions to be strong. We can't be strong in our own strength, but we can be strong in His strength. We can be strong in the promises. We can be strong in grace. Listen to these verses

Therefore you shall keep every commandment which I command you today, that you may be strong, and go in and possess the land which you cross over to possess—Deuteronomy 11:8

Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you—Deuteronomy 31:6

Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go—Joshua 1:9

Be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded—2 Chronicles 15:7

Strengthen the weak hands, and mark firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you”—Isaiah 35:3-4

And he said, “O man greatly beloved, fear not! Peace be to you; be strong, yes, be strong!” So when he spoke to me, I was strengthened—Daniel 10:19

The people who know their God shall be strong and do exploits—Daniel 11:32

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong—1 Corinthians 16:13

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might—Ephesians 6:10

Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus—2 Timothy 2:1

And so Jesus came to them on the water, walking across the billowing waves, making His way through the storm and stepping on the whitecaps as though there were paving stones. And as He approached the boat, He shouted above the surf and hollered above the howling wind these words that have echoed through the ages down to you and me: Be of good cheer. It is I. Don't be afraid!

Whatever your storm, whatever your gale, whatever your struggle, you have total access through His grace to those same three short, simple sentences: Be of good cheer. It is I. Don't be afraid. Those words are a great encouragement. In fact, they encouraged Peter to do something rather rash and reckless.

And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come!” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got back into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.”

If you're like me, our favorite part of this story is Peter's attempt to walk on the water, too. So often I've put myself in his place and wondered what I would do and how I would do. Somehow we identify with Peter here. But there's one overarching lesson to the entire episode. We have storms and we have a Savior who can walk across them. When, in the midst of the storm, we focus on the storm, we sink beneath it. When, in the midst of the storm, we focus on the Savior, we rise above it.

That's the fortitude factor. That's the faith factor.

The Gratitude Factor

That leads to the final element of this story—the gratitude factor.

And how does the story end? It ends with thanksgiving, praise, worship, and awe.

Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.”

Now let's freeze-frame that picture, and let's go back one or two hours and freeze-frame that picture, too, when the disciples were at their moment of desperation. Put the two pictures side-by-side. Three o'clock: Exhaustion. Four o'clock: Exaltation. Three o'clock: Anguish and worry. Four o'clock: Awe and worship. Three o'clock: Acting as though Jesus had forgotten them and the storm had beaten them. Four o'clock: Realizing that Jesus had not forgotten them for one moment and that He was greater than the storm.

The secret of great faith is knowing at three o'clock that four o'clock is coming, and reacting accordingly.

It is replacing worry with worship, and doing so by faith. When the disciples looked out into the howling darkness at three o'clock, they could not see Jesus; but He could see them. Even at that very moment, He was making His way down the mountain, spreading an invisible carpet-runner across the waves and coming in their direction. But He was doing so in His own timing because He wanted to develop their spiritual muscles and teach them to trust Him even as the storm passes by.

The faith that pleases Jesus is being of good cheer at three o'clock because you know Jesus is going to make all things work together for good at four o'clock, and you're willing to wait patiently for His perfect timing.

The faith that pleases Jesus is the faith that adopts a four o'clock attitude in a three o'clock storm. It is the faith that remembers the words: Be of good cheer. It is I. Do not be afraid. And we maintain a sense of gratitude and grace even on stormy nights.

Exhausted and frightened,
They battled the rain,
The wind, the waves,

Enduring the strain,

Till finally their nerves
could stand it no more;
and their strength was all gone,
and their muscles were sore.

But up on the mountain
Jesus could see,
every white-capping wave
On the rough Galilee.

And treading the billows
like a carpet of sod,
He came to their aid
With the power of God.

They worshipped Him then,
With rejoicing and awe
For the marvels He did,
And the wonders they saw.

But better to praise Him
With the storm at its worst;
By remembering His power
And promises first

Hosanna, Loud Hosanna, the Little Children Sang **Matthew 21; Deuteronomy 6**

Today is Palm Sunday, and the thing I'd like for you to notice today is the role of children in this story. We see it especially in Matthew's account of the Triumphal Entry. Matthew is the Children's Gospel. He has more references to children than any other Gospel, and he writes more poignantly about ministering to children than any of the other Gospel writers, especially in chapter 18. He must have had children of his own, and he seems to have had a great heart for children. He noticed them.

His account of the Triumphal Entry is in chapter 21, and in the story itself there is no mention of children, but there is later. In this passage, Jesus was making His final entrance into Jerusalem, and He came riding in on a donkey, fulfilling the Messianic promise given in Zechariah 9:9. There is great excitement in the air...

And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest" (vv. 8-9).

None of the Gospel writers say anything about children being in the crowd, although we can assume there were lots and lots of children there. But let's read on and in a moment we'll come to the children. Continue with verse 10:

And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee." Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of thieves." Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

Now, look at verse 15:

But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant and said to Him, "Do You hear what

these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?’”

In other words, the hearts of children incline naturally toward the Lord, just as the faces of flowers incline naturally toward the sun. Faith comes naturally to a child. Love comes naturally to a child. Joy comes naturally to a child. The Lord Jesus comes naturally to a child. Now it’s true that children are born with a sin nature within them, as any parent can tell you.

There was one mother who was trying to go over the Ten Commandments with her little boy. “Now, Justin,” she said, “is there any commandment that tells you how to treat your parents.” He said that yes, there was—Thou shalt honor your father and mother. “Very good,” said his mom. “Now, is there a commandment that tells you how to treat your little brother?” He thought a moment before saying, “Thou shalt not kill.”

No, children aren’t exactly little angels, but it’s true that a young child’s life has not yet been complicated by sin and guilt, and they are very receptive to the things of God. That’s why Jesus took a little child and sat him on His lap and told us that we must enter the kingdom of Heaven as little children. That’s why many Christians in the world today—most Christians, actually—can trace their conversion back to a childhood experience in which they gave their hearts of Jesus Christ.

Now, here’s a related truth. God wants to place children in Christian homes in order to facilitate and nurture that process. The apostle Paul wrote, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, but bring them up in the nurture and instruction of the Lord.” And in Malachi the Lord tells us that one of the reasons He hates divorce is because He intends for us to raise godly offspring in a healthy, functional environment.

Is there, then, a passage in the Bible which serves as the most foundational teaching in all of the Word of God on the subject of raising children? Is there a fountainhead passage in the Bible on the subject of parenting? Yes, there is, and if you have been at TDF for several years, you’ve probably heard the essence of the message I want to bring today. I find that I preach on this passage every three or four or five years because I believe it is so important and foundational.

It is found early in the Bible, in books of Moses. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and when you read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, you read story after story of parents who had troubles with their children, starting with Cain and Abel. When you come to Deuteronomy, you’re reading the final words that Moses, his last sermons, addressed to the younger generation who were getting ready to cross the River Jordan and enter the Promised Land. The whole purpose of Deuteronomy is to instruct the younger generation on how to avoid the sins and mistakes of their elders, and there is a great deal in Deuteronomy on the importance of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The words “child” and “children” occur over fifty times in Deuteronomy.

The most basic passage in the book of Deuteronomy and, in fact, in the entire Bible on the subject of children rearing is the famous Shema, as it is called by the Jews, these verses in Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your souls, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Here are three rules for parenting which undergird everything else that we do as dads and moms. They summarize every other good word that has ever been spoken or written on the subject of effective parenting.

Love the Lord your God

The first rule for parents is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. Oddly enough, the first rule for raising children is to love somebody else more than we love our kids. We’re to love the Lord first and foremost. Jesus said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.” Where do you find the resources you need for raising children? Where does the joy come from? Where does the stamina come from? Where does the wisdom come from? Where does the love come from? Where does the patience come from? All these things are the results and the by-products of our own relationship with and love for the Lord.

I was recently studying through the life of the apostle Peter, and I saw something I’d never seen before—how passionate he was and demonstrative in his love toward Jesus. Now in this day and age, if one man loved another man as passionately and openly as Peter loved Jesus, we would raise our eyebrows. But think of how instantly and irrevocably Peter left his fishing nets to follow Jesus. Think of how passionately he wanted to get out of that boat to be near Jesus on the waves. Think of how he defended Jesus Christ before the critics. Think of how he said, “Even if all men betray you, I will not do so.” Think of how crushed he was when he failed

Jesus. Think of how quickly he jumped out of the boat and swam to shore when Jesus appeared on the coastline following the resurrection. Peter fell in love with another man—Jesus Christ—and it was a healthy and godly and growing love, and it changed his life, and everybody knew about it.

Our children need to see that same kind of excitement and passion in our love for the Lord Jesus.

Study the Bible

Second, effective parents are Bible students. The passage in Deuteronomy says: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your souls, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.

God words are to be on your hearts. If you want to be a good parent, spend time in the Scripture. One of the things that greatly impressed me as I grew up was my father's love for the Bible. He was raised on the side of a mountain in East Tennessee, a mile or so from the nearest road. His own father died when he was about seven, and all he remembered of his dad was his funeral and the rain beating on the tin roof of a shed near the cemetery. But somehow my father became a gifted educator and a wonderful dad. And I recall many times getting out of bed at night and finding him sitting in the den of our home, reading his Bible. Week after week I'd listen to him discuss the Bible with his older brother, my Uncle Walter, who was also a keen student of the Bible. Year after year he taught the men's Bible class at our church. And I recall hearing him and my mother reading the Bible together in bed at night before they turned off the light. Those memories have stayed with me all my life, and it's clearly one of the reasons that I grew up with an interest in the Bible myself.

When I was in college, I clipped an article out of a magazine on this subject and filed it away. I've referred back to it many times. It was an interview with Ruth Bell Graham, and the interviewer asked her about her upbringing in China where her parents were missionaries. She said, "Each morning when I went downstairs to breakfast, my father—a busy missionary surgeon—would be sitting reading his Bible. At night, her work behind her, my mother would be doing the same. Anything that could so capture the interest and devotion of those I admired and loved the most, I reasoned, must be worth investigating. So at an early age I began reading my Bible and found it to be, in the words of an old Scotsman, sweet pasturage."

Now, we've gotten away from that in our culture. Our children see us sitting in front of the television set hour after hour. They see us caught up in the excitement of our sports teams. They see us caught up in the excitement of the war. They see us hungering and thirsting after the latest movies. But when was the last time your children say you sitting quietly at home, the television turned off, reading and studying and pouring over God's Word?

Share God's Word Naturally

Now, there is a third aspect to being effective parents—we must share verses from the Bible naturally and spontaneously with our children. Look at the passage again:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your souls, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is a good time to remind you that our Sunday School here for children, and our nursery, preschool, and elementary ministries are not the primary means by which children should learn about the Lord and about the Bible. According to the Bible, the primary place in which children should learn about the Lord and about the Bible is in the home from their fathers, and also from their mothers. Our children's ministries here are only supplements to reinforce what's happening in the home.

It is your job and mine to instill the Word of God into the hearts of our children. How do we do that? According to this passage, it is spontaneous. Our hearts should be so full of the Word of God that it overflows naturally into the hearts and lives of our children.

In my hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee, lived a schoolteacher named Beula Thomas, a friend of my mother's, who was raised on the Colorado prairie. Before her death, she recorded her childhood recollections in a little booklet, including the vivid incident that brought her to faith in Jesus Christ.

An early blizzard hit the Rockies during the winter of 1912, and a local shepherd, Mr. Woods, was caught with his flock in the mountains near the Thomas homestead. He desperately tried to herd his sheep into a hollow space close together so they could keep warm. Woods knew the thick snow would provide a protective covering for his sheep, saving them from the bitter wind; and the warm breath from the sheep would melt the snow near their faces, allowing them to breathe. But instead of listening to their shepherd, the sheep bolted after the lead sheep and ran into a thick snowdrift where they perished. The despondent, half-frozen shepherd showed up at the Thomas house, seeking refuge from the storm. Mrs. Thomas heated water for the poor man's hands and feet while her husband rubbed them vigorously to ward off frostbite. Over a supper of salmon patties the man told his sad story.

The three Thomas children were gripped by this unexpected visitor. Shortly afterward, while they discussed it all with their mother, she quoted Psalm 23, explaining that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for us, though all we like sheep have gone astray. "Some people are stubborn and refuse to follow Christ and are lost forever. But Jesus came to lead his sheep to eternal safety." As she used that story to explain the Gospel, her words spoke to the children, and that day both Beula and sister Pearl chose to follow the Master's voice. Beula always traced her conversion back to that event.

This passage goes on to say that we should write the word of God on the doorposts of our houses. Now, the Jews took this very earnestly, and to this day if you visit a Jewish home it's likely you'll see a little device, a little case, attached to the door called a Mezuzah. If you visit Israel, you'll even find a Mezuzah attached to the door casing of your hotel room.

Now, I don't think we have to take these verses in that sort of literal sense; but I think we can learn from them the importance of having Scripture on the walls of our homes. There are so many beautiful renditions of Scripture now, framed, and suitable for hanging in our homes.

When I was at Wheaton College, I took a class in childhood education and we devoted a class session to the importance of painting and artwork in the home. The professor told of a woman whose sons all went off to sea. They became sailors, and the woman was unhappy about it. She wondered why all of her sons would take off on the high seas for their life's professions. And then she realized that on the living room wall was a picture of a majestic clipper ship, flags waving, ploughing the waves. No one had ever said anything about that painting, but now she realized the power of its unspoken presence in the home.

There are many paintings that are now available by Christian artists with Scripture verses beneath them, and many renditions of Scripture copied with beautiful penmanship and calligraphy, and the presence of Scripture in our homes has a great impact on our children.

A mother in our church come to me one day several years ago and told me that her young son had a problem with fears at night. He was unable to go to sleep at night because of various fears and worries. One Sunday in a message I quoted 2 Timothy 1:7: God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, of power, and of a sound mind. That verse so impressed him that he and his mother went out and bought some luminous, glow-in-the-dark paint, and carefully painted that verse along the top of the wall opposite his bed so he could see it whenever he awakened in the night.

So if you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle—if you have any children in your life to whom you can minister—remember this. Children gravitate naturally toward the Lord Jesus Christ, and our job is to encourage them along the way. It is our job as dads and moms to instill within them a love for God and His Word. How can we do this? We must love the Lord our God ourselves, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We must pour into His word to nourish our own hearts. And we must let His Word overflow from our lives into the hearts and minds and ears of our children.

And what will they say then?

Like children in the biblical days of Jesus, they will say,

"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest!"

CHRIST'S OWN SERMON ABOUT HIS RETURN

Matthew 24-25

It was during the Great Depression, and Margery Talcott and her husband were barely making it. Their son Pete was six years old. About a week before Christmas, they had a little family meeting of sorts. Margery explained to Pete that there was no money that year for presents, no money at all. "But I'll tell you what we can do," said the father, with a flash of inspiration. "We can make pictures of the presents we'd like to give each other."

Somehow they managed to find a little tree and scrape together some sparse decorations for it. And for the next week, it was a family project. Each one worked hard on their pictures.

"On Christmas morning, never was a tree heaped with such riches!" said Margery. "The gifts were only pictures of gifts, to be sure, cut out or drawn and colored or painted, nailed and hammered and pasted and sewed. But they were presents, luxurious beyond our dreams."

The daddy received a black limousine and a red motor boat. For the mom, there was a diamond bracelet, a fur coat, and best of all a watercolor of the dream house she had always wanted, a white one with green shutters and forsythia bushes on the lawn. Pete received a lion's share of the gifts, including a fabulous camping tent and a swimming pool.

When time came for the couple to open the gift Pete had drawn for them, it was the best present of all, a crayon drawing of three people laughing—a man, a woman, and a little boy. They had their arms around one another and under the picture was printed just one word: US.

"For many years," wrote Margery Talcott, "we have looked back at that day as the richest, most satisfying Christmas we ever had." ("The Christmas We Will Never Forget" by Margery Talcott, in *The Guideposts Christmas Treasury* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Magazine/Guideposts Associates, Inc.), 179-180.)

When Jesus came the first time, He left something under the tree. He left us with one of the best gifts that the world has ever been given—a picture of His return. He painted it using 1,845 verses in the Bible. That has been our subject for the last several weeks, and today we're coming to the end of our series of sermons entitled "Rapture Ready" on the topic of the rapture of the church, the antichrist and the Great Tribulation, and the Return of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of the ages.

I'd like to end today by showing you something interesting about our Lord's own sermon on this subject. On the week He was crucified, He trekked up the Mount of Olives opposite Jerusalem, and there He taught His disciples about the signs of the times and the end of the age. We call this the Olivet Discourse, and it's found in Matthew 24 and 25. Today I'd like to show you something very interesting about this message, so if you have your Bibles, please turn there with me.

Notice the setting, which is given at the beginning of Matthew 24: Jesus left the temple and was walking away when His disciples came up to Him to call His attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" He asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of Your Coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus answered.....

And in verse 4 through verse 35, He gives us the outline for the events of the Last Days. But here's what I want you to notice. From verse 36 to the last verse of the chapter, verse 51, and then through the entire next chapter, Jesus drives home the implications of this and tells us how we should live. In other words, the first third of our Lord's sermon was His outline of the Last Days, but He spends the last two-thirds on application. Look, for example, at Matthew 24:42-44:

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.

And continuing with Mt 24:45:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the Master has put in charge of the servants in His household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when He returns.

And, then, chapter 25 opens with the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Notice the point Jesus is making in Mt 25:13:

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Jesus went on to tell two other stories—the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, stressing the same point. And I think it is very interesting that Jesus preached one sermon devoted exclusively to His Return, and He spent two-thirds of His time in application. There are 93 verses in the Olivet Discourse. The first 31 of them outline for us the sequence of events to unfold during the Last Days, and the last 62 are devoted to application—to stressing the fact that we must be watching and waiting and working, ready at any moment for our Lord to return.

Now I think that the apostle Peter understood that message, because he made exactly the same point when he later wrote about our Lord's return.

Look at 2 Peter 3:10-11:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?

That's the question. If we're really watching and waiting for our Lord to return at any moment, what kind of people should we be?

This is one of the great purposes of biblical prophecy. It wasn't given just to satisfy our curiosity or to meet our need to know the future. It was given to improve our lives now and to motivate us to be the kind of people we should be.

In my research for this series of messages, one of the books I consulted was published exactly 100 years ago, in 1908, and written by William E. Blackstone. The title was simply [Jesus is Coming](#). The title of chapter 17 of this book is "[A Practical Doctrine](#)," and in that chapter Blackstone lists 40 different ways that, according to the Bible, this doctrine should affect our lives.

I don't have time today for a sermon with 40 points, but I do want to give five ways in which the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ should transform us every day.

1. The Second Coming Brings Anticipation

First, the doctrine of the Second Coming fills us with anticipation. Notice how Peter brings this out in the passage we've just referred to, 2 Peter 3:11-14: Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.

Three times in this passage, Peter tells us that we should be looking forward to His return. And it reminds me of what Paul said just before his death. He talked about the crown of righteousness, which the Lord would give him and to all who are looking forward to the Lord's return.

I recall when I was a child, my dad took us all on a trip out West. We drove all the way across the country. My sister was just about six months old, and I was six years old. We had some friends who lived in Downey, California, not far from Anaheim, and we spent several nights with them. One day they said, "Tomorrow let's go to Disneyland." Now, at this time, Disneyland was still a brand new thing. It had been opened five years earlier, but it was still a novelty. But I had heard about it, and I was so excited that I could hardly stand it. And that morning I woke up and got dressed, and I put my t-shirt on backwards so that the tag was showing just below my neck. I came out for breakfast and my dad was talking to his friend. He looked at me and grinned and said, "I know a little boy who's so excited that he put his clothes on backward." For some reason, I remember my dad's saying that more than I remember what we did when we actually got to Disneyland. For some reason, my memory of that day is kind of vague. I can hardly remember anything about the rides or the shows. What I remember most is the excitement and anticipation that I felt about going.

