

Sermons on John-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. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in Romans.

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SURPRISED BY JOY! IN HIM WAS LIFE....

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5NKJV)

Once a few Sundays ago I used a word that some people had not previously heard, and so today before we get into the sermon I thought I'd just share with you some words and their definitions to make sure we're all on the same page. I keep a dictionary right above my desk, and I enjoy searching out new words and their meanings; and I thought I'd share with you some interesting definitions.

- **Antique:** An item your grandparents bought, your parents got rid of, and you're buying again.
- **Atheism:** A non-prophet organization
- **Boss:** Someone who is early when you are late and late when you are early.

- Cannibal: Someone who is fed up with people.
- Feedback: The inevitable result of feeding a baby strained carrots.
- Grandparents: People who think your children are wonderful even though they're sure you're not raising them right.
- Paradox (par'-u-doks'): Two physicians
- Secret: Something you tell to one person at a time.
- Gossip: A twenty-four hour teller
- Toothache: The pain that drives you to extraction.
- Traffic Light: An apparatus that automatically turns red when your car approaches.
- Buffet: A French word that means "Go get it yourself."
- Tattoo: Permanent proof of temporary insanity.