The same thing was true about Christmas when I was a child. Every Christmas Eve, my mother would have all the aunts and uncles over for Christmas Eve Supper, and after the dishes were washed we'd gather around the tree and open the presents. As I think back to those days, I can hardly remember any one particular present that I received. What I remember most is the excitement and impatience and anticipation of opening them. I could hardly wait for the supper to be finished and the dishes washed. It was the anticipation that I remember.

It's even that way as an adult. Several years ago, I took my wife and girls on a trip to Europe. My best memories about that trip have to do with the excitement and planning and study and anticipation that I did before we left.

There is something very therapeutic about anticipation. When we have something to look forward to, it gives us hope and we view the future with a sense of excitement. That's what the Second Coming should bring to our attitudes and hearts every day. This doctrine provides the therapy of anticipation, which is crucial to our mental and emotional well-being.

2. The Second Coming Brings Comfort

Secondly and relatedly, the Second Coming brings comfort to our hearts. At the end of this month, I'll be wrapping up 29 years of pastoral ministry here, and one of my regrets is that I haven't kept better records. I can't remember how many weddings I've performed, or how many babies I've dedicated, or how many funerals I've officiated. In fact, I now realize what was going on with my friend, Winford Floyd, who was the pastor of our church while I was growing up. One summer during my college years, I served as his intern, and it was a wonderful experience. But one day we were driving down the main street of Elizabethton, Elk Avenue, and he saw someone on the sidewalk, and a puzzled look came over his face. "I remember conducting that man's funeral," he said. "I remember burying that man." It happened two or three times; and at the time I wondered how in the world he could get so mixed up. But now I know; there are so many ministry functions that it all gets mixed up in our brains. (So if I come up to you with a puzzled expression on my face, that may be the reason).

But I know this. If I didn't have the doctrine of the Second Coming, I do not think I would ever officiate another funeral. I would have nothing to say. I'd have no comfort to give. And with my own losses and sadnesses, if it weren't for the Second Coming, I'd be overwhelmed with depression.

But 1 Thessalonians 5 says: "So shall we ever be with the Lord... therefore comfort one another with these words." This is arguably

the most comforting truth in the entire Bible.

3. The Second Coming Brings Purity

So the Second Coming brings anticipation and comfort. Third, the Second Coming inspires us to purity. Look at the 2 Peter passage again: Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.

Because Christ is coming at any moment, we want to be ready for Him. We're inspired to be holy and godly, and spotless and blameless. Let me explain it this way. Suppose you've invited people over to your house. If you're like us, you work hard to get the house clean and straightened up. You want everything to look its best before your company arrives. You dust and vacuum and straighten and try hard to make a good impression, because you have someone coming to see you.

Well, we have someone coming to see us; He may come at any time. So we want to be ready when it comes. And that should speak to us in very practical ways. For example, the Bible suggests that we dress with appropriate modesty. And I've been encouraged recently to read in the magazines that a new "Modesty Movement" is sweeping the country, and many young men and women are resisting the urge to wear provocative and overly tight or revealing clothes.

In some ways it seemed to have a beginning in 2004, when an eleven-year-old girl named Ella Gunderson wrote a letter to Nordstrom, the famous department-store chain, complaining that its denim jeans were too revealing. Apparently Nordstrom was getting similar input from other young people, because it issued an apology and eventually started a "Modern and Modest" line of clothing for young ladies.

Other department stores are following the trend. Someone called it, "youth led rebellion," and news of this new Modesty Movement is hitting the newspapers and television programs. It's encouraging to know that many people today, motivated by their faith, want to affirm their testimony through their appearance.

I remember reading about one young man who went to a movie that had scenes in it that violated his Christian principles. He got up and left. He said, "If Jesus were to come back at this instant, I wouldn't want Him to find me here."

4. The Second Coming Brings Self-Control

Along those same lines, there is one particular aspect of holiness that seems especially related to the doctrine of the Second Coming, and that is self-control. There's something about studying the truths of Christ's return that strengthens us in the area of self-control, and this comes up again and again in the New Testament.

- Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed—1 Peter 1:13
- The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray—1 Peter 4:7
- Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come—Acts 24:25
- Now, brothers, about the times and dates, we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief.... You, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled....—2 Thessalonians 5:1-8
- Live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ—Titus 2:11-12

Notice that all these passages connect self-control with an awareness of the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

We can learn a lesson from that. Every day all over America there are thousands upon thousands of self-help groups and therapy sessions aimed at helping people control their passions, addictions, emotions, and behavior. But I'm not sure if any of them have actually discovered this truth or this technique. A study of the Second Coming bolsters our sense of self-control. So if this is an area of struggle for you, study the doctrine of the Second Coming and find ways of attaching this truth to the area in which you need more self-control.

You can find creative ways of doing that. For example, perhaps you need self-control in the area of your personal computer.

Perhaps you're apt to look at things you shouldn't, or maybe you just spend too much time surfing the web. Perhaps you're addicted to video games. Well, select a verse in the Bible about the Second Coming or perhaps a photograph of beautiful cloud formations to remind you of His return. Use that for your screen saver. Take a moment whenever you sit at your computer to pray, "Even, so, come, Lord Jesus." Learn to remind yourself frequently that His coming is imminent, and it will tremendously bolster the sense of self-control you can exercise in life.

5. The Second Coming Brings Work

So the Second Coming brings anticipation and comfort. It also brings purity and self-control. But finally, the Second Coming of Christ makes us workers in the Kingdom. It inspires and compels us to work for the Master. Jesus said, "Occupy till I come." He said, in paraphrase, "Blessed is that servant whose Master finds Him working faithfully when He comes."

Think of it this way. What if you knew for certain that Christ was coming again at noon tomorrow. Would it make any difference in the urgency with which you tried to warn and win others? A sense of the imminent return of Christ is the fuel that inspires our labor for Him.

Two thousand years ago, most people had given up on the Messiah. It had been two thousand years since the promise given by God to Abraham. It had been one thousand years since the promises given to King David. It had been seven hundred years since the promises given to Isaiah. It had been four hundred years since the close of the Old Testament. The Jewish nation had waited for their Messiah year after year, generation after generation, century after century. And most had given up and said, "Maybe we misunderstood. Maybe He's not coming."

But in the fullness of time and in a little Judean town, He did show up. Most people missed it at the time, but there were two old people in nearby Jerusalem who were waiting and watching. Simeon and Anna. It had somehow been revealed to them that the Messiah would come under their watch, and they were waiting and ready. And in Luke 2, the old man, Simeon, took the Christ child in his arms and praised God saying,

"Now Lord, as you have promised, dismiss Thy servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to Your people Israel."

We need to be Simeons and Anna—waiting, watching, working, and ready to answer Peter's great question: In view of His Coming which will be like a thief in the night, and in view of His soon appearing, what sort of people ought we to be?

GOD IN THREE PERSONS, BLESSED TRINITY

Matthew 28:18-19

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Matthew 28:18-19

Can you explain this Trinity stuff to me? That's the question that led to my developing the sermon series we're beginning today. We have a program of discipleship in our church in which we take new converts—new Christians—and we assign a mentor to walk with them through the discipleship materials that we use. Recently we had a young man who became a new follower of Jesus Christ. We gave him the material and he and his mentor met for their first session. But as they started, the young man said, "You know, I don't understand this doctrine about the Trinity. What's that all about? Can you explain this Trinity stuff to me?"

When I heard that I realized that although this is the deepest and most distinctive truth of Christianity, it's one I've neglected to some extent in my preaching. After all, the doctrine of the Trinity intimidating to preach about. How can you explain the inexplicable? How can you preach on the imponderable?

Well, while I was thinking about these things, I had to take a quick trip to Orlando for a meeting. On my way back from the hotel to the airport I wanted to see if I could find a way of witnessing to my taxi driver. But just as I started, I found out he was already a Christian and he started witnessing to me. He was from the Caribbean. He said he grew up in church, was converted in childhood, and was now active in his church in Orlando.

So I asked him, "Can you explain this Trinity stuff to me? What do Christians mean when they talk about the Trinity?" My young taxi driver started preaching and stabbing the air with his finger and you would have thought he was in the pulpit. He said, "There is one God and it is the Father and He had a Son, who is Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God." He kept emphasizing these sentences over and over, but it became obvious that this young man who claimed to have been a Christian all his life did not have a clear

understanding of the Trinity.

“Yes,” I asked him, “but is Jesus God? And if Jesus is God how can the Father be God? And what about the Holy Spirit?” I asked questions like that to challenge him. Every time I would ask a question, he’d go into his preaching mode and say: “There is one God and it is the Father and He had a Son, who is Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God.” But he never came close to explaining the Trinity.

Well, this young man is not alone. I think a lot of Christians have an inadequate understanding of the subject of the Trinity. Truth be told, as I’ve studied the subject in preparing for these messages, I was surprised at how much I learned that I had never fully realized before.

And so for the next several weeks I’d like to preach a doctrinal series of sermons on this subject. When I say doctrinal series, that means these messages will be theological and explanatory in nature, but it does not mean that this is just an academic series of studies. One of the things that surprised me most is how the reality of the Tri-unity of God reverberates through the entire created order. I’ll touch on that at the end of today’s message and will discuss it more during these series of messages.

But today, to keep things simple, I have the traditional three points and a poem.

Editorial Note: Related Resources:

- [Trinity - Holman Bible Dictionary](#)
- [International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Trinity](#)

1. The Trinity is the Most Unique Aspect of Christian Truth

First, the doctrine of the Trinity is the most unique aspect of Christian truth. Dr. Henry Morris calls it “undoubtedly the most distinctive doctrine of the Christian faith.” (“The Wonderful Truth of the Trinity,” by Henry Morris at <http://www.irc.org/article/2494>.) This is the doctrine more than any other that sets Christianity apart from all other religions, faith systems, sects, cults, and philosophies.

- Judaism believes that there is one God who exists as one person or one center of consciousness—Jehovah or Yahweh.
- Islam believes that there is one God who exists as one person or one center of consciousness—Allah. One of the chief points at which Muslims attack Christianity concerns our belief in the Trinity.
- The Unitarians believe there is one God who exists as one person, which is why they are called Unitarians. (Actually, however, most of them don’t even believe that anymore).
- The Mormons believe that there are many Gods, and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate Gods among these many Gods.
- The Jehovah Witnesses believe that Jehovah is God but that Jesus isn’t.
- Buddhism doesn’t believe there is a god at all, though in some ways Buddhism can be called pantheistic (believing in there is a god-force that is sort of everywhere).
- Many of the eastern religions, including Hinduism, are pantheistic or polytheistic.
- Atheism, of course, doesn’t even believe there is a god at all.

Christians are the only people in the world who believe there is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons. It is the truth that distinguishes us from everyone else in on earth. The frightening thing is that in some quarters, this great historic, biblical truth is being thrown overboard.

- There’s a growing movement within the American church known as Oneness Pentecostalism that denies the doctrine of the Trinity. They actually believe a form of modalism, which I’ll explain later.
- One of the most prominent names associated with Oneness Pentecostalism is Bishop T. D. Jakes, who is the pastor of The Potter’s House in Dallas, one of the fastest growing mega-churches in America. I remember seeing him on the cover of Time Magazine several years ago, and the caption said that he was the next Billy Graham. But from what I’ve read Bishop Jakes does not hold to the historic and biblical doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God who eternally exists in three persons. He believes instead in a form of modalism, which, again, I’ll explain later.
- A more recent name in the news is that of Gwen Shamblin, who established the popular Weighdown Workshop and the founder of a large church down in Brentwood, Tennessee. She has also rejected the historical and biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

The Bible tells us that we must defend the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints, and the battleground today is with the historic and biblical doctrine of the Trinity, which is the one truth that makes Christianity absolutely unique among the religions and faith-systems and cults and sects of this world.

2. The Trinity is Easy to State

Second, the doctrine of the Trinity is easy to state. Here it is: There is One God who eternally exists in Three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is One God who eternally exists in Three Persons, or in Three Centers of Consciousness.

Let's look at the Biblical support for this.

First, the Bible everywhere affirms that there is one God and only one God.

- Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one—Deuteronomy 6:4. Jesus affirmed and quoted this Old Testament passage in Mark 12.
- The Lord is God and that there is no other—1 Kings 8:60
- I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from Me there is no God—Isaiah 45:5
- There is only one God—Romans 3:30
- We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one—1 Corinthians 8:4-6
- You believe that there is one God! Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder—James 1:19

Second, the Bible teaches that this one God eternally exists in three persons. I can illustrate this by looking at the very beginning and at the very ending of Jesus' ministry as it's recorded in the book of Matthew. The ministry of our Lord had a very definite commencement. It was His baptism. Look at what Matthew says in chapter 3, verses 16. You've heard of John 3:16. Well, look at Matthew 3:16:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove lighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

Notice the presence of the entire Godhead in this passage. The Son was baptized, the Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit descended like a dove.

Now turn to the very end of Matthew's Gospel. The very last paragraph, just before Jesus ascended into heaven, is known as the Great Commissions. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18-19).

Jesus opened and concluded His ministry with the Trinity, and notice in the baptism formula that He gave us, He didn't command us to be instructed in the names (plural) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity doesn't mean that there are three Gods, or that there is one God in three roles or forms or modes. But that there is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons: God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity.

Now, this is a good place to bring up the whole subject of [modalism](#). Very likely this is a new term for you, but just think of the word "mode." The word "mode" means "form." We talk about different modes of transportation, and we're talking about forms of transportation. Do you drive your car to work or take the train? What mode or form of transportation do you use?

Well, modalists believe that there is one God who eternally exists in one person but who reveals Himself in three different modes or roles or forms. This is a heresy that goes all the way back to the 3rd century and to a person named Sabellius, who was a priest who probably lived in Rome around the year AD 200. He taught that there was one indivisible God who does not eternally exist in Three Persons but who reveals himself in three different modes. So this heresy is called [Sabellianism](#) or modalism.

Here's one example of what a modalist might say. In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as God the Father; but in the Gospels, God revealed Himself in the form of Jesus Christ the Son. At the Day of Pentecost, God revealed Himself as the Holy Spirit. So there is one God who eternally exists as one person, but He reveals Himself in various modes or forms or pictures or relationships to meet the needs or exigencies of the times.

Now, it is very easy to slip into modalism when you try to explain the Trinity, and I myself have fallen into that trap. Someone came up to me recently—I don't remember who it was—but he said to me: "Some time ago (I hope it was a long time ago; in fact, I'm not sure it was really me but it could have been), you really helped me understand the Trinity. You said something to this effect: 'I am one human being, but I have different roles. I am a husband. I am a father. I am a pastor. In the same way, God is one God but He occupies three different roles.'"

Hopefully that person had me confused with someone else, because that explanation is classic, heretical Sabellianism or modalism. We do not have a God who has revealed Himself in three different ways; we have One God who actually exists in Three Persons, Three different centers of consciousness—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I might be a husband and a father and a pastor, but I am still one person with one center of consciousness just fulfilling different roles in life. I have not been cloned and I am not three persons. God is not just filling various roles. He is not one God in three different forms. He is actually one God who eternally exists in three persons.

Incidentally, most of the other analogies we use are modalistic, too. For example, have you ever heard someone say, "The Trinity is like water. It can exist as liquid, ice, or vapor"? Yes, but that drop of water does not exist as liquid, ice, and vapor at the same time. It may pass from one form to another, but it is not liquid, ice, and vapor simultaneously.

Now, some people say: "This is illogical. This is crazy. This doesn't make sense." But you cannot say that with intellectual credibility. The doctrine of the Trinity is not illogical. It may be wonderful and mysterious and transcendent and supernatural. But it is not illogical. That is, it does not violate the law of non-contradiction.

If we say that there was one God and three Gods at the same time and in the same relationship, those two statements would cancel each other out, contradict each other, and be illogical. If we said that God was one person and three persons at the same time and in the same relationship—that, too, would be illogical. But to say that there is one God who eternally exists in three persons might be mysterious, but it is not self-contradicting or illogical.

So, like all of God's truth, the historic and orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is simple and easy to state: There is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons. It is so simple to state, in fact, that over the centuries a particular illustration has been used to portray it. It's a triangle within a circle. The circle represents the unity or oneness of God, but the three corners of the triangle represent the Three Members of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. Yet the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. One. They are separate and distinguishable persons—one God who eternally exists in Three Persons.

As the old song says: "God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity."

3. The Trinity is Impossible to Understand

Third, this truth is easy to state but impossible to understand. And that's one of the reasons I'm convinced that it's true.

If we could comprehend the infinite and ethereal being of God and pack Him up within our soggy brains, He would not be eternal, illimitable, and transcendent. If we could remove the "mystery" of God, He would not be God after all. The theologian Wayne Grudem wrote: "It is spiritually healthy for us to acknowledge openly that God's very being is far greater than we can ever comprehend.

The theologian Louis Berkhof wrote: "[The Trinity is a mystery](#).. (We) cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible... in its essential nature."

Dr. Henry Morris says, "[We cannot really comprehend this with our minds](#), but we can believe it and rejoice with our hearts." ("[The Wonderful Truth of the Trinity](#)," by Henry Morris at <http://www.irc.org/article/2494>.)

It fact, it is brilliant. No human being would have come up with this idea. In all the eons of human history, in the records of ancient mythologies and legends, in the formation of major religions and deviant cults, in all the philosophies that have ever been articulated—no one, no human being, has ever come up with such an idea. It is beyond human imagination. It is a revealed truth from the realms of heaven shown to us in Scripture alone.

And yet...

And yet, if we look carefully at the creation, we can see reverberations of the Trinity everywhere. The very nature of the Trinity is reflected in all reality. It's reflected in our forms and functions and attitudes and actions. It's reflected in the very nature of the cosmos and the very nature of the church.

For example, the reality of the Triune God established the pattern we see throughout all the creation as it relates to the entire actuality of unity with diversity.

What do you have in the Trinity? You have unity in diversity. There is one God, and that one God is one in nature, one in essence. God is union and God is united and God is one. Yet there is diversity within the Trinity. The Father is different from the Son, and the Son is different from Spirit, and the Spirit is different from the Father. Unity with diversity.

Now, look at the creation. The nature of God is reflected in what He has created. Last week, I was with friends in West Virginia who had a new puppy. It was a little white Maltese, and it ran around like a living cotton ball. And I thought of how similar that Maltese is to a Great Dane. They both have four legs and they both think like a dog and they both bark and they both like to take their tongues

and lick your skin and they can both bite. Yet how different they are.

Look at the stars. As we peer upward into the heaven, they all look alike—tiny twinkling distant lights against the black velvet of space. And each one is alike, yet each one is different.

Look at your garden full of different vegetables or your orchard with different kinds of trees bearing fruits.

Look at human beings. Most of us have two legs and two eyes and two ears and we tend to walk upright and speak intelligible language and have various emotions; and yet how different we all are from one another.

What if we were all the same? What if we looked alike and thought alike and dressed alike and talked alike? But what does Genesis 1:26 say? “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.’” That verse has very many implications, but one of them is this—unity with diversity. Just as God is One and yet Three, so we are one and yet many.

And look at the church. Let me show you what Paul has to say about this in Ephesians 4:

As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all.

There’s the unity. There is one God, and so His creation, His people, and His church is one—united, one body even as there is one God. The unity of the church reflects the very intrinsic, eternal unity of God.

But unity does not mean monotony. There is diversity:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says; “When He ascended on High, He led captives in His train and gave gifts to men.” (What does “He ascended” mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure and fullness of Christ.

So there is one body but we have many different gifts and we are all different—yet we are one. And by the way, did you notice how the Trinity jumps out at you in this passage from Ephesians? There is one God and one Father who is over all. There is one Christ who bestows spiritual gifts on His church. And there is one Spirit who preserves the unity of the body.

Whenever you see the stars in the sky, the animals of the field, the vegetables in the garden, the people at church—realize God’s Triune nature is reflected in all of His creation. The universe is the way it is because God is the way He is. He is Three and yet One—One and yet Three. There is unity and there is diversity within the Godhead, and the creation reflects the Creator. Christianity is the only faith system in the world that understands and articulates this. It’s what makes the Christian faith unique. It’s easy to state but impossible to understand.

And that brings us to the poem:

Praise God from whom all blessing flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

TRIPLY COMMISSIONED MATTHEW 28

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

I like people with passion, people who really believe in what they’re doing. The other week, I was listening to National Public Radio, and they told the story of a man named Jeff Varasano, a brilliant computer consultant who relocated to Atlanta. He has an incredible and curious mind; and I later learned that he’s one of the fastest people on earth when it comes to solving the Rubik’s

Cube. Well, Varasano wasn't very happy with his job as a computer consultant, and he began to develop an obsession for pizza. He had trouble finding a decent slice in Atlanta, and he was curious to know if he could make a decent pizza in his home kitchen. One of the secrets to a good pizza is having a hot enough oven. In Italy the ovens are so hot that a pizza will literally bake in as little as 45 seconds. Maybe two minutes, maximum. You need an oven that's somewhere between 800 and 1200 degrees, and the average home oven doesn't get anywhere near that hot. But Jeff Varasano noticed that his home oven had a self-cleaning cycle in which for a brief moment it would become so hot that it basically incinerated everything in the oven. So he took a pair of hedge clippers and clipped off the thermostat, so that his oven would get that hot and stay that hot. He baked over a thousand pizzas—in between visits from the appliance repairmen and the fire department. Sometimes his oven would burst into flames in the middle of a party for his taste-testing friends. He experimented with hundreds of ingredients. Heblogged about the whole experience and his blogs became very popular. He has since opened a pizzeria in Atlanta, and it's been voted the best pizza in Atlanta. A few weeks ago I was in Atlanta and I ate there, and it was the best pizza I think I've ever had. My server told me that it stayed in the oven for less than two minutes, but the crust was beautifully and lightly charred, yet chewy and delicious. This is all because a man became obsessed with pizza. It became his purpose and passion in life.

Now, the point of my sermon today is this. Don't you think that you and I should be as passionate about souls as that man is about pizza? If a round disk of dough can become so important, which is baked in two minutes and consumed in twenty minutes, don't you think that we should have at least an equal passion for souls, which are eternal? I can tell you that from the moment Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 28, which we call the Great Commission, they became the driving force and the unquenchable passion of the early disciples. The book of Acts is simply the historical record of the passion of the early church in fulfilling this great commission, and the history of Christianity is simply the story of the spreading of the Gospel across land and sea, from generation to generation, from one person to another, from one nation to another, until it has come down to you and me. The early church wasn't zealous about pizza or parties or popularity, power, prosperity, or possessions. They were zealous about proclaiming the news that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead!

Matthew 28:1-15 We Are Triply Commissioned

As I studied Matthew 28 for today's message, I saw something that I had never seen before. The Great Commission doesn't just occur at the end of this chapter. It occurs three times in this chapter, and it really is the theme that runs through this chapter like a crimson cord. This chapter is an account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the purpose isn't just to show us the resurrection. It's to grip us with the fact that the message of the resurrection is to be shared wherever we go, wherever we are. In this chapter, we are triply commissioned. Look at verse 1:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

As I studied this passage, I came to realize that Jesus rose from the dead during the night. The Jewish Sabbath ended at sundown, and sometime after sundown, perhaps sometime after midnight, perhaps in the wee hours, the resurrection occurred. Jesus' body was not only reactivated, as it were. It was transformed and glorified in a flash of power. And He rose up, right out of the shroud. His glorified body passed through the stone walls of that cave or right through the stone door, just as He would later mysteriously enter and exit the Upper Room through closed doors.

The next morning, in that purplish early hour when it's no longer dark but not yet light, the angel of the Lord came down and caused a mini-earthquake. He rolled away the stone and sat on it while the guards trembled with fear and as the women made their approach to the tomb.

The stone wasn't rolled away so Christ could get out of the tomb, but so the observers could get in and see it was empty.

I checked all four Gospel accounts and they read in the same way. Jesus rose from the dead during the night—it may have been very near the dawn, but we don't know. He shattered the night. He overcame the darkness. And just at the dawning, the soldiers and the women and the disciples and the whole population of Jerusalem found the tomb as empty as air. The first spoken news of the resurrection came from angelic messengers, perhaps some of the same angels who had previously announced His birth.

Instantly this news began to spread like a California brush fire. Look at Mt 28:5:

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. **Then go quickly and tell...**

Notice those words.

This is the Great Commission before we get to the Great Commission.

This is our mandate and our mission:

Come and see; go and tell.

That's always the divine order. Here's the news: it's fantastic, it's life-changing, it's history-splitting, it's eternity-altering—now pass it on! Come and see, go and tell.

Then go quickly and tell His disciples, "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him." Now I have told you.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples.

But then we have one of the greatest moments in the Gospels. It is almost as though Jesus Himself is so eager to see these women that He cannot wait to meet them all in Galilee. The official plan, the plan which Jesus had evidently tried to pre-arrange with His disciples, was to meet them after the resurrection in a specific location up north, in Galilee. But it is almost as though Jesus couldn't wait for the reunion. Look at Mt 28:9:

Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. **Go and tell...**"

Notice those words again. This is the second time we have the Great Commission before coming to the Great Commission. What are we to do? What is our mission, our mandate? We're to go and tell.

Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me."

And so we come to the last paragraph of the book. Look at Mt 28:16:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

Now, I do not believe that the eleven disciples were alone or that they went by themselves to that mountain. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that there was at least one occasion when hundreds of people saw the risen Christ. I believe this may have been that occasion. As far as we know, this was the only pre-planned and pre-announced post-resurrection appearance of Christ. This is the only time, so far as we know, when He announced that He was going to make a special appearance in a certain place. I believe these eleven disciples and their families and these women and many others showed up. It was our Lord's final sermon as it's recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

So this multitude of people assembled, and some of them had not yet seen the risen Christ with their own eyes. In fact, most of them hadn't seen Him. They had heard the reports and the rumors and the testimonies. But some of them weren't so sure. There was great curiosity, and some in the crowd had doubts. And then someone said, "Look! There He is. Here He comes!"

Well, the younger ones that had sharper vision saw Him at once; some of the older ones whose eyesight wasn't so good doubted. Remember, they didn't have eyeglasses back then. But then Jesus came closer and they all recognized Him.

Now, I'm interpreting and even speculating a little in giving you that scenario, but I believe it makes the best sense of this passage. Look at verse 17:

When they saw Him...

Apparently at a distance, as we'll see.

When they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them...

He came closer, He continued to approach them, He drew near; and they all could see and recognize Him. And then Jesus spoke to them. I'm quite sure that we only have the gist or the core of all that Jesus said. He must have greeted them, spoken to them, preached a little bit. But Matthew's purpose is to end His Gospel with the core message our Lord wanted to communicate to this crowd. In the succinctness of Scripture, the Holy Spirit only led Matthew to write down the essence and emphasis of the message. We call this the Great Commission, although it's the third time in this chapter we're told to go and tell:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

And with that, Matthew concludes His Gospel. He doesn't describe any more of the Lord's post-resurrection appearances. He

doesn't describe the Lord's ascension or His return to Heaven. He doesn't describe the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. He punches home His message and deliberately ends with the Great Commission, letting us know that the message of the Gospel and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are now to spread to all the earth, and it's our responsibility to come and see, and to go and tell.

Breaking Down the Great Commission - Matthew 28:16-20

I don't have time for a detailed analysis of this Great Commission, but it is relatively simple to unpack.

First, He tells us about His power: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. With the resurrection, He has demonstrated His authority over every foe, and with His ascension He's going to resume His place on the throne. With His authority He's about to have a commissioning service for the entire church throughout all of human history.

From time to time, we have a commissioning service for a missionary or missionary family, particularly when they are going as career missionaries to invest their lives in the work of cross-cultural evangelism. We call it a Commissioning Service, because we are commissioning them and sending them out. Well, here in this Scripture, the Lord is preaching the Commissioning Sermon for every Christian throughout human history, and we are sent out with His power and authority.

Second, He tells us about His purpose. It's to make disciples: All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples.... A disciple is someone who trusts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, is actively learning and obeying His teachings, and is actively identifying with His purpose of making other disciples.

Third, He gives us His place of ministry, the zone of His concern, and it is the entire world: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.... Jesus Himself had never traveled very far from Judea and Galilee. He'd never been to Athens or Rome or India or Asia. He was a regional evangelist in a very small Middle Eastern nation. And yet He envisioned the entire world as His mission field, and He was flinging His disciples to the farthest corners of the globe. It's the world that God is concerned about. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son... In the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, Jesus said that His Gospel must be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. This is why we talk about international missions and global evangelism. This is why we are a missions-minded church.

Fourth, He gives us His plan for making disciples. It involves two steps, baptizing and teaching: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Baptizing implies winning someone to Christ. It's the sign and symbol that someone has received Christ as Savior. So we're to win people to Christ, and then we're to teach them. Notice that it doesn't say, "...teaching them everything," but "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." We're to win people to Christ, and then we're to mentor them into living a Christian lifestyle.

Finally, Jesus reassures us about His presence: And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. I believe that refers to the end of the church age, the age of missions, the age of the Gentiles, the age of evangelism.

One of the reasons I believe in creationism instead of evolution is because of the spreading nature of all living things. Everything is so perfectly designed to spread and to propagate itself. I have a little flower garden in the back yard, and I can't get over how persistently things spread. I battle quack grass (that's what we called it up in the mountains) all the time—very stubborn, tough stems of grass that shoot out across the mulch and create a network like a spider's web, rooting and spreading everywhere. Nearby I planted some raspberry plants I'd bought from the farmer's market. They were just getting a good start when the young man who works for me mowed them down by mistake. Well, they came back up from the roots, and every week there's a new stem that shoots through air like a meteor, lands nearby, takes root, and sends another stem shooting to another spot. I told my wife, Katrina, that our raspberry bushes are going to take over the garden. They are very energetic spreaders. Nearby are some maple trees. Every spring they send little helicopter-like seed packets all across my garden, and I think I must have a hundred maple trees that spring up every year in borders and flower pots and flower beds. Every living thing in creation is designed to reproduce itself, multiply, and spread out in its own unique way.

So it should not come as a surprise to us that God used the same pattern and built the same driving potential into His church. It is as natural for the church of Jesus Christ to spread as it is for quack grass, raspberry bushes, and maple trees. And, in fact, it's not just a potential and a pattern; it is a commandment. It is our commission. We are to spread the message from person-to-person until it covers the globe.

Recently I went jogging with a pastor-friend, and I asked him how he had come to know Christ as his Savior. He told me that he had grown up in a broken home, and was being raised by his dad and step-mother. When he was 12, his dad was killed in a car wreck,

and he ended up moving back with his mother. He had little Christian influence in his life, but from time to time he'd go to church or be involved in a children's program or a Bible memory program, but only here and there, hit and miss. His grandmother was a godly woman who prayed for him, and he would occasionally go to church with her. Sometimes at home on Sundays he'd tune into some television preacher or another. But as a teenager and a young adult, his life descended into a lot of self-destructive behavior, and at one point he found himself in jail. His grandmother's pastor visited him, but there was no life-changing event in his life. And then one night when he was 21 years old, he was out drinking and getting drunk with his cousin, he heard himself say these words: "I'm tired of living like this. Tomorrow I'm going to give my life to the Lord."

Well, at that time he was living in an apartment above his grandmother's house, and the next morning he got up, dressed, walked out the door, and came down the steps. He told me that as he descended the steps, it was as though he ran into a brick wall. He stopped abruptly and remembered what he had said the night before. An inner voice seemed to ask, "Are you going to do it? Are you going to give your life to the Lord?" He felt that it was then or never, that if he didn't do something at that moment, he never would. He finished going down the steps, walked across the street, and knocked on the door of the pastor of his grandmother's church. That morning, he trusted Christ as both Savior and Lord. From that moment, he said, everything in his life began to change.

Now, that sounds like a sudden and dramatic conversion; but notice that he had various exposures to the Gospel off and on through the years, as a child, from television preachers, from a pastor who visited him in prison, and he had a grandmother who prayed earnestly for him. It took many years to sow the seed, but then the day of harvest came.

When it comes to the Great Commission, it's not just a matter of winning people to Christ in the flash of a moment. It's a matter of planting and plodding and praying. That's church work; that's Great Commission work; that's soul-winning and evangelism; that's missions.

We have a power, a purpose, a place, a plan, and a presence. And our strategy is planning and plodding and praying, and the Bible tells us not to grow weary in the process, for we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Are you doing your part?

All authority is given to me both in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age

THE LAST DAY OF WORLD HISTORY

Matthew 24:1-14

The recent war in Iraq has once again focused the world's attention on the Persian Gulf and on the Middle East; and that piques our interest in the whole area of Bible prophecy, for much of what is written in Bible prophecy concerns this part of the world.

What does the Bible have to say about the end of the world? What does the Bible have to say about the signs of the times and the end of the age? In answering that question, we could go to many passages of Scripture. God clearly wants His people to know what's ahead, and He has given us vast amounts of surprisingly accurate information in book of Daniel, for example, and in the book of Revelation. Or we could turn to the prophet Isaiah, or to smaller books like 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The Bible is full of predictions about the future, indicating that God wants us to know what is ahead in human history.

But perhaps the best place to start is with the teachings of Jesus Christ Himself. As you know, Jesus delivered a number of sermons on a variety of topics. One of His last messages was on the subject of the signs of the times and the end of the age. He shared this sermon with a very small audience. According to Mark's Gospel, there were only four people there at the time—His innermost circle of disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

This message was written down, however, and is recorded for us in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the three synoptic Gospels. Matthew gives us the fullest account of it, two entire chapters, Matthew 24 and 25. We call this the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus spoke these words on the Mount of Olives just across the valley from Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives, there is a fabulous view across the valley to the Temple Mount, and tourists come from all over the world to take in the Olivet view of the old city of Jerusalem. Well, it was here on a sun-splashed Spring day on the last week of His life that Jesus talked about the end of the world. Let's read the first part of it for our study today, Matthew 24:1-14.

Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the

disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and shall deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:1-14).

The Setting for the Olivet Discourse

In order to understand the setting for this message, let's go back to Matthew 21. This portion of Scripture describes the events that took place during Passion Week, the time of the Passover. Jesus made His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21. He immediately went into the Temple, overturned the tables and drove out the money changers. In the remainder of chapter 21 and in all of chapter 22, He debated His critics.

Until now, Jesus had kept a lower profile, spending much of His time out of the capital city of Jerusalem, staying to the far north, in Galilee. He had avoided situations that would deliberately precipitate a crisis. But now, He had openly paraded into Jerusalem, marched into the Temple, and taken the city by storm. The scribes and Pharisees and religious leaders were stunned, and they confronted Him in the Temple. But they were no match for Him in a debate, and again and again they were bested in their public disputations with Him. Then in Matthew 23, Jesus preached a blistering sermon against the religionists, saying over and over again, "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees."

Then He had ended His sermon with:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

With that He turned and marched out of the Temple, His disciples in tow. They must have been absolutely stunned, not sure what to say. They filed through the temple courtyard, out of the gates of that most beautiful building in the world, out of the gates of the walled city of Jerusalem, down the precipitous valley of Kidron, and up the steep slopes of Mount Olivet. Pausing to catch their breath, one of the disciples looked back at that majestic porticos of Herod's Temple and commented about how beautiful this complex was in the light of the Springtime sun. Jesus, however, wasn't impressed. He was still righteously indignant, and He replied, "You think so? The day is coming when not one stone will be left on top of another." And with that, He resumed His hike up the Mount of Olives.

At the top of the mountain, some of the disciples evidently scattered, perhaps to get food or to do some other errands. But four disciples stayed with the Lord, and as they sat looking across at the Temple, they asked Jesus when these catastrophic events would take place.

Signs of the Times

In reply, Jesus gave several signposts that will mark the days prior to His return. He said, in essence, that things were not going to get better—but worse—as history unfolded in the future. He predicted that false religious leaders would arise and begin new religions. He said that wars and rumors of wars would tear the world apart, and that famines and earthquakes and strange diseases would increase. He predicted that there would be an increasing climate of violence in the world. He warned that there would be increasing persecution against Christians, and, simultaneously, a great expansion of missionary activity. Then, He said, the end would come.

The end of what? Well, that's the great question. Verse 14 says:

And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

The end of what? The end of world? No. He cannot mean the end of the world or the end of human history, because He is going on in the rest of the chapter and in the rest of this sermon to tell us other, subsequent things that are going to happen.

In the verses that follow He is going to tell us about a time of Great Tribulation that will occur on the earth. He is going to tell us

about the Son of Man coming like a bolt of lightning splitting the sky. He is going to tell us about the judgment of God upon this world. All of these things will happen after “the end” that is referred to in verse 14. So when Jesus says, “Then the end will come,” what is He talking about?

Well, we have two good clues here in this passage. First, look at the original question as the disciples asked it in verse 3: Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age.

Notice the words: “...the end of the age.” Not the end of the world, or the end of human history, but the end of a particular age. What age is it? That brings us to the second clue. Look again at verse 14: And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the nations, and then the end will come.

He is talking about the end of the age of preaching the Gospel of the kingdom. The end of the age of the Church. The end of the age of the Gospel. The end of the age of Grace.

The Unseen Gap

This brings us to something I've been pointing out recently in our Wednesday night Bible classes. When you study the prophecies and predictions of the Old Testament, there is no mention of the age of the church. The prophets were concerned about the future of Israel, and that was their focus. So in the Old Testament, you read about the coming of Christ and the first coming and the second coming are both squeezed together. The Old Testament prophets did not anticipate the age of the Church, the age of Grace. They did not know that there was going to be a 2000-year parenthesis in human history during which the Gospel would be preached to all the Gentile nations of the world.

Let me give you an example. Look at Zechariah 9:9-10. In the New Living Translation, it says:

Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—even on a donkey's colt. I will remove the battle chariots from Israel and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and I will destroy all the weapons used in battle. Your king will bring peace to the nations. His realm will stretch from sea to sea and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah predicted that a great Messiah would come, a King, who would enter Jerusalem in humility, riding on a donkey, and who would proceed to rule on this earth and to impose a period of global peace from the Middle East to the entire world. He did not know nor was he told that between verse 9 and verse 10 there would be a parenthesis, a gap, of 2000-plus years in order for the message of redemption to be spread to every nation through a new entity that the Messiah would establish, the church.

Let me give you one other example. Look at Isaiah 11:

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of His roots...

...in other words, a man will be born among the descends of King David.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord....

And Isaiah went on to describe the character of the coming Messiah, which was fulfilled perfectly by our Lord's first coming. But then Isaiah proceeded to describe a time of worldwide peace, when even the conflicts of nature will be resolved. Verse 4 says that this Branch of David will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth... Verse 6 says that the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat...

The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the vipers den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

That's a description of the coming Millennial Reign of our Lord which shall take place following His Second Coming. But as Isaiah presented it, it was all squeezed together, like two sides of an accordion, pressed together. Isaiah did not know that God was going to pull these two sides apart, and that between them there would be a space of time known as the church age.

Another good example is the so-called seventy weeks of Daniel 9. The Lord made a very specific prediction in Daniel, chapter 9, that all subsequent human history would be contained within seventy periods of seven years, or 490 years. He then described 69 periods of seven years, or 483 years, that would elapse between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem in Old Testament days, and the entrance of the Messiah into Jerusalem. But then the writer skips right down to the remaining seven years of world history, the period of Great Tribulation. There is no indication in Daniel 9 that there is a 2000-plus year gap between the 69 sevens and the

seventieth seven, during which the Gospel would be preached to all the world.

So the Old Testament prophets knew that there was coming a King, a Messiah, a Descendant of David, who would come in both humility and in power, but they did not realize that there would be two coming with a period of time between them. This period of time is the age of Grace, the age of the church, the age of the preaching of the Gospel.

How, then, did we learn about that this age of the church? When did we discover that this was the plan of God from the very beginning? Look at Ephesians 3. In verse 3, Paul talked about the fact that God had revealed a mystery to him. The word mystery in the ancient Greek language meant something that was formerly hidden, but is now unveiled or revealed. Ephesians 3 says that there was a portion of the divine plan that the ancient prophets were not privy to. God revealed to Paul and to the apostles that there would be a period of time in which a new organization would impact this world, an entity made up of both Jews and Gentiles—the church—whose mission would be to spread the Gospel to all the nations of the earth.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:3-6, NIV).

The Old Testament prophets weren't told about the role of the church, for they were prophets to the nation of Israel and concerned about the future of the Jews. It was not revealed to them, as it was later revealed to Paul and to the Apostles, that there would be a period of time during which Jews and Gentiles would be united in one entity—the church—for the evangelizing of the world.

In Matthew 24 Jesus said, in effect,

"This world is not going to get better and better, it is going to get worse and worse, with increasing levels of warfare and destruction and violence until the Gospel has been preached in every nation of the world, and then the end of this age of Grace, the end of this church age, is going to come."

What, then, is the event that will signal an end to the age of grace? It is the sudden and immediate and dramatic rapture of the church. I believe that the rapture of the church is the next great event on the prophetic calendar, and in terms of the Olivet Discourse, I think that it occurs right here at the end of verse 14.

The Rapture

What is the rapture of the church? 1 Thessalonians 4 describes it this way:

For the Lord Himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

There are several things in this passage that are critically important. First, notice the words "caught up"—Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them.... The Greek word is *ἁρπάζω* (*harpazō*), which means "snatched away" or "seized." When this passage was translated into Latin, the word chosen was the Latin word "Raptus," and that's where we get our English word "Rapture."

Second, notice that we are caught up—snatched away, raptured—in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The rapture of the church and the Second Coming of Christ are separate events. At the rapture, Jesus comes in the air; at the Second Coming, He lands on this earth and His feet will stand once again on the Mount of Olives. At the rapture He will come for His children; at the Second Coming He will come with His children. The rapture is the precipitating event for the Tribulation period, and the Second Coming will bring the Tribulation to its pre-appointed conclusion.

Third, notice that Christ will come with a shout. My friend, Denis Lyle of Belfast, Northern Ireland, points out that there are three times in the New Testament when Jesus shouts with an authoritative shout, and all three times are connected with resurrection. The first time was in John 11 when He shouted, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus was raised from the grave. The second time was on the cross when Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up the ghost. And at this command, the veil of the Temple was rent in two, the rocks rumbled, the graves were opened, and many saints rose from the dead (Matthew 27:50-53). The third shout will be at the rapture, where millions will rise from the dead at the sound of His voice.

Conclusion

This leaves us with one huge question. When will the end come? When will the rapture occur? When will Jesus suddenly come with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trump of God? When will Matthew 24:1-14 be fulfilled?

Jesus gives us the answer here in Matthew 24: “When the Gospel has been preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, then the end will come.” The word “nation” is *ἔθνος* (*ethnos*). We get our English word ethnic from this word, and it means, generally, people group. When that last ethnic group has been reached. When that last tribe has been evangelized. When that last person appointed for salvation has received Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.

I don't know how far away we are from that point, but it is getting closer every day. That's why we are working so hard to evangelize our community. That's why we devote some much energy to the missionary mandate. In one of the Bible's most remarkable verses about the return of Christ, 2 Peter 3:12 says that we can hasten His coming. How? By living magnetic, evangelistic, Gospel-proclaiming, missions-minded lives.

And one day soon, when that last sinner has prayed to receive Jesus Christ as Savior, when that last nation has the Gospel in its hands, the skies will swell up with majestic clouds, the winds will blow, the Lord will descend with a shout, the dead in Christ will rise, and we who are alive and remain shall be caught up in the air, to meet the Lord in the clouds. Are you ready for that day?

Years ago when I was in college there was a song that captured the significance of all this. It was by Larry Norman, and the words said:

There's no time to change your mind,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.
I wish we'd all been ready.

What if He were to come today? I hope we'll all be ready.

CHAOS BEGINS

Matthew 24

A Time/CNN poll has found that 17 per cent of Americans -- nearly one in five -- believe that the end of the world will come in their lifetimes, and 59 per cent believe that the prophecies about the end of the world found in the Book of Revelation are true and will happen in the near future. Some of this interest in the End Times has been fueled by the sales of the “Left Behind” books. One in ten Americans has read at least one of these novels which fictionalize the events of the book of Revelation.

It only stands to reason that God, being God, knows the future and wants to show His children what will happen in days to come. The greatest authority on this subject is Jesus Christ Himself who devoted one of His last sermons to the subject of the end of the age. He delivered this information while sitting on the beautiful Mount of Olives on the Eastern side of ancient Jerusalem, and thus we call this the “Olivet Discourse” or the Sermon on the Mount of Olives. We began a study on this passage of Scripture last week, and today we want to begin where we left off. Let's begin reading in Matthew 24:

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” 4 Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ, and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains. 9 “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. 15 “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. 18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. 22 If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. 23 At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. 24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. 25 See, I have told you

ahead of time.”

In the first part of this passage, Jesus told His disciples that history is not going to get better and better, but worse and worse. He said that there would be increasing cycles of false religions, war, famines, earthquakes, and diseases. He also predicted worldwide persecution against the church, but He also predicted that the Gospel of the Kingdom would be preached to all the nations. Then, He said, the end would come.

The end of what? The end of the church age. The end of the age of grace. As I said last week, I believe that the next great event on the prophetic calendar will be the rapture of the church as described in 1 Thessalonians 4.

The Rapture

Sometimes people ask me, “Do you think the church will go through the Tribulation period.” There are three schools of thought on this among students of Bible prophecy. Some believe that the church will be raptured, caught up to heaven, before the Tribulation begins. We call this the Pre-Tribulation view. Some believe that the church will be caught up in the middle of the tribulation; this is the Mid-Tribulation view. Some believe that the church will only be caught up in the skies to meet the Lord when He returns at His Second Coming at the end of the Tribulation, and we call that the Post-Tribulation view.

My personal view is the first, that the church will be caught up, raptured, before the beginning of the Great Tribulation period. Why do I believe that? There are several reasons.

1. The Matthew Passage.

As we've seen, Jesus said in the Olivet Discourse—Matthew 24:14—that as soon as the task of taking the Gospel to the nations of the world was completed, that the end would come. The end of what? The end of the age of preaching. The end of the age of the Gospel. The end of the age of Grace. Then would come the Tribulation period described in verses 15 and following. As long as the church is in the world, we are going to be preaching the Gospel and taking the message of Christ to the nations. As soon as our job is done, the church will be removed; and the Tribulation period will start. The church age is a parenthesis in the unfolding of the plan of God, unforeseen by the Jewish prophets who were concerned with the future of Israel. When the church's task is completed, the church will be removed; and the remaining predictions of the prophets will begin to unfold.

2. The 2 Thessalonians Passage.

The apostle Paul speaks of this quite clearly, it seems to me, in 2 Thessalonians 2:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist) is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

In other words, there is something and someone currently in the world that is preventing the Antichrist from appearing. Who is this someone? What is this something? What is going to be removed prior to the appearance of the Antichrist?

It is the Holy Spirit-indwelt church. The age of the church began on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the church of Jesus Christ and equipped them for the task of taking the whole Gospel to the whole world. The age of the church will come to a close when it is removed—gathered to Jesus, snatched into the heavens at the rapture—and then the Antichrist will arise and the Tribulation period will begin.

3. The Revelation 3 Passage.

There is also a very interesting verse in Revelation 3. Here Jesus is speaking to the faithful church in the Asian city of Philadelphia. This church represents the faithful churches of our Lord, wherever they are found on earth or in history. Listen to what the Lord says to us:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars

—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

4. The Romans 11 Passage.

In this passage, the apostle Paul is discussing the role of the nation of Israel in the plan of God. You might recall that last week, I said that the Old Testament prophets did not know, nor were they told, that there was coming a church age—the age of the Gospel—in which the Gentiles and Jews would join forces in a great organization known as the church of Jesus Christ, the job of which was to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. That was a mystery, unknown to the prophets, but revealed to Paul and to the early apostolic leaders of the church. In the Old Testament, the first coming and the second coming of Christ are squeezed together, like two sides of an accordion. But in the plan of God for history, there was an unseen gap—a parenthesis—during which the church would take the Gospel to the world. With the rapture of the church, that gap comes to a close, and Israel is once again at center stage. Now, look at the way Paul puts it in Romans 11:

25 I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come from Zion; He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. 27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Israel has experienced a hardening, they have been set aside somewhat, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. In other words, until the last person on earth who is appointed for eternal life is saved. Until the number of saved people in world history is complete. Until the church’s task is done. And then the age of grace, the age of the church will be completed, and we will be snatched out of the way and the program of God for human history involving the Jewish people will resume.

As theologian Rene Pasche puts it:

“God knows in advance the number of His elect. When the totality of those who are destined to life eternal have received the Savior, the ear of grace will be completed, and the Church will be taken up.”

5. The Example of Lot.

In Luke’s Gospel there is an interesting picture.

...in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. 29 But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 “It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. 32 Remember Lot’s wife! 33 Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. 34 I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. 35 Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.” (Luke 17:28-34)

Perhaps you remember this story from the book of Genesis. Sodom was an exceedingly sinful city. The Sodomite civilization has deteriorated into moral madness, from sexuality into sensuality into homosexuality into total moral meltdown. But God said, as long as I can find 10 people in this city who are godly worshippers, I will not destroy the city. The presence of a righteous minority held off the fires of divine judgment. But, unable to find 10 righteous people, the angels came and snatched Lot from the city and then the process of judgment began.

Jesus said, “It will be like that when I come again.” As long as the church is in the world, judgment is being withheld. But when the Lord comes with His angels to snatch the church out of the world, then the season of God’s wrath will begin.

The Rupture

Now, let’s go back to Matthew 24, where we deduce that the next great event following the rapture involves something that is going to happen in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Let’s go back and resume our study of Matthew 24: And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end (of the church age) will come. So when...

The Greek particle here is *o v* (oun), which serves as a transition. It can be translated “but” or “therefore” or “consequently.”

...so when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

In other words, after the rapture of the church, something is going to happen in the holy place of the Jewish temple that is going to

trigger the Great Tribulation period. There's going to be a rapture, and then there's going to be a rupture. The Antichrist is going to march into Jerusalem and erect a pagan image in the Holy Place of the Jewish Temple, and that will trigger the start of the Tribulation Period. We'll talk more about this next week, but for now I'd like to end this message by briefly discussing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

If something is going to happen in the Holy Place of the Jewish temple, it implies that the Jewish Temple is going to be rebuilt, either just before or immediately after the rapture of the church. Today there is no Jewish temple sitting on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The Muslims have control of that area, and there are Islamic mosques there. The most famous is the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, the latter being built in the seventh century, in AD 684. It has been sitting on the Temple Mount for well over one thousand years, and it still is one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

That building is tremendously frustrating to those who want to rebuild the Jewish Temple, because to remove the Dome of the Rock would trigger World War III.

In 1967, during the Six Day War, Israeli forces liberated the Temple Mount from the Muslims, and on that day Chief Rabbi General Shlomo Goren proclaimed this: "We have taken the city of God, we are entering the Messianic era for the Jewish people... The holy place (the Temple Mount) was our place first, and our God's place. From here we do not move. Never, never!" Suddenly great efforts were initiated to move toward rebuilding the Jewish Temple.

But all this came to a sudden halt when the famous Jewish General, Moshe Dayan, returned jurisdiction of the Temple Mount to the Muslim Supreme Council as a gesture of goodwill and peace toward the Islamic world. So this area is under the control of the Israeli military, but administered by Muslims. You may recall that the current cycle of violence in the Middle East began in September, 2000, when Ariel Sharon toured the Temple Mount.

This area is the most contested 35 acres of ground in the world, and the powder keg of history. And there are Jewish organizations working every day in preparation for the time when the Temple will be rebuilt. There is an organization called the Temple Mount Faithful who come every year, hauling a huge cornerstone for the Temple. Every year, they are turned away by the Israeli military. There is an organization called the Temple Institute duplicating and storing the furnishings for the Temple when it is rebuilt. Every day Orthodox Jews recite three times daily the words: "May it be Thy will that the Temple be speedily rebuilt in our own time."

Now, let me ask you this. How likely was it that the Lord Jesus Christ, sitting on the Mount of Olives, gazing over at the most beautiful buildings in the world, would be able to accurately predict what we have just read today? He predicted that the Temple of His day would be totally destroyed, that there would be a downward spiral of human history characterized by false religions, wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, persecution against the church, and the globalization of Christian missions. Then He predicted that the end of the church age would suddenly occur, and shortly thereafter that the Jewish Temple would be rebuilt.

And His words spoken 2000 years ago, are as current as the headlines of today's paper.

I don't think we have very long to go, do you? I think we'll better be ready, don't you? Are you ready?

THE DEBUT OF THE ANTICHRIST

Matthew 24:15

Sir Isaac Newton, who died in 1727, was a famous English scientist who laid the foundations of physics as a modern discipline. He's best known for having discovered the law of gravity, but he also created calculus and developed many other formulas and disciplines that serve as the basis of modern science to this day.

Many people don't know that Sir Isaac was also a devoted Christian and a great student of the Bible. He had a particular interest in biblical prophecy and in what the Bible had to say about the signs of the times and the end of the age. It was a subject he studied with great interest for fifty years.

In the 1930s, a trunk was discovered in the house of the Earl of Portsmouth. It had been sitting there for over two centuries, and inside were thousands of pages that Sir Isaac had written on the subject of Bible prophecy. A recent British television documentary investigated these papers and found that Newton believed that history would be characterized by wars and trouble, that there would come a terrible period of plagues and tribulation preceding the Second Coming of Christ; then there would follow a thousand year Messianic reign of peace on earth.

Hidden away in the papers was even a suggested date for Christ's return. Sir Isaac wasn't dogmatic, and he wasn't predicting a date with certainty. But he indicated that according to his studies and calculations, he felt the return of Christ might occur about the

year 2060, which would be 57 years from now.

Well, he might have it right; we don't know. The Lord could come 57 minutes from now, 57 hours, 57 days, or 57 years. But His coming is closer than it has ever been before. During these Springtime Sundays, we're studying what the Lord Jesus had to say about these matters in His famous Olivet Discourse, His sermon on the Signs of the Times, delivered to four of His disciples as they sat on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. What we've learned so far corresponds nicely with what Sir Isaac Newton believed. This current age of human history is going to be characterized by the rise of false religions, by wars and rumors of wars, by earthquakes, famines, and diseases. There will be increasing violence in the world, and great persecution against the Church. But the Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come—the end of the age of the church, the end of the age of grace, the end of the era of preaching. The church will be raptured—caught up in the sky—and the events of the Tribulation period will unfold. Let's begin our reading today with Matthew 24:14.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. So when you see standing in the holy place "the abomination that causes desolation," spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak (Matthew 24:14-16).

This passage used to bother me because of those four little words: "Let the reader understand." I could never understand it, and I thought to myself, "If Jesus insisted that I understand this, it must be understandable, but I'm not understanding it!"

Well, this is like a house in which the key hangs on the doorpost. The secret for getting into it is right here in front of us. So when you see standing in the holy place "the abomination that causes desolation" spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand. Do you see the key hanging on the doorpost? To understand this passage, we have to go back to the book of Daniel and see what Daniel the prophet was talking about.

Daniel was born during the final days of the kingdom of Judah. The great Babylonian Empire and its leader, King Nebuchadnezzar, were rising up in the East, in the land we now call Iraq. The armies of Babylon would soon march into Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and wipe out the Jewish state. But Daniel, being a brilliant, strong, handsome young man, was spared by the Babylonians and deported to the royal courts where he entered the service of Nebuchadnezzar and became a powerful statesman.

Years later, as an old man, he watched the Babylonian Empire fall to the Persians, and it was during this time that he was given the vision we read in Daniel, chapter 8:

18 While he (an angel) was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet. 19 He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. 20 The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. 21 The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king.

In other words, the angel was telling Daniel that the Empire of Babylon would be superceded by the Medo-Persian Empire, and the Medo-Persian Empire would be superceded by the Empire of Greece led by a very powerful king whom we now know was Alexander the Great. When Alexander died, he was very young, 32 or 33, and he had no plan of succession. So the Greek Empire was divided between his four generals:

22 The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

What was predicted came to pass. History moved from the Babylonian Empire to the Medo-Persian Empire, to the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great which, upon his death, was divided into four parts. Now, here's where it gets interesting. The angel told Daniel about a very evil man, a stern-faced ruler, who will become head of one of these four sections. Look at verses 23ff:

23 "In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise. 24 He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people. 25 He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power. 26 "The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."

I know we're in deep water here, so let me be a little redundant. In Daniel chapter 8, an angel came to reveal to Daniel what was

going to happen in the future. The angel said, in effect, "Several great world empires will rise and fall—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece. When the king of Greece, Alexander the Great, suddenly dies, his empire will be divided into four sections. In one of those sections, a very evil man will arise and he will be a picture, a type, a foreshadowing, of the coming Antichrist."

I think this is one of the most interesting things in the entire Bible, especially as it relates to prophecy. The Lord has given us a preview in human history of what the Antichrist will be like. In other words, there has already been a man on the stage of world history who is a preview—a prototype—of the Antichrist. It is as though the Lord said, "If you want to know what the Antichrist is going to be like, I'll give you a miniature sample of him in human history."

Who was this man? Before I tell you, let's move on to Daniel 9. Here we are told what this evil ruler, this Antichrist, will do. Look at verse 27: He will confirm a covenant with many (that word "many" means "Israel") for one "seven" (that is, for one period of seven years). In the middle of the seven (after three and one-half years), he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple, he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

Let's move on to Daniel, chapter 11. Here Daniel is again being told what will happen after the death of Alexander the Great, how Alexander's kingdom will be divided, how one of the kings that will arise will be evil beyond description, how he will desecrate the temple and become a type of the coming Antichrist. Look at verses 21ff:

"He will be succeeded by a contemptible person who has not been given the honor of royalty. He will invade the kingdom when its people feel secure, and he will seize it through intrigue... 31 "His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. 32 With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.

Now, one last passage in Daniel. Look at Daniel 12:11: From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days (approximately three and one-half years).

So now let's put it all together in very simple terms. The prophet Daniel received a revelation in which he said that in the time period between the Old and New Testaments (as we now know it to be) there would come a very evil man, a descendant of one of the generals of Alexander the Great, and he would come into Jerusalem, desecrate the Temple, set up an abominable image, and seek to slaughter the Jewish people. And this evil man would be a symbol in history of the coming Antichrist who is going to make a peace treaty with Israel for seven years, but in the middle of those seven years will come into Jerusalem, break the treaty, set up in the rebuilt temple an abominable image, and he will see to destroy the Jewish people.

It happened just as Daniel foretold. Alexander the Great had a general named Seleucus, and after the death of Alexander, Seleucus took control of the portion of the Greek Empire that was headquartered in Syria. Roughly two centuries after the close of the Old Testament and two centuries before the birth of Christ, a child was born into the Seleucid Dynasty and named Antiochus IV. He is the man predicted in Daniel 8, 9, 11, and 12. When he became the ruler of the Seleucid Dynasty and the ruler of the Syrian Empire, he began to think of himself a god, wanting to be worshipped. He gave himself the name, "Theos Epiphanies," meaning, "God Manifest." So he was called Antiochus Epiphanies.

He wanted to Hellenize his empire; that is, to make everyone Greek speaking, Greek thinking, Greek acting. In the little land of Judah, he wanted to replace the Jewish culture with the culture of Greece. And so he marched into Israel in the year 167 B.C., determined to wipe out the Jewish faith.

He forbade the Jews to worship their god, Jehovah. He outlawed the observance of the Sabbath. He outlawed all the Jewish feasts, festivals, and sacrifices. He outlawed the circumcision of baby boys, which was a hallmark of Judaism. He ordered that all copies of the Hebrew Scriptures be destroyed.

On December 16, 167 B.C., in one of the most infamous acts in history, the troops of Antiochus Epiphanies entered the rebuilt Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and offered a pig on the holy altar of Israel. This is the famous "Abomination of Desolation," an abominable sacrifice that desolated the sanctity of the Temple. Antiochus insisted that from that time forth, the offerings on Israel's altars be made unto him, that he be worshipped as god.

Now, I want to quote to you from Will Durant, who wrote about this in Volume II of his *The Story of Civilization*:

(Antiochus)... marched up to Jerusalem, slaughtered Jews of either sex by the thousand, desecrated and looted the Temple, appropriated for the royal coffers its golden altar, its vessels, and its treasuries... and gave orders for the compulsory Hellenization of all Jews. He commanded that the Temple be rededicated as a shrine to Zeus, that a Greek altar be built over the old one, and that the usual sacrifices be replaced with a sacrifice of swine. He forbade the keeping of the Sabbath or Jewish festivals, and made circumcision a capital crime.... Women who had circumcised their newborn sons were cast with their infants over the city

walls to death.... Throughout Judea the old religion and its rites were interdicted, and the Greek ritual was made compulsory on pain of death. Every Jew who refused to eat pork, or who was found possessing the Book of the Law, was to be jailed or killed, and the Book wherever found was to be burned. Jerusalem itself was put to flames.... At times, it seems, Antiochus thought of establishing and requiring the worship of himself as god.... Many Jews conformed to the demands, waiting for the storm to pass. Many others fled into caves or mountain retreats, lived on clandestine gleaning from the fields, and resolutely carried on the ordinances of Jewish life. In the end, Antiochus pushed the Jews too hard, and they rebelled against him. Against all odds, they gained their independence and became once again an independent nation until they were defeated by the forces of the Roman Empire just before the birth of Christ.

This is a lot of history, a lot of arcane material, but let me see if I can sum it up with simplicity. In the book of Daniel, we are told that there would be several world empires in antiquity, one of them being the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, Daniel was told, his empire would be divided, and from one of the divisions would come a stern-faced ruler, a master of iniquity, who would violate the Jewish temple by setting up in it an abominable image.

History unfolded as promised, and this evil man, Antiochus IV Epiphanies, rose to power in Syria. He determined to wipe the Jewish faith off the face of the earth; and, marching into Jerusalem, he interrupted the Jewish sacrificial system and erected an image that caused spiritual desolation to fall over the Jewish people.

About two hundred years later, Jesus of Nazareth sat atop the Mount of Olives and predicted that it would all happen again. There is a double fulfillment to Daniel's prediction. Here is basically what Jesus said on that day in Matthew 24. He told His disciples:

The Temple you're looking at right now across the Kidron Valley is going to be destroyed soon, and not one stone will be left atop another. Then there will be a period of history known as the age of the Gospel, which will be characterized by the rise of many false religions, by wars and rumors of war, by earthquakes, diseases, and famine, by global persecution against the church, and by the Gospel being preached in all the earth as a witness to all nations.

Then the end of the church age will come, the church will be raptured, and a stern-faced ruler, a master of intrigue, is going to be raised up onto the stage of world events and human history. He will be like Antiochus Epiphanies, only many times worse. The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the Jews will once again be offering their ritual sacrifices. But this stern-faced ruler will come as predicted by Daniel the prophet, and he will enter the Jewish Temple, and he will set up an image that desecrates the Temple and causes desolation among the Jewish people. And when you see that happen, then let those in Jerusalem flee to the mountains for there is coming a time of Tribulation such as the world has never seen before and will never see again.

In closing, there are two other Scriptures that I want to read in order to show you the preponderance of information on this subject.

2 Thessalonians 2 says:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

And finally, check this out in Revelation 13. This says that when the Antichrist comes, he will set up a great image of himself and force everyone to worship it. He will have an assistant—a diabolical thug—who will act on his behalf in enforcing this decree. This agent of the Antichrist is described in verses 14-15:

He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

Notice how this theme is repeated throughout Scripture, in Daniel 8, in Daniel 9, in Daniel 11, in Daniel 12, in Matthew 24 and the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke, in 2 Thessalonians 2, and in Revelation 13.

Perhaps the most explosive political issue in the world today—even in today's headlines—is the future of the 35-acres of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Archaeologist Randall Price, who has written an exhaustive book on the subject, says: "It is universally conceded that there is no more volatile acreage on earth than that of the Temple Mount. If the Temple Mount is dynamite, and the Temple movement has lit the fuse, how long will it be until an explosive situation is reached?"

Every day the headlines of our newspapers bring us closer to the edge of history, and every headline in one way or another proves

the validity of biblical prophecy. I'm reminded of the old song that says:

In times like these, you need a Savior
In times like these, you need an anchor.
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the solid Rock.

That Rock is Jesus, yes, He's the one.
That Rock is Jesus, God's only Son.
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the solid Rock.

THE DAYS OF TROUBLE

Matthew 24:15-28

Last week, the sequel to the movie, *The Matrix*, opened in theaters across the nation. I haven't seen either *The Matrix* or *The Matrix Reloaded*, but I know a little of what they are about. They're about the future, about a world that has been deceived, that is in the hands of a diabolical enemy—a super computer—that derives its power from the brains of these deceived men and women. And there is a messianic figure in these movies—the One—who is trying to redeem and save the masses. Some of these masses have indeed escaped and have established the city of Zion near the center of the earth. From there they try to sneak back into the Matrix to free the minds of other human beings and to deliver them. Like so many movies today, the Matrix movies have a futuristic and messianic quality about them. People are fascinated by the future and by redemption.

Interestingly, that happens to be the theme of the Bible itself, and especially of those portions of the Bible in which God lifts the curtain of time and gives us glimpses into the future.

The Lord Jesus spoke on this subject in Matthew 24 and 25. We call this passage the "Olivet Discourse" because it was given to His disciples as they sat atop the Mount of Olives on the Eastern flanks of Jerusalem. He is the real "One" who has come to save those who have been deceived by the enemy and to redeem us for all time and eternity. And He is the one who has told us what will happen in future days.

We've been looking at these chapters in recent Sundays, and today we are coming to what Jesus said would happen immediately after the rapture of the church at the end of the Age of the Gospel. Let's begin our reading today with Matthew 24:15:

So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or, "There He is!" do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, "There He is, out in the desert," do not go out; or, "Here He is, in the inner rooms," do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will be gathered.

In this passage, Jesus describes three events that will happen shortly after the church is snatched up off this world.

Great Developments (Matthew 24:15-20)

First, there will be great developments—the rapture of the church, the desecration of the temple, and the flight of many Jews from Jerusalem. As I understand it, here's what I think will happen. As soon as the last person appointed for salvation has trusted Christ as Savior, the trumpet will sound, and the rapture will suddenly occur, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. The sudden disappearance of a billion people from the earth will send the world into crisis. Out of this crisis there will emerge a powerful, magnetic, confident, charismatic, effective leader—a stern-faced ruler, a man of lawlessness, the man we call the Antichrist. He will begin consolidating his power in the world, and the day will come, according to Daniel 9, when he will establish peace in the Middle East and sign a peace treaty with Israel. Daniel 9:27 says, "He will confirm a covenant with many (with Israel) for one 'seven,'" that

is, for one period of seven years. It will be a seven-year agreement.

The Jewish Temple—the third temple—will be rebuilt, either before this time or during this period. But in the middle of this seven-year period, this leader will march into Jerusalem, put an end to the resumed sacrifices of Israel, and install an image of himself in the Temple, proclaiming himself to be god and insisting that He be worshipped. This is the “Abomination of Desolation.”

Daniel 9:27 says,

“He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple, he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.”

Jesus said, “When you see this happen, then flee the city, flee from Jerusalem, because it is the beginning of a period of Great Tribulation.”

Great Distress (Matthew 24:21-22)

Second, as a result of these great developments, a period of great distress will sweep across the world. Notice how Jesus describes this in verse 21:

For then there will be great distress....

Many of the translations say, “Great Tribulation,” and this is where we get that famous phrase we use when we talk about the “Great Tribulation.”

The Greek word that is used here is **thlipsis**, and it is a very common Bible word meaning pressure, problems, trials, and tribulation. Jesus used this word in John 16 when He warned Christians that in this world they would encounter many troubles, but to be of good cheer for He had overcome the world.

But Jesus said here in Matthew 24 that an unprecedented time of trouble is going to come upon the nation of Israel and upon the whole world. It will be a time of distress, “unequaled from the beginning of the world and never to be equaled again.” He said that if those days are not shortened, no flesh would be saved. In other words, this time of distress will have a termination date. It will be interrupted by the Second Coming of Christ. Otherwise, no one would survive it. It would result in the total annihilation of human life from this planet. It is going to be a global period of suffering, centered in the Middle East, but with the potential of destroying all human life on this planet, but for the intervention of God and the Second Coming of Christ.

And, Jesus said, for the sake of Israel—the elect, God’s chosen people—the Tribulation will be interrupted by the return of Christ.

I’d like to take a few moments and show you some other passages in the Bible that describe this time of Great Tribulation.

In chapter 13 of his book, the prophet Isaiah predicted judgment upon the ancient empire of Babylon, but his description goes beyond past history to a future time of judgment that will come upon the world. This is another incidence of what we call the “double fulfillment of prophecy,” in which past events serve as a prototype of events still to come. Look at these verses:

4 Listen, a noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together! The Lord Almighty is mustering an army for war. 5 They come from faraway lands, from the ends of the heavens—the Lord and the weapons of his wrath—to destroy the whole country. 6 Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. 7 Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will melt. 8 Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame. 9 See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. 10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. 11 I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. (Isaiah 13:4-11)

This passage is indicative of similar passages in almost all the Old Testament prophets describing a time of great judgment that will come upon the world at the end of history.

The prophet Jeremiah put it this way in Jeremiah 30:7ff (**Ed**: See commentary)

4 These are the words the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah: 5 “This is what the Lord says: “‘Cries of fear are heard—terror, not peace. 6 Ask and see: Can a man bear children? Then why do I see every strong man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor, every face turned deathly pale? 7 How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be **a time of trouble for Jacob**, but he will be saved out of it.

The prophet Joel preached a series of sermons upon the occasion of a devastating locust invasion that virtually destroyed the economy of ancient Israel, but his sermons seem to indicate that this locust invasion is a symbol of worse things to come. Joel 2 says:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand— 2 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come.

Joel is describing an army of locusts, but the book of Revelation describes the army of demons that will be unleashed on the land like a swarm of satanic locusts during the Great Tribulation. Joel goes on to say in verse 11:

The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?

Notice also the prophet Daniel. We could look at Daniel 11, where many of the details of this Great Tribulation are given, but for the sake of time, let's just glance at the beginning chapter 12, noticing how similar these words are to the ones we hear from the lips of Jesus in Matthew 24:

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of the nations until now. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. (Daniel 12:1)

Look at these words from the prophet Zephaniah:

14 "The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. 15 That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, 16 a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. 17 I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. 18 Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth." (Zephaniah 1:14-18)

In Luke's Gospel we read:

25 "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken." (Luke 21:24-26)

The most extensive description of this period of time is in the book of Revelation. Many people are confused about the book of Revelation, and people often ask me, "What is the book of Revelation all about?" The most helpful thing I can say is that the vast middle part of Revelation, from chapter 6 through chapter 18, describes the events of the Great Tribulation period. The Lord uses several great figures of speech. He says that the Tribulation period is going to be like a scroll filled with devastation and sealed with seven seals, all of which are going to be opened. It's going to be like seven trumpets announcing judgment on the world, all of which are going to be sounded. It's going to be like seven bowls full of divine wrath, all of which are going to be poured out upon the world.

All of which brings us back to our Lord's sermon on Mount Olivet in which He describes this period of time following the sudden rapture of the church as a time of great distress, unequalled from the beginning of history and never to be equaled again.

Great Deception (Matthew 24:23-25)

Interestingly, there is one aspect of these days that Jesus particularly wanted to warn us about—the powerful effect that false prophets will have during those days. Look again at Mt 24:23ff:

At that time if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or, "There He is!" do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

In the last couple of years there have been several television shows that reveal how magicians and psychics perform their tricks and stunts. But sometimes a magician comes along—David Blaine is a good example—and his magic seems beyond description. We wonder if there isn't satanic power behind it. Well, I don't know about David Blaine, but I do know that during the Tribulation period there will be magicians, psychics, and religious leaders who will use trickery and satanic power to deceive people. And the world's population will be so great that multitudes will be deceived.

Jesus said, “Don’t be deceived by them.” Mt 24:26ff says:

“So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible in the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man.”

In other words, Jesus was saying, “No one is going to have to tell you when I come again. It will be obvious, visible, global, unmistakable, and dynamic. It will be like lightning that flashes around the world.”

Now, look at Mt 24:28:

“Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.”

Some of the translations use the word “eagles,” but that is a poor choice given the context. The idea here is a rotting carcass attracts vultures. Jesus is saying that a rotting, dying world will attract religious vultures—people with evil satanic powers that will prey on this sick and dying planet.

The book of Revelation also warns of those during the Tribulation period who will have satanic power to perform great miracles and do awesome deeds, so as to deceive the world. I believe that the false religion of Islam that dominates the Middle East and North Africa—and which is increasingly dominating Europe—will be a part of this.

The interesting thing is this—as we await that time we’re seeing more and more Islamic peoples from Middle Eastern and North African nations come to Christ. It’s only a trickle, and they do so at the risk of their lives; but it is happening. I was intrigued this week by a story in a magazine called *The Voice of the Martyrs*. It was about an Egyptian Muslim named Mohammed Farouk who hated Christians. He was a devout student of the Koran, and he had memorized the whole book in high school. He assaulted Christians at every opportunity, and began plotting with other Muslims how to capture and torture believers. He was part of a gang of Muslims who attacked several Coptic churches and set fire to a one of them.

In 1990, Mohammed was asked to research the Bible in order to confront and debate Christians. He didn’t really want to do this, because he was afraid of the Bible. He feared that possessing a Bible would invite demons into his home. But as he began reading the Bible, he found himself transfixed by its message. He read it over and over.

Then one night he had a vivid dream. He saw a blinding, radiant light in his bedroom, and an august and powerful figure stood before him. The figure approached him, grabbed his shoulders and shook him gently, as if trying to awaken him. “Who are you?” asked Mohammed. “I don’t know you.” The voice replied, “I am He for whom you are searching.” Mohammed accepted Christ that night.

This is a story that is being repeated over and over again in the Islamic world—not in great numbers, but with consistency. It’s happening here in America, too. Multitudes of people are coming to Jesus Christ and finding Him to be the One who can redeem them, free them, and enable them to face the future with confidence. You can make the same decision; you can come to Christ today.

As someone said,

“We don’t know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.”

Today I encourage you to come to Christ, give Him your life, and begin living for Him exclusively in these last days.

THE FINAL BATTLE

Matthew 24:26-31

I’ve been traveling solo the last couple of weeks, and I enjoy doing that because I sometimes need time alone, time by myself, time to get some distance between myself and all the concerns of life so that I can think through things more clearly. But I get mighty homesick if I’m away from home very long, and I miss my wife, Katrina, terribly, and my girls, and my grandchildren, and all of you. If there’s anything more wonderful than being away for awhile, it is coming back, it is coming home, it’s being reunited with those we love.

I think even the Lord Jesus must feel that way. He’s been away for awhile now, and I suspect He’s getting mighty homesick to come back for you and me. During the last week of His life, just before His departure, He devoted a sermon of two chapters in Matthew’s

Gospel to the signs of the times and to His return. As we read these passages, we sense an urgency in His voice and we cannot miss the emphasis He places on the importance of this subject. For the last several weeks, we've been studying this sermon—the Olivet Discourse—and today we are coming to the passage that begins in Matthew 24:26-31:

So if anyone tells you, "There He is, out in the desert," do not go out; or "Here He is, in the inner rooms," do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the East is visible in the West, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will be gathered. Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with great power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

Review

To review, this is the last week of our Lord's earthly life prior to Calvary, and He had just finished His last debate and disputation with Jewish leaders in the Temple. He had made a rather dramatic departure from the city, and was now sitting on the Mount of Olives, gazing over at the Temple, and reflecting on the future of His people. He told His disciples that the Temple they were admiring would soon be destroyed; and He said that following its destruction, there would come a period characterized by wars, diseases, earthquakes, and trouble. But He also predicted that His church would grow to global proportions and that it would endure great persecution around the world. But He also said, "The Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end would come."

The end of what? The end of the church age. The end of the age of missions. The end of the age of the proclamation of the Gospel by the Spirit-indwelt church. I believe He was predicting that the church would be removed at the moment of the rapture, and, following that, a terrible stern-faced ruler would emerge. This will be the Antichrist who will eventually erect his own image—the abomination of desolation—in the Third Jewish Temple and demand that the people of Israel bow and worship him. That will trigger a time of distress such as the world has never seen and will never see again.

Jesus went on to say, "During this time, rumors will fly that the Messiah has come. People will say, 'There He is, out in the desert. The Messiah has arrived!' Or, 'There He is; He's in the inner rooms of the Temple right now.' But don't believe it. When I come again, you'll not hear about it, you'll see it. It won't be a matter of rumor and speculation; it will be an unmistakable reality that no one can miss. It will be as dramatic as a brilliant bolt of lightning that literally splits the sky in two, from East to West. These false prophets giving rise to the rumors are simply vultures feeding on a dying world."

Now, beginning with Mt 24:29, in His own words, we hear Jesus describing what will happen when He comes again at that wonderful, much-awaited, highly-anticipated event we call the Second Coming.

The Light of the Sun

Here's what I would like to do in today's message. I'd like to briefly explain our Lord's words here and show you corresponding passages in the Bible that demonstrate the cohesive consistency of the Scriptures on this subject. I think this is very important and very reassuring.

Let's suppose that I wrote a book on the future. We have a whole area of study now, with academics called futurists studying past and current trends and making predictions about what will unfold in the future. Many books are written on this subject. Suppose I was a futurist and I wrote a book on what I thought would unfold in days yet to come. And then suppose seven hundred years from now, in the year AD 2703, someone else wrote a book about the future. And suppose another 700 years passed, and someone in the year 3,403 wrote another book. Would you expect these three books to say essentially the same things, to make the same predictions, to build on one another and reinforce one another, and to actually form one organic whole presenting one unified picture? If that happened it would be the greatest miracle in the history of non-fiction literature.

Yet that is exactly what we see in the Bible. Though it was written over a period of 1400 to 1500 years by over forty authors—and though it is filled with predictions and prophecy—it is remarkably, miraculously consistent and cohesive on what it says regarding the future. Here in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is taking a very simple approach, giving us the broad outlines of His return. I would like to take you to some other passages to fill in the picture and to show you how neatly it all corresponds, one part to another.

So with that as our approach today, let's start here with Mt 24:29:

Immediately after the distress of those days... In other words, the Great Tribulation will come to a sudden end at the Second Coming. The Return of Christ will occur immediately after the period of distress known as the Tribulation. Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

There will be terrifying cataclysmic physical phenomena accompanying the return of Christ. It will literally shake the world, the solar system, and indeed the whole universe.

Where else is this taught in the Bible? Everywhere! Let's look at some corresponding passages. First, look at Isaiah, chapter 13, written 700 years before Jesus delivered His Olivet Discourse.

9 See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. 10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. 11 I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. 12 I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. 13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13)

Now look at this vivid description in Isaiah 34:

Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it! 2 The LORD is angry with all nations; His wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them, He will give them over to slaughter. 3 Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench; the mountains will be soaked with their blood. 4 All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree. (Isaiah 34:1-4)

Now let's see what the weeping prophet Jeremiah has to say in chapter 4 of his book:

23 I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. 24 I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. 25 I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. 26 I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. 27 This is what the LORD says: "The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. 28 Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back." (Jeremiah 4:23-27)

Now, notice how the prophet Ezekiel puts it in chapter 32 of his book. Ezekiel was preaching at the very same time as Jeremiah, but they were hundreds of miles apart. They didn't know one another, and they had no opportunity to collaborate on their respective messages. Jeremiah was in Jerusalem, but Ezekiel was nearly a thousand miles away in a refugee settlement in Babylon. Ezekiel 32:7ff says:

7 When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. 8 All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Listen to what the prophet Joel said. He was actually describing an invasion of locusts that had swept over the nation of Judah and devastated the crops, the agriculture, and the economy. But his words portended a coming day of judgment at the moment of Christ's return.

10 Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. 11 The LORD thunders at the head of His army; His forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey His command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? (Joel 2:10)

And down in Joel 2:30-32:

I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 31 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 32 And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Now, go to the third chapter of Joel's prophecy:

14 Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. 15 The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. 16 The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. (Joel 3:14-16)

The prophet Zechariah says that it will be a unique day such as the world has never seen before:

Zech 14:6 On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. 7 It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime—a day known to the LORD . When evening comes, there will be light.

Why? The sun and moon will fail and fall; and a new kind of light—the radiance of the Lord—will illuminate the earth.

We're running out of time, so let's just skip to one final book, the Revelation. Look at chapter 6:

12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, 13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. 14 The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev 6:12-17)

The Light of the Son

Just try to imagine it. Several years ago there was a pastor named Earl Kelly, of the First Baptist Church of Holly Springs, Mississippi, who was preaching on the second coming of Christ from the Olivet Discourse. He had just quoted Matthew 24:27, "For as the lightning comes out of the east, and flashes to the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be." At that very moment, a large light bulb fell from its socket in the ceiling and shattered on the floor in front of the pulpit. Without missing a beat, Rev. Kelley said: "His coming will be just as sudden, and unexpected, and devastating (as that)!"

Now, I'd like to use the illustration of a light bulb in a somewhat different way. Suppose that I had all the lights in this room changed to red light bulbs. When we turned on the lights everything would look differently. There would be a red glow to everything. We'd all look like we had a fever. Our clothing would have a red tint to it, and we'd see everything in pinkish terms. Or if we had blue light bulbs in all the sockets, everything would have a blue tint.

I want to suggest that all the different aspects of our lives look differently when we see them in the light of the Second Coming of Christ. It casts a particularly glorious glow about everything, and it changes our attitudes about absolutely everything.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Let's take our attitude toward things. When we see them in the light of the world, the things we buy are treasures; but when we see them in the light of the Second Coming of Christ they are not treasures, but tools. Even something as simple as a piece of jewelry. If you see a piece of jewelry—say a necklace or a ring or a broach—in the light of the world, it is a treasure designed to draw attention to ourselves and make an impression for ourselves and to make ourselves look better.

But Christians live in the light of the Second Coming wear jewelry, if we do, not to draw attention to ourselves, but to make ourselves a little more pleasant and presentable in society for the sake of Christ. We want our appearance to enhance our testimony. The simplicity of our outward appearance reflects the simplicity and beauty of our inner souls. Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 3: "Don't be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God. That is the way the holy women of old made themselves beautiful."

Or take our homes and houses. In the light of the world, these are places of status and comfort; but the Christian who lives in the light of the Second Coming has a pilgrim mentality, and our homes and houses are temporary resting places in which we can raise our children for Christ, study our Bibles, find protection from the elements, and entertain others for the Lord's sake. They aren't treasures to be coveted, but tools to be used.

Same with our bank accounts, our money, all our possessions.

1 Corinthians 7 says: "The time is short. From now... those who buy something (should live) as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away."

Listen to the way Peterson puts it in his translation of that passage, beginning in 1 Corinthians 7:29: I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out.

I read about a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary that kept a little plaque on his desk bearing only two words: "Perhaps Today." What difference would it make in your life if every moment when you awoke you said aloud, "Jesus is coming soon. He may

come today.” What difference would it make in your life if you laid down every night saying, “I wonder if Christ will come and snatch me heavenward while I’m lying in this bed. I wonder if He will come while I’m sleeping.” The Bible says blessed are those who love His appearing. For as lightning flashes from the East to the West, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.

And Lord, haste the day when our faith shall be sight,
The skies be rolled up as a scroll.
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
Even so...is it well with your soul?

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Matthew 24:32-25:30

My friend, Denis Lyle of Belfast, Northern Ireland, tells of a tourist visiting Switzerland who observed a beautiful mansion on the lonely shore of a picturesque lake. The house was surrounded by well kept gardens, tidy paths, and gorgeous flowerbeds. Not a weed was to be seen anywhere. The mansion’s beautiful setting and neat surroundings revealed that much toil had been expended on developing the grounds. Complimenting the gardener on the beauty and order of the garden the tourist asked, “How long have you been caretaker here?” The gardener replied, “I have been here for twenty years.”

The tourist further asked, “And during all that time how often has the owner of the property been in residence?” The gardener smiled and said, “He has been here only four times.”

“And to think,” exclaimed the visitor, “That for all these years you have kept this house and garden in such superb condition. Why, you look after them just as if you expected the owner to come tomorrow.”

“Oh, no,” said the gardener. “I look after these grounds as if I expected him to come today.”

In our study of the Olivet Discourse, we’re coming to Matthew 24:32, and what I want you to notice is that there is a rather obvious shift that occurs in His message at this point. Until now, He has been teaching us the sequence of events that will occur between the First Century and the Second Coming. The first 31 verses of His message are devoted to didactic teaching about the end times. For the last several weeks, we have been looking at these 31 verses. But now, having given us the broad sweep of predictive prophecy, Jesus paused, changed His approach, and began telling a series of stories and illustrations to help His listeners realize the implications of what He has been saying. He wants us to begin living as though we were expecting Him to come—not tomorrow—but today.

The Fig Tree

He used six different stories or illustrations to drive home the importance of His Second Coming, and I’d like for us to briefly touch on each of those six stories. So let’s break in at this point and resume our study of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, verse 32. Here He employed the illustration of the fig tree to tell us that, in regard to His coming, we should be watching:

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

The fig tree was in ancient Palestine what the crocuses, tulips, and daffodils are to Tennessee. The fig tree was the first tree to bud out and blossom, so it was a sign that springtime was near. Even so, Jesus said, when you see all these things, you know that the Second Coming is near.

Now, we have an interpretive challenge here. What did Jesus mean when He said, “This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened”? There are three possibilities.

First, He might have been speaking very literally to the disciples, telling them that all the events He was describing would come to pass within the next thirty or forty years, within their generation. That’s a difficult interpretation to sustain, because while these things began to take place within their generation with the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in AD 70, much of what Jesus has said here is still in the future.

Second, He could have been addressing these words to the generation of the Tribulation period. When the church is raptured, our Bibles will be left behind. Jesus goes on in the next verse—verse 35—to say, “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.” Notice the two-fold repetition of the phrase, “all these things.” Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

So He might have been projecting Himself into the future, letting the final generation of humanity know that all these things were now coming to sudden and total fulfillment.

The third possibility (and the one that seems most sensible to me) is to understand the word “generation” in its broad sense as a period or age. That is a standard and allowable definition in the lexicons. I think Jesus was telling us here that all these things are coming to pass, and to keep our eyes on the signs of the times so that we’ll stay alert and be ready. When all these things are fulfilled, the age will be at an end—and not before.

The Days of Noah

The reason I prefer this interpretation is because it fits the context and corresponds with the point that He is making. Notice how He proceeds in verse 36 to give us the second illustration. He reaches back into time and gives us a historical illustration—the days of Noah:

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and it took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

The interesting thing about this illustration is that in using it Jesus doesn’t emphasize the sensuality or sinfulness or evil of the people of Noah’s day. He doesn’t talk about their living in sin, their disregard for holiness, or the corruption of their society. His point here is that they lived unprepared for judgment and in seeming total ambivalence to the warnings of Noah.

People today are living their lives in total disregard of the imminence of the coming Rapture and the reality of the coming judgment. Jesus’ point is that we should live in constant readiness for the Lord to come. See how He puts it in verse 42: Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

The Thief in the Night

And then, in Matthew 24:43, He uses another illustration to make the same point:

But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.

The Wise Servant

And now, a fourth illustration to drive home the same point. The parable of the wise servant says that we should not only be watching for the Lord, but working for the Lord:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, “My master is staying away a long time,” and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In other words, Jesus has left to return to heaven, but He’s coming back. In the meantime, we are His servants and He has given us a work to do, a kingdom to build, a task to complete. We’ll be judged for whether we were faithful to the task or whether we became distracted by the world. What gifts and resources and talents has God given you? What opportunities do you have to serve Him, to hasten His coming?

The Ten Virgins

Now as we continue on into Matthew 25, let me remind you that when Matthew originally wrote his Gospel, he didn’t have any chapter divisions at all. The chapters were added later. So Matthew 24 and 25 is one unbroken sermon. As we pass over into chapter 25, Jesus didn’t break His delivery at all; He just continued with another illustration or story.

I’ll not take time to read this, but let me give you the essence of this parable. There was a wedding planned, and there were ten young ladies in the bridal party. Their job was to wait at a certain spot for the bridegroom and to accompany him on to the wedding. But he delayed his coming, and when he finally showed up, only half of the maids were ready for him. The others had fallen asleep and had let their lamps go out. They were ashamed and unable to proceed on with Him. Jesus said, “Therefore, keep watch,

because you do not know the day or the hour.”

The Talents

And then, in Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus used yet another story—a rather long illustration—to drive home the same point. He told about a Master, a wealthy employer, who, before leaving on a long trip, entrusted three servants with various amounts of money to invest until He returned.

Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

The first and second servants were diligent and faithful, but the third buried the money and was lazy and slothful. When the owner returned, he commended the first two, saying, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little, I will make you a ruler over much.” But the third servant received a bitter reprimand from the master.

So we have six different stories, all of them touching on the same general theme. Jesus is telling us that the information about His return should have a profound impact on our thinking and behavior. The Bible doesn’t give us prophetic information just to satisfy our curiosity or to distract us with all sorts of endless, fruitless discussions about eschatological issues. I think we can sum it up by saying that the person who really processes the Olivet Discourse as Jesus intends will be known by three attributes.

First, we should be happy. If we study diligently the subject matter of the last days, it should make us happier people. I can’t help thinking here of my Uncle Walter Morgan, my father’s oldest brother. When he was in his eighties, he was very active; and I would often go over to his house with my dad. I’d sit and watch television in the den while my dad and uncle were in the kitchen, sitting at the kitchen table and discussing prophecy. Uncle Walter read a great deal from the preachers back in the 40s and 50s who wrote and preached on prophetic themes, such as Hyman Appleman, who was a Russian Jewish evangelist; and William Steuart McBirnie, and M. R. DeHaan. He subscribed to the Jerusalem Post, and kept up with the latest news from Israel. And he was full of life and full of happiness. Every Sunday until he had a depilating stroke he stood on the steps of the church, giving out the Sunday programs, then he went inside and taught the “Old Women’s Sunday School Class,” as it was called.

He wasn’t worried about dying; he wasn’t worried about the future. He knew what was coming, and he knew who was coming, and he lived with a sense of happiness because he knew he was living in the last days, and he was waiting for his Lord. I think that’s the way we should live, and that’s the way we should die.

Second, the teachings about the return of Christ should make us holy. First John 3:3 says, “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Think of it this way. On rare occasions, when our children were nearly grown, Katrina and I would leave home for overnight or for brief trip, telling our girls to take care of things, that we would be back on a particular day. I’m almost certain that very little housework took place until the hours before our expected return home; and then I think there was feverish activity. That’s when the dishes would be washed, the beds made, and the house put into ship-shape. They wanted to make sure everything was clean and neat for our return.

If we have a sense of the Lord’s return, it will affect the way we live, the places we go, the words we say, the way we invest our money and our time and our talents. Everyone who has this hope within him purifies himself. We’ll want to clean up our lives and live as He expects us to live.

Third, a gripping awareness of the soon return of Christ makes us, not only happy and holy, but hard-working. We want to be about our Master’s business. We want to be found occupied when He returns so that we’ll hear Him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

I recently read a gripping story about a terrible fire that took the lives of many people in Chicago. This happened exactly 100 years ago, in 1903, at the brand new, supposedly fireproof Iroquois Theater on Randolph Street in Chicago. On the stage of the theater were many backdrops, painted in highly flammable oil paints. During an afternoon matinee performance on December 30th, the theater was packed with 1900 people. It was standing room only. At exactly 3:15, during the performance, a hot light somehow ignited one of the curtains, sending a flame racing up the velvet curtains and igniting the flammable backdrops. The people inside panicked, and in the stampede the followed people trampled on top of others until bodies were stacked ten high. Six hundred people died.

I read recently that there was one man who managed to get out, but in order to escape he had to climb over the trampled bodies of women and children. He did nothing to help others; he was only intent on saving himself.

Later, he was struck with the callousness of what he had done, and he became deranged. He wandered around, muttering the

same thing to himself over and over—the words: “I have saved nobody but myself. I have saved nobody but myself.”

What a terrible thing if we have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and say, “Oh, I have saved nobody but myself.”

Jesus told us that the last days were going to be characterized by wars and rumors of war, false prophets, pestilences and diseases, earthquakes, famines, worldwide persecution, and the globalization of the Gospel. And then, He said, the end would come—the end of the age of the church. Then the Antichrist will appear and establish an abominable image of himself in the Jerusalem Temple, which would trigger a time of great tribulation which the world has never before seen and will never see again. But just when it appears that all hope is gone, the Son of Man will appear in the sky, splitting open the heavens. The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars of the heavens will fall like figs in the wintertime, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

Now, Jesus said, learn the lesson of the fig tree, of the days of Noah, of the thief in the night, of the faithful and wise servant, of the ten virgins, of the wise and foolish stewards. Since all these things must come to pass, what sort of people ought we to be? We ought to be happy people. We ought to be holy people. We ought to be hard-working people, so that when our Lord appears He will look at us appreciatively and say,

“Well done, thou good and faithful servants. You have been faithful over little; I will make you rulers over much. Enter thou into the joys of your Lord.”

THE FINAL VERDICT

Matthew 25:31-46

Tonight we are coming to the end of our series of seven messages on the Olivet Discourse, the sermon our Lord preached in Matthew 24 and 25 on the subject of His return to earth. This is our last opportunity to look over the entire message and to understand how it is structured, so let’s turn together to the 24th chapter of Matthew. Notice the question the disciples asked: “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen (referring to the destruction of the Temple that Jesus had just mentioned), and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”

In reply, Jesus began speaking, telling them all subsequent human history will be characterized, not by upward social evolution, but by a downward escalation of wars, diseases, famines, earthquakes, and persecution. But, He said, this will be the era in which the church will take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the earth as a testimony to all nations, and then the end of the church age will come—the rapture of the church and the end of the age of grace.

Following that, in verse 15, Jesus predicted that a terrible, desecrating image—the abomination of desolation—would be set up in the rebuilt Third Temple in Jerusalem, and that event would mark the beginning of a period of Great Tribulation such as the world had never seen before and would never see again. “Unless those days were shortened,” Jesus said, “no flesh would be saved.”

But those days will be cut short and dramatically interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ who will appear in the sky like likening that flashes in the east and splits through the heavens to the west. Verse 30 says:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky and all the nations on earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. Then He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to another.

Now, as we saw this morning, at this point Jesus interrupted His explanation of the sequence of events that will characterize the days of the Second Coming. He will get back to His narrative in chapter 25, verse 31. But now He’s going to pause to give us a mental breather and to tell us six stories showing us the implications of His predictions. He uses the illustrations of the fig tree, of the days of Noah, of the thief in the night, of the wise servant, of the ten virgins, and of the talents. All these stories are designed to drive home the point that the imminent return of Christ should have a dramatic effect on the way we’re living. We should live our lives as those who know we’re on the edge of history, who are aware we’re living in the last days. A knowledge of the swiftly approaching return of Christ should make us happy people, holy people, and hard-working people. We should be watching, waiting, and working.

Now, having paused to give us these six different illustrations, Jesus resumed His narrative regarding the sequence of events that will characterize the Second Coming. The resumption of events occurs in Matthew 25:31, after the last of His stories, the one about the talents.

Now, Jesus said, in effect, after I split open the sky and return in glory, I will sit in judgment on the world and I will judge the nations.

So that's where we are tonight; let's begin our study at Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Then He will say to those on His left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." Then also will they answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Now there are two difficult questions, two interpretive challenges, to this passage. First, what judgment is this referring to? And second, why is this a "works" judgment and not a "faith" judgment? That has always bothered me. I would have thought that the sheep would be those who trusted Jesus Christ for salvation, and the goats are those who rejected Him. And, in a sense, of course, that is true; but Jesus puts it in terms of benevolence and charity. There's nothing specific here about faith or grace; it's about feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. So what judgment is this? And why is it framed in terms of works rather than of grace?

I think we can answer both of those with the same answer. Many Bible scholars believe that this judgment is not the final judgment at the end of the world. This is not the Great White Throne Judgment described in Revelation 20 that will occur at the end of the Millennial Reign of Christ.

It is instead the judgment of the nations that will take place at the end of the Tribulation and at the beginning of the Millennial Reign of Christ. Notice that there are three groups mentioned here—the sheep, the goats, and the brethren. Let's go back and look at it.

Mt 25:31ff: When the Son of Man comes in His glory...

This is a judgment that will take place at the time of the Second Coming, after the Tribulation and before the Millennium. The sequence of events as I understand it is that Jesus will come for the church at the rapture. There will follow a time of Great Tribulation which will be concluded by the sudden return of Jesus Christ to this earth. There will be an intermediate judgment, described here in this passage about the sheep and the goats, followed by a thousand year reign of righteousness in which all of God's promises for Israel will be abundantly fulfilled. After that the great and terrible Judgment at the Great White Throne will occur, followed by the recreation of the heavens and the earth as the habitation of the saints for all eternity as described in the last two chapters of the Bible. Look at it again with me:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

What will be the basis of the judgment? What will determine who are the sheep and who are the goats? The answer is--how the individuals and nations of the world treat Jesus' brothers. Look at verse 40: The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Who are the brothers of the Lord? The Jews. What is He saying? I think Jesus may be saying this: We know that during the Great Tribulation, some people on earth—some among the nations, some of the Gentiles—are going to be saved. People are going to find the Bibles that have been left behind, they are going to hear the witnesses that God raises up, they're going to hear the preaching of the 144,000 that God sends out—and they are going find Jesus as Messiah and, in so doing, they will find themselves siding with Israel in refusing to bow down to the image of the Beast. They will refuse the mark of the beast.

Even now, the Jews have a term for people like this. These people are called "Righteous Gentiles." If you go to Israel, for example, and visit [Yad Vashem](#), the Holocaust Memorial, you'll find monuments and memorials to over 11,000 "righteous Gentiles" who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Interestingly, at Yad Vashem, almost 5,000 of these righteous Gentiles are Polish.

During the Great Tribulation Period, many Gentiles are going to come to Christ and become allies with Israel against the Antichrist. They are going to aid and assist the blood brothers of Jesus. They are going to give them food and clothing and shelter and assistance, just as the Righteous Gentiles did during World War II and the Holocaust. And when Jesus comes to end the Great Tribulation and to establish His 1000-year reign, He is going to conduct an intermediate judgment to separate the righteous Gentiles from the evil men and women in the world who sided with the Antichrist. The evil are going to be cast into hell to await the Great White Throne Judgment. The righteous Gentiles will enter the Millennial Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, and there await eternal life.

That's my understanding of this text. But regardless of whether this particular interpretation is the best, the important thing for us to notice is how certain is the judgment. God never ignores sin; He is a just judge.

Sometimes it's hard for us to comprehend or visualize the seriousness with which the Lord judges sin. I sometimes feel like we need something akin to the programs that take troubled youths inside prisons to show them what will happen if they don't mend their ways. I wish I had a way of making us all understand more visually and more urgently the reality of coming judgment.

Recently I came across a story that brought this home to me. It's one of the most fascinating and remarkable stories I've ever read, and it comes from the pen of Dr. V. Raymond Edman. Dr. Edman, former missionary to Ecuador, was for many years the beloved and highly respected president of my alma mater, Wheaton College. He wrote an autobiographical book of incidents that had happened to him and to people whom he knew, and in this book he told about a missionary named John H. Hartman, who was a friend of his.

In the very early 1900s, the Hartmans were missionaries in the West Indies. They lived on the island of Barbados, and several times a year Rev. Hartman would travel from island to island on a small inter-island steamer to visit his various congregations in the Caribbean, including a little church on the island of Martinique.

"Only once," said Rev. Hartman, "did (my wife) Mrs. Hartman ever ask me not to go on one of those trips. Many a time she was ill with some tropical fever, to be sure; but only on one occasion did she beg me not to go as I had planned. I explained to her that I had no alternative but to go. The steamer went only once a month. The previous month I had sent letters to each congregation along the way to inform them that on the boat's next trip I would come for some services. The steamer remained in a given harbor for a day or two, sometimes more. Each local congregation knew approximately the day of arrival and would send word about my coming to the members and friends scattered in the towns, villages and plantations. In those days we had no wireless or radio service, and, of course, no air mail. I had to go, or else disappoint every congregation throughout the islands."

But on this one occasion, Mrs. Hartman expressed great apprehension for him. Though she was seldom discouraged, worried, or blue, she had a foreboding about this trip, scheduled for early May, 1902, and she felt that if he started out he would never return. It was such a strong impression, that Rev. Hartman reluctantly agreed to stay in Barbados.

He said, "I watched the little steamer sail from the harbor, and my heart went out to the many Christians who would be disappointed in not meeting me as it arrived on one island and another. However, there seemed nothing else I could do."

He was especially concerned for the church on the island of Martinique. The city of St. Pierre was a place of great wickedness. Rev. Hartman later said, "The people were given to drunkenness and gross immorality, with open scoffing and blasphemy against everything religious. I learned later on good authority that a sow was sacrificed on Good Friday in the cathedral as a burlesque of the crucifixion of the Savior. With this mounting wickedness and depravity, there came increasingly violent persecution of the believers. They were subject to physical harm and imprisonment as well as insolence and insults from their fellow citizens, filled with strong drink and heady with sordid pleasures. Finally the persecution grew so intense that the Christians felt they could no longer remain in the city. As a result they gathered together what few belongings they could take with them and went as a group from St. Pierre. They obeyed literally the words of the Savior, 'When ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet... When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another' (Matthew 10:14, 23)."

Rev. Hartman continued, "Their principle concern was for me. They knew that I would be arriving in a few days on the boat, and they had no way of telling me where they had gone or why. They did their best by leaving a message with some to be delivered to me on board ship, if indeed their neighbors would take the trouble to do so. Then they went on foot to another part of the island."

In the meantime, unknown to the Hartmans, something else was happening on the island of Martinique. There was a volcano, Mt. Pelee, at the base of the capital city of St. Pierre. It has been relatively dormant, and scientists had ascended the slopes of Mt. Pelee making the best assessments they could. They were unanimous in their opinion that there was no danger whatever in any eruption.

On the very day—May 8, 1902—that Rev. Hartman had intended to visit the congregation but was prevented by his wife's forebodings; on the very day that the little congregation would have been entertaining their preacher had they not packed up their belongs and fled; on that very day Mt. Pelee blew its top.

It was like Mt. St. Helen's. The force of the explosion is beyond comprehension. Without any noticeable warning, a tremendous explosion of superheated steam blew out the top of the mountain with such force that the noise of the eruption was heard in Venezuela, more than 850 miles away. Not only were the buildings and their inhabitants destroyed almost instantaneously, but every ship in the harbor burned and sank. The little inter-island steamer had burned at the wharf, and there were no survivors.

In less than two minutes, thirty thousand citizens of the city of St. Pierre perished. Only two inhabitants of the entire city survived the catastrophe, and they were prisoners in solitary confinement who were being held in the deepest dungeon of the city jail, which served as a sort of bomb shelter for them.

The little congregation was safe and sound, but they were grief-stricken because they thought their missionary/pastor had perished that day. Not until two months later, when contact was finally reestablished, was their sorrow turned to joy at God's providential protection. Hartman later recalled that the same passage that the little church had used to justify their moving—that if you are persecuted in one city, shake the dust off your feet and flee to another city—that same passage also warns that it will be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for those cities that reject the Savior.

The Bible teaches that God is going to judge the cities and nations and the individuals of this world. Not one human being outside of Christ will escape judgment at the Great White Throne of God. Sin always brings about death and judgment, and the Bible is full of warnings from one end to the other.

How wonderful on that day to be safe in the arms of Jesus, shielded by His blood, forgiven by His grace, recipients of the crown of Him who will say,

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many. Enter thou into the joys of your Lord.”

He's Alive (But Don't Tell Anyone)

Matthew 27:32-39

I read this week that there are sixty-five new massive rollercoasters opening around the world this year. There are already hundreds of breath-taking roller coasters around the globe, and they've all been rated by various rollercoaster enthusiasts. The top-rated rollercoaster in the world is reportedly the Kingda Ka at Six Flags in New Jersey. It goes from zero to 138 miles an hour in less than four seconds and has a straight, vertical 90 degree drop. I only know of one rollercoaster more dramatic, and that's Matthew, chapters 27 and 28—and the rollercoaster of emotions connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I describe it as a rollercoaster of emotions because I want you to try to visualize and internalize the ups and downs of that world-changing weekend—the depths of horror and depression and despair; the tinges of excitement as hints and rumors of the resurrection began to appear; and then the massive explosion of joy which is still reverberating through history and is ringing out in millions of hearts today. I'd like to ask you three questions this morning along these lines:

Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?

Experience the Grief (Matthew 27:32-39).

First, were you there when they crucified my Lord? Or to put it differently, can you imagine the grief experienced by His family and friends as they gazed at His beaten and battered body hanging exposed on the cross? Here's the way Matthew expressed it in chapter 27 of his Gospel:

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified Him, they divided up His clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. Above His head they placed the written charge against Him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. Two robbers were crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left. Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads....

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” – which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

...And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit...

A man recently corresponded with me about this. He had read one of my books and was commenting about the hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross." In his letter, he made an interesting observation. The crosses that hang around our necks or that adorn our churches are polished and smooth. If someone makes a wooden cross for a church sanctuary, for example, they typically sand it down and put a coat of varnish or polyurethane over it. You can run your hand over it without getting any cuts or splinters. It's as smooth as a piece of furniture. But the Romans who cut the trees and split the wood and formed the cross of Christ had no such designs. The wood was rough and jagged and filled with hundreds of sharp splinters of varying sizes. The wood was perhaps riddled with insects. When the raw and scourged back of Jesus Christ was forced onto that wood and raised perpendicular to the ground, the full weight of his body bore down on all those splinters and exposed Him to all the tortures of that wood.

Mel Gibson tried to portray the torture of crucifixion in his movie about the passion of Christ, and people around the world were shocked at how graphic and bloody it was. But the reason is because the cross portrays our sins, and our sins are very ugly and very deadly. It's a gruesome but a perfect symbol. The Bible teaches that on the cross, Jesus was bearing the ugliness and deadliness of our own sins, and the power of His shed blood is sufficient to obtain our eternal pardon.

Seven hundred years before the crucifixion of Christ, the prophet Isaiah predicted and described it for us and explained to us its meaning. He wrote: He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes are we healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Every one of our sins was laid on our Lord that day. Think of it! Your sins and mine. The worst and darkest of all our secrets, and those sins that are so small that we may not even be aware of them. There's not anything you can do that's beyond the scope of the blood of Jesus Christ and His ability to fully pardon and forgive. So my first question today is, have you been to Calvary? Have you gazed upon the very dying form of one who suffered there for you and me? Can you imagine the grief of that day?

Were You There When They Laid Him in the Tomb?

Experience the Despair (Matthew 27:57-61)

The second question is: Were you there then they laid Him in the tomb? In other words, can you imagine the despair of that Friday night and that black and hopeless Saturday? Let's continue reading Matthew's description of it:

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

They were utterly helpless and felt utterly hopeless. Think of how Mary the mother of Jesus felt. Think of how Peter felt. Suppose that someone comes up to you, doubles up his fist, and slams it into your face. That would be bad enough, but what if he aims next for your stomach, then for your kidney. Multiple blows are catastrophic to our bodies and to our nervous systems. And here the followers of Jesus had multiple blows.

First, their dearest one had died. Second, He had died young. Third, He had been tortured to death before their very eyes. Fourth, they had deserted Him at His moment of greatest need, and they were overwhelmed, not only with grief but with guilt. Fifth, they had not only lost their friend, they had literally lost their religion. They had based their eternal destiny and their spiritual hope on Jesus as the Messiah, and they apparently been wrong. For us, when we suffer a crippling loss, at least we can find comfort and solace in our faith and in the promises of God; but these people no longer had that. Their so-called Messiah—or what was left of His mangled body—was in the tomb. Sixth, they no longer even had jobs or normal occupations or a routine to which they could return. They had left all to follow Him. Virtually everything in their lives had collapsed, and the blackness of despair had fallen over their lives like the edge of night.

Often as I read the Bible, I say to myself, "I wish I had been there just for the day. I wish I could have seen this or that take place." But I've never wanted to have been there on that black Saturday when the followers of Christ were trapped in a nightmare and His body was laying lifeless in that tomb. Yet all of us need to go there and understand and appreciate it.

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? Can you imagine the despair of that day?

Were You There When He Rose Up from the Grave?

Experience the Joy (Matthew 28:1-10)

But you can anticipate my third question: Were you there when He rose up from the grave? Can you imagine the intoxicating joy, the happiness, the exuberance of that dawning Easter Sunday? Matthew describes it like this:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of Him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me."

The resurrection of Christ is biblically logical and theologically necessary. None of us would have invented a story like this, but now as we look back on it we can see the genius of God in the plan that He devised from the foundation of the world. He knew that in the freedom of our own wills, we would fall and fail and need forgiveness. So He Himself entered into humanity, died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the dead that death itself might be destroyed. This took place at a specific event in history, and that event is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. God was in Christ defeating sin and Satan, and destroying death and despair forever.

No wonder the angels said, "Go and spread the news. Go and tell someone else." Can you imagine how impossible it would have been to have kept this a secret? This was brought home to me earlier this year when I read the story of a woman named Marty Halyburton whose husband was shot down during the Vietnam War. On October 17, 1965, Navy Pilot Porter Halyburton's plane was shot down over North Vietnam, and American aircraft in the area saw nothing but a fireball. No ejection. No parachute. No radio transmission on the ground. No beeping from any emergency transmitters.

Shortly afterward, far away in Atlanta, Georgia, a car pulled up and two men in uniform and a Navy chaplain knocked on the door of Porter's wife, Marty. They told her that Porter had been shot down and killed in action over North Vietnam. They showed her a map of the area and pointed to where his plane had erupted in a ball of fire. "We know he's dead," they told her.

For several days, Marty was too numb to react. She simply held the couple's baby and knew the child would never know her daddy. A memorial service was held, and an overflow crowd of people came to offer their condolences. Speakers spoke well of Porter's young life and the happiness he had brought to so many people. He was a hero, they said, who gave his life for freedom. Flags were flown at half-staff all over town, and a grave-marker was placed in Porter's memory in the family cemetery listing the dates of his birth and death.

Eighteen months passed and Marty tried to adjust to her tragic loss, but it was very hard, and eventually she even began dating a little; but every night she missed Porter.

Unknown to her, Porter had survived the crash and was being held by the North Vietnamese as a POW. Despite abuse and even torture, he was in reasonably good condition; but he anguished over the fact that he knew his family must think he was dead. But then one day, the North Vietnamese staged a publicity stunt in which they paraded some of the POWs through the streets of Hanoi, and United States Military Intelligence gained photographs and studied them with painstaking care. There among them was Porter Halyburton.

Shortly afterward, a man from the casualty branch of the Navy called Marty to inquire about her well-being. At first, Marty thought it was simply a courtesy call. But then he asked for directions to her house and asked if he could stop by. Then he said that he had flown in from Washington.

Marty hung up the phone and walked into the living room where her best friend happened to be waiting. "Dot," said Marty, "this man is coming from Washington."

"What do you think he wants?" said Dot.

Marty paused and then spoke flatly, "They're coming to tell me that Porter's alive."

A few minutes later six men showed up, and Marty met them at the doorstep. One of them looked at her and said, "We've got something to talk to about you." And Marty interrupted him and said, "I know what you have to say. You've come to tell me that my

husband is alive.”

The man looked at her in amazement, then said, “I’ve been worrying about how I was going to tell you, and you’ve just made it easier for me.” They went into the house and told Marty everything they knew, but then they told her to keep the news to herself and not to share it with anyone except the very closest of immediate family members for fear of reprisals against the POWs if the news got out.

That, however, proved impossible to do. How do you hide the sparkle in your eyes, the bounce in your step, the smile on your face? How do you hide the sudden transformation that has come over your personality? How do you stand around talking to your friends without blurring out the news? How do you answer questions without hinting at the truth? In the end, the Navy realized this and they made it easier by officially changing Porter’s status; and from that moment on, Marty devoted her life to two things. First, she did all she could to keep the plight of American POWs in front of the American public. She met with congressmen and reporters and spoke at functions and spread the news so that the POWs would not be forgotten. And second, she started preparing for the day when Porter would come home again—as he, in fact, did.

As I read that story, I found that I identified with it, with the rising and falling of her emotions, with the rollercoaster experience she faced. I couldn’t help but think of Easter, of Christ, of the Resurrection, and of those original followers of Christ. That must be something of how they felt. First, the tragic, heart-numbing news that He was dead. Then the suspicions that He was alive after all. Then confirmation. But there’s one thing Marty endured that the disciples didn’t have to face. They were never told to keep it quiet.

How could anyone keep news like that quiet? If Christ has risen from the dead, don’t you think it will show up in the sparkle in our eyes, the smile on our face, the bounce in our step, the conversations we have with friends and family? The joy of resurrection is irrepressible.

We should live out that joy every day; and we can do it by giving our lives without reservation to the Lord Jesus Christ. What Jesus Christ did was very public before all the world, but it is very personal to each of us. In His omniscience, I believe that He had in mind every single individual in the world who needed or would ever need redemption. He was thinking of you, and today He is calling you to become His follower. He wants to forgive your sins, heal your hurts, and give you everlasting life.

If Jesus Christ could lift Peter and John and Mary from the depths of despair and infuse them with certain hope, He can do the same for you. If Jesus Christ could turn their sadness into gladness, He can do the same for you. If He could forgive their sin and give them eternal life, He can do so now for you here in this place. If He could burst the tomb and destroy death on that Easter Sunday, He can change your life today and put you on a new path and give you a purpose worth living for.

It’s time to get off the rollercoaster and onto the straight and narrow. The Bible says, “If we confess with our mouths Jesus as Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart one believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:9-13).

Miracle Messenger--The Angel Of The Resurrection

Matthew 28

A few weeks ago, I delivered a series of Sunday morning messages on the subject of witchcraft, the occult, and demons. Now today I want to balance it all out with an Easter Sunday morning message about the angel of the Resurrection. People are very interested in angels today, and we meet one straightaway in last chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, the account of the resurrection. It begins like this:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The Angel's Mission (Matthew 28:1-6)

The first thing to notice is the angel's mission, and I find it very curious to consider how Matthew puts it here. We get the idea from carefully reading this account that the body of Jesus Christ returned to life unseen in the darkness of that Middle Eastern tomb, that he rose out of his burial shroud, and that he physically and miraculously passed through the sealed, stone door of the tomb without the guards even knowing that he was gone. As the women arrived, the soldiers were unknowingly guarding an empty tomb from which the body of Jesus Christ has already disappeared. As the women approached the tomb, an angel from heaven descended from the sky, touched down with an earthquake, flexed his muscles, and rolled away the stone. He removed the grave covering, not so that the body of Jesus Christ could get out of the tomb, but so that the women, the guards, the disciples, and all the world could go in and see for themselves that it was empty.

What, then, can we learn about angels from this passage? Well, this angel...

- Had the ability to materialize, to become visible
- He was able to fly or descend from the sky
- His very presence made the earth quake and tremble
- He was incredibly powerful, able to roll away a massive stone as if it were a marshmallow
- He terrified the Roman troops by his sheer appearance
- He gleamed, flashed like lightning, and was white as snow
- He could communicate, presumably in Aramaic, to these women.

All that corresponds with what we know about angels from other passages in the Bible. In all, there are references to angels in 34 of the 66 books of the Bible, 17 in the Old Testament and 17 in the New Testament. The word angel is used 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament...

- Hagar was comforted by an angel
- Abraham was visited by angels
- Jacob wrestled with an angel
- The Israelites were led by an angel through the desert
- Gideon was instructed by an angel
- David was disciplined by the angel who smote Israel
- The armies of Assyria were destroyed by an angel
- Elijah was fed by an angel
- Zechariah tells us that angels patrol the earth like secret agents from heaven

In the Gospels...

- Angels announced our Lord's birth to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds
- Angels comforted him when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness
- Angels strengthened him in the Garden of Gethsemane during his suffering
- Angels gathered in hushed amazement before the cross, perhaps waiting for the Lord to lift his finger and beckon them to rescue him. The old song says, He could have called 10,000 angels To destroy the world and set him free; / He could have called 10,000 angels / But he died alone for you and me.
- An angel--perhaps Gabriel--announced his resurrection here in our passage today
- Two angels dressed in white reminded the disciples at our Lord's ascension of his Second Coming

Elsewhere in the New Testament...

- Angels explained Christ's ascension to the apostles on Mt. Olivet

- Angels opened prison doors to free the disciples
- An angel directed Philip to a new place of ministry
- An angel directed Cornelius to send for Peter as the Gospel was given to the Gentiles
- The apostle Paul was strengthened by an angel during a turbulent storm at sea
- We learn in the book of Revelation that the angels of God congregate in vast multitudes around the throne of God for endless praise and worship

Hebrews chapter 1 tells us that angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation, and I believe that we underestimate the role that angels sometimes play in our own lives today.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once told his congregation in London: I do not know how to explain it; I can not tell how it is; but I believe angels have a great deal to do with the business of the world.

Martin Luther said, The angels are near us. They have long arms, and although they stand before the face and in the presence of God and his son Christ, yet they are hard by and about us in those affairs which by God we are commanded to take in hand.

Billy Graham wrote in his book on angels: One of the most comforting truths in all the Bible to me as I travel from one part of the world to another is to know that God has stationed his heavenly guards to protect, guide and lead me through life's dangerous way. I cannot see these beings with my physical eyes, but I sense they are present every day.

I found a story recently I didn't believe until I searched it out and authenticated it for myself. It involved [Charles Herbert Lightoller](#), a tall, sun-bronzed, handsome sailor, possessing a deep, pleasant speaking voice. His mother had died during his infancy, his father had abandoned him, and he had run off to sea at the age of thirteen. By 1912, he was a respected seaman for the White Star Line and was assigned to the maiden voyage of the greatest ocean liner ever built, the Titanic.

He was just drifting off to sleep on April 14, 1912, when he felt a bump in the ship's forward motion. Hopping from his bunk, he soon learned that the Titanic had struck an iceberg. As the horrors of that night unfolded, Lightoller finally found himself standing on the roof of the officer's quarters, the water lapping at his feet, as he helped any and all into lifeboats. Finally there was nothing left for Lightoller to do but jump from the roof into the freezing waters of the North Atlantic.

The shock of the 28-degree water against his sweating body stunned him, and as he struggled to regain his bearing and swim away from the ship he was suddenly sucked back and pinned against a ventilation grate at the base of a funnel that went all the way down to boiler room 6. He was stuck, drowning, and going down with the ship.

Suddenly Psalm 91:11 came clearly to his mind: For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways...

At that very moment, a blast of hot air exploded from the belly of the ship, shooting Lightoller like a missile to the surface of the ocean. At length, he managed to grab a piece of rope attached to the side of an overturned lifeboat and float along with it until he pulled himself on top of the upside-down boat. He turned and watched the last moments of the Titanic. Her stern swung up in the air until the ship was in "an absolutely perpendicular position." Then she slowly sank down into the water, with only a small gulp as her stern disappeared beneath the waves.

There were about thirty men atop the lifeboat and together they recited the Lord's Prayer, then Lightoller took command of the boat and guided them to safety

Psalm 91 says, He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

And Psalm 34 adds, The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers him.

The Bible also says that we should be careful about the way we treat strangers for some have entertained angels unawares. Some time ago in Leadership Journal, I read about a schoolteacher name Dobie Gadiant who decided to travel across America one summer and see the sights she had taught about. Traveling alone in a truck with camper in tow, she launched out. One afternoon rounding a curve on I-5 near Sacramento in rush-hour traffic, a water pump blew on her truck. She was tired, exasperated, scared, and alone. In spite of the traffic jam she caused, no one seemed interested in helping.

Leaning up against the trailer, she prayed, "Please, God, send me an angel... preferably one with mechanical experience." Within four minutes, a huge Harley drove up, ridden by an enormous man sporting long, black hair, a beard, and tattooed arms. With an incredible air of confidence, he jumped off and, without even glancing at Dobie, went to work on the truck. Within another few minutes, he flagged down a larger truck, attached a tow chain to the frame of the disabled Chevy, and whisked the whole 56-foot rig off the freeway onto a side street, where he calmly continued to work on the water pump.

The intimidated schoolteacher was too dumbfounded to talk. Especially when she read the paralyzing words on the back of his leather jacket: "Hell's Angels—California." As he finished his task, she finally got up enough courage to say, "Thanks so much," and carry on a brief conversation. Noting her surprise at the whole ordeal, he looked her straight in the eye and mumbled, "Don't judge a book by its cover. You may not know who you're talking to." With that, he smiled, closed the hood of the truck, and straddled his Harley. With a wave, he was gone as fast as he had appeared.

Well, the angel that showed up on Easter Morning was wearing his finest Easter clothing. He was bright and shining, flashing like lightning, and he was powerful and glorious. His mission: To roll away the stone, to unveil the tomb, and to demonstrate to all the world that it no longer held the body of one Jesus of Nazareth.

The Angel's Message (Matthew 28:5-7)

The second thing to notice is the angel's message. The word angel—angelos in the Greek—literally means messenger. Throughout the Bible, the angels were sent out with many messages. It was an angel who announced...

- The destruction of Sodom to Abraham
- The work of God to Balaam
- The conquest of Palestine to Joshua
- And the unfolding of world history to Daniel

In the life of Christ, it was angels who announced his birth to Joseph, to Mary, and to the shepherds of Bethlehem. But I suppose the happiest assignment ever given to any angel was the joyful task of announcing the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. We can almost hear the satisfaction in his voice as he concludes his remarks saying, "There now, I have delivered my message; I have told you."

And what an announcement! This is the message that turns darkness to day in our lives. This is the message that strips death of its fear, the grave of its terror, and life of its despair.

Up from the grave He arose
With a mighty triumph o'er his foes.
He arose a victor from the dark domain
And He lives forever with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!

The Angel's Master (Matthew 28:8-10)

So in the first paragraph we have the angel's mission--he descended from heaven to roll away the stone and bear the tomb. In the second paragraph we have the angel's message: He is not here, he is risen as he said. In the third paragraph, we have the angel's Master: So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

And the risen, reigning Christ is just the one we want to see! Living without him in this world is like a plant living without water—we just wither up and eventually die. It is like a pond with no source of fresh water. We just become dank and stale and stagnant. It is like a room with no ventilation. We become oppressive and unhealthy. It is like a night with no starlight, like a day with no sunrise, like a corpse without breath.

The human heart has a natural hunger that only Jesus Christ can fill. Last week I visited with a friend of mine whom I had not seen for 25 years. His name was Bill Harding, and we graduated together in 1974 from Columbia International University in South Carolina. We were hallmates during our junior year. He told me that after his graduation he had gotten married, gone to seminary, and had gone to Ethiopia with Sudan Interior Mission. Ethiopia at the time was under an oppressive Marxist government that did not welcome missionaries, and Bill had to find some other reason to justify his stay in the country. In earlier days, Bill had worked on golf courses, installing irrigation equipment. So he told the government that he knew something about water resource management, and they quickly put him in charge of drilling wells for the populace. He learned quickly on the job, and for several years, he successfully oversaw the drilling of wells, and he helped provide Ethiopians with fresh water. All the same time, he and his wife Grace were looking for opportunities to quietly witness and share their faith. He especially poured himself into three Ethiopian Christians whom he was able to teach and train.

At length, the Marxists fell from power, and Bill suddenly found new freedom in preaching. These men asked Bill if they could invite

some people over to the Harding house to hear more about the Gospel, and Bill excitedly said yes. The day came, and imagine how stunned Bill and Grace were when ten thousand people showed up. There was a large field in front of their house, and for four days, sometimes in the driving rain, the people stayed. Bill preached without microphone and amplification, but multitudes were converted. The crowds would sometimes stand in the driving rain for four hours, listening to the Word of God being shouted to them over the sound of the downpour.

Bill is now stationed in Addis Ababa, with a circuit of preaching points in which thousands show up. He told me that whenever he preaches, he can see nothing but "boom boxes" being held aloft in the first several rows, as people record his sermon. When he later returns to the same spot, he finds many people who can preach his sermon word-for-word, having listened to the tapes over and over. Thousands have come to Jesus Christ, and it is a time of harvest, a time of reaping, a time of revival.

Don't you wish your heart was hungry like that? Here in America we are so distracted by our affluence and so dull in our spirits that we sometimes forget how keen the human heart is in its natural state for the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone can meet our deepest needs. He alone can give us lasting peace.

I wonder if anyone here today has a hungry heart? Does anyone here need Jesus Christ? Is anyone here mired down in destructive habits and sins from which you can't seem to break free? Is anyone searching for the hope of the Resurrection?

The tomb is empty that our hearts might be full. The reason Christ died is so that we might live, and the reason he rose again is that we might serve a Risen Savior. He wants to make you a person of hope, living every day to its fullest in the light of the angel's mission: the empty tomb. In the light of his message: "Christ is risen just as he said." And in the light of his Master, Jesus of Nazareth, who said: "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly."

What Happens When We Die **Matthew 28:5-6; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Psalm 144:4**

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit--Matthew 27:46

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay--Matthew 28:5-6

Claire, newly married at age 45, was excited about her upcoming trip. She was going to travel overseas for the first time, visiting five countries in 15 days. She was eager to see new cultures, to sample new and strange foods, to hear new and strange languages. She was excited about flying first class and staying in Five Star hotels. In all her life, she had never been more than 300 miles from home, and now she was going to travel around the world with her new husband.

Someone asked her, "Aren't you nervous about the trip? Aren't you afraid?"

"Well, I'm a little nervous," she replied, "but I'm not afraid. My husband is a business consultant. His work has taken him to 53 countries over the past 25 years. He knows his way around, and I'm planning to stick closely to him. He's already been there and back."

For Christians, that is exactly the way we feel about death and the hereafter. We may be a little nervous about the subject of death and a little apprehensive about the process of dying, but it's an anticipatory kind of nervousness. We are not afraid, for our Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, has already been there and back.

Today we're going to interrupt our Exodus 14 sequence of messages for a brief three-week Easter series entitled What Happens When We Die. What happens at the very moment of death? What do we feel? Where do we go? How do we get there? How long do we stay there? What lies beyond the grave?

This morning, I have four simple introductory points to make.

Our Souls Are Made for Eternity

First, according to Ecclesiastes 3:11, our souls are made for eternity. God has planted eternity in our hearts. That's why the world is overwhelmingly religious. Men and women cannot live without a perception of God. Today in the United States, despite 100 years of destructive criticism, cynicism, relentless attacks against the Christian faith by scientists, philosophers, scholars, the media, and even the government, still, according to the most recent surveys, 95% of the American people believe there is a God.

Out of the 6 billion people who currently inhabit our planet, only 900,000,000 of them classify themselves as atheistic, agnostic, non-religious, or secular.

Apologist William Lane Craig wrote: If there's no God, what's so special about human beings? They're just accidental byproducts of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust called Planet Earth, lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe, and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time.

We can't live with such [nihilism](#) or hopelessness, for we are made with eternity in our hearts. The philosopher Pascal spoke of a God-shaped vacuum within us that can never be satisfied by any created thing, but by God alone through Jesus Christ. Augustine began his famous Confessions saying "Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee." Holocaust survivor and psychologist [Viktor Frankl](#) spoke of the existential vacuum that haunts every human being.

I was interested the other day to read something that Solomon Rushdie, the famous novelist, said: There is a God-shaped hole in me. For a long time I stressed the absence, the hole. Now I find it is the shape which has become more important.

Solomon Rushdie may not realize it, but the shape of the hole in his soul is exactly the size and dimension of Jesus Christ. The Stranger of Galilee belongs in our hearts, and our lives are incomplete without Him. We are made for Him as fish are made for the sea, birds for the air, stars for the sky, for we are not made just for time. We are eternal beings. Our lives do not end in the grave.

Our Lives are Characterized by Brevity

But that brings me to my second point: Our present lives on this planet are brief. We aren't long for this world. Our real future and our real life is elsewhere.

The Bible says, You do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

The Psalmist said, Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor.

Job said, My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle.

Psalm 144:4 says, Man is like a breath; His days are like a passing shadow.

I remember some time ago in a Board of Retirement meeting I was studying the annuity charts that were presented to us. These charts calculate how long a person will live based on certain statistical formulas. Somehow it came as a shock to me when I saw that, all things being equal, I had only so many years left to live and, statistically speaking, could pinpoint the year of my death according to the laws of probability.

But none of us knows if we'll actually even live out a normal lifespan. This week there was an Air Philippines Boeing 737 packed with over a hundred Easter holiday travelers. The pilot sent an emergency message that something was wrong with the plane, and he needed to land quickly, but there was another plane that had to be moved from the runway. The Air Philippines flight circled around twice, but with increasing difficulty. It descended so low that one of its wings hit the top of a coconut tree on a high hill, and the plane plunged to the ground, killing all 131 people aboard.

Death can come to us at any age, at any moment. There are people in this room that will never see another Easter on earth.

Death Occurs When the Spirit Leaves the Body

That brings me to my third point. According to the Bible death occurs when the spirit leaves the body.

Psalm 146:3-4 says Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.

Matthew 27:50 says, And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up his spirit.

John 19:30 concurs. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

We read about the death of Stephen in the book of Acts with these words:

And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60)

Luke 8:55 tells about a little girl that Jesus raised from the dead: Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And He commanded that she be given something to eat.

1 Kings 17:21 has a similar story about a young man whom Elijah raised from the dead: And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, I pray, let this child's

soul come back to him." Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived.

James 2:26 put it like this: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

In recent years, doctors and social scientists have been conducting many studies on this subject, studying deathbed scenes of those who pass away and interviewing people with near-death experiences. [Dr. Maurice Rawlings](#), a Chattanooga cardiologist, has written a couple of books based on his research. He observes that death survivors tell us that the moment of death is absolutely painless. Nothing at all. No choking or smothering. Nothing like that. "Feels like fainting," they say, or "like a missed heartbeat," or "a lost breath." "Less than anesthesia for surgery." Many of them have a sense of their soul leaving their body on a tranquil voyage down a sort of tunnel.

My own father is an example. He once happened to be in a hospital when he suffered a severe heart attack. Had he not been in the hospital at the time, he would have surely died; even with all their medical technology, the doctors thought he was a goner. But somehow my dad did live through that experience, and he later described his near-death experience. He said he felt his soul leaving his body and floating through a tranquil tunnel toward a brilliant but lovely light. He was almost there when he sensed himself being directed to turn around and return, for it was not yet time for him to depart this life.

Assistant Secretary to the Navy James E. Johnson was in his car waiting on a traffic light in Washington, D. C. He was talking to an attorney on his cell phone when he was rear-ended by a vehicle going at a high rate of speed. The impact hurled him into the steering column and wedging him into the dashboard of his car. Everything went black. A moment later, he found himself floating toward a light which was as dazzling as a brilliant sunrise as he gazed down on the scene of the accident without the slightest desire to return to the lifeless body tangled in the wreckage below.

Johnson later wrote, I flew headlong through a dark tunnel at accelerating speed toward the shimmering light I sensed was Christ.... Inside this light was a celestial city, like a castle in the sky. The translucent golden streets glowed with the brilliance that illuminates the whole city.... I knew I was in heaven.

Soon I saw Ken, my son who had been called to heaven years before. He was dressed in dazzling white.... Then I recognized my father-in-law, with his special way of smiling and that little squint in his eyes I had known so well. "You'll be all right," he said, "Go on back. Go on back."

My own father and mother joined the chant. My mother pointed to the light and asked, "Did you see Him?" I answered, "Yes," with deep reverence. Caught up in the pervasive love and total peace of that place, I could not imagine leaving. Yet I knew I must. My time had not yet come.

The accident scene came into focus again. Suddenly I felt very heavy, as if someone had laid an iron weight on top of me. As I began floating downward toward my body, a growing sensation of pain filled my consciousness. The shimmering light of heavenly love slowly dissolved into a harsh, flashing red light. I was back in my body.

The hymnwriter Frances R. Havergal penned such well-known songs as Take My Life and Let It Be and Like a River Glorious. In 1879, she became ill and was confined to bed. Her fever grew worse, and friends and family members grew alarmed. It gradually became apparent that at age 42, Frances Ridley Havergal was dying. Her brother said, "You have talked and written a great deal about the King; and you will soon see Him in his beauty."

"It's splendid!" she replied. "I thought He would have left me here a long while; but He is so good to take me now." A little later she whispered, "Come, Lord Jesus, come and fetch me." She dozed for a few minutes, then suddenly awakened, saying, "I am lost in amazement." She began singing faintly but clearly. A terrible rush of convulsions seized her, and when they ceased and the nurse gently laid her back on her pillows. Frances' sister later wrote: Then she looked up steadfastly, as if she saw the Lord. Surely nothing less heavenly could have reflected such a glorious radiance upon her face. For ten minutes we watched that almost visible meeting with her King, and her countenance was so glad, as if she were already talking to Him! Then she tried to sing, but after one sweet, high note, "HE---" her voice failed and her brother commended her soul into the Redeemer's hand.

But not all the stories have good endings. The aforementioned Dr. Maurice Rawlings was an agnostic and a cynic when something happened to him that changed his life. He was conducting a heart examination one day of a 48-year-old mail carrier from LeFayette, Georgia, named Charles McKaig. McKaig was on the treadmill machine when his heart monitor became erratic, then flat-lined. Surprisingly, Charlie continued to talk for a moment, unaware that his heart had stopped. Four or five seconds later, he looked suddenly dumbfounded. It was as if he were about to ask a question. Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell, the treadmill sweeping his body away like so much trash, as Dr. Rawlings later put it.

Rawlings immediately began applying CPR, and as Charlie's heart began beating, he began screaming, "Don't stop! I'm in hell! I'm in hell!"

Rawlings thought the man was having hallucinations. But Charlie continued, "For God's sake, don't stop! Don't you understand? Every time you let go I'm back in hell." Charlie begged Rawlings to pray for him, but Rawlings told him to shut up. He said, "I'm a doctor, not a minister."

The nurses gave Rawlings such a terrible look, that even while applying CPR he said, "All right. Say it! Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Go on and say it."

Charlie said those words, and a strange thing happened. He was no longer a wide-eyed, screaming, combative lunatic. He was relaxed and calm and cooperative. He survived the experience, but he was a changed man from that moment on.

That experience deeply shook Rawlings, leading the doctor to begin a long-term study into near-death experiences, and out of his research Rawlings himself became a Christian. What he discovered in his research is that about half of all near-death experiences are horrifyingly negative and terror-filled.

Some time ago, Channel Four's Demetria Kalodimos narrated a series of special reports on this subject. She interviewed one resuscitated man who said he found himself traveling down a tunnel, confronted by a menacing voice that called him ugly names and become more violent as he approached the light, which turned out to be a malevolent light.

Another young man, Lee Merritt, became aware of demons within the walls of the tunnel, and the tunnel became increasing dark. "The darkness was so real you could touch it and it would burn."

In 1948, George Godkin of Alberta, Canada, related a despairing near-death affair in the midst of a prolonged critical illness: I was guided to a place in the spirit world called Hell.... The darkness of Hell is so intense that it seems to have a pressure per square inch. It is an extremely black, dismal, desolate, heavy, pressurized type of darkness. It gives the individual a crushing, despondent feeling of loneliness. The heat is a dry, dehydrating type. Your eyeballs are so dry they feel like red hot coals in their sockets. Your tongue and lips are parched and cracked with the intense heat. The breath from your nostrils as well as the air you breathe feels like a blast from a furnace. The exterior of your body feels as though it were encased within a white hot stove. The interior of your body has a sensation of scorching hot air being forced through it.

Now, I do not want to make too much out of these accounts because they do not carry with them the authority of Scripture (Editorial comment: To that I say "Amen" -- the danger of these "Near Death Experiences" is we read more into the afterlife from them than we do from what God has chosen to reveal to us in His Word. Major on the Word of God not books and movies and stories about Near Death Experiences!) Only the Bible gives us inspired, authoritative information about death and the life hereafter. But I can't help remembering a story that my father told me years ago. He said that when he was a boy there was an old man who lived up above them in the mountains named Nick Hill. He was an evil man, and my dad was always afraid of him. He swore, threatened the children, and was mean to his family.

One evening one of Nick Hill's children came running down the path saying that his dad was bad off. Everyone ran up to the Hill place, and my dad, only a boy, never forgot the scene as Nick Hill died. It took several people to hold him down as a look of sheer terror filled his face and as his body arched and twisted and struggled. All the while he was screaming, "Hold me! Hold on to me! Help me! I see Hell Fire coming! I can see the flames!"

To put it simply, it isn't safe to die without knowing the One Who has been there and back. It isn't safe to die without Jesus. The Bible says, It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that the judgement. (Hebrews 9:27)

Our Eternal State Depends on the Redemption of Jesus Christ

And that brings me to my last point. Our eternal state depends on the redemption of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. (John 11:25)

In John 14:1-3, Jesus told his disciples, Let not your hearts be troubled. You 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 you will be also.

The writer of Psalm 23 said, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.

Since we are made for eternity, and since this life is so very brief. Since death is the dividing asunder of soul and body, and since it

isn't safe to die without the redemption of Christ, don't you think you should be more serious about the Lord Jesus than you are?

Don't you think He should be the first thing, the last thing, and the only thing in your life?

Don't you think it's time to let Him be the Lord and Ruler of all your life and of all your affairs?

For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? (Mark 8:36)

Come to Jesus Christ and give Him your life. Live in the light of eternity. Live for Christ alone. You can have confidence in Him. You can trust Him with your life, and you can also trust Him with death, for He has already been there--and back.
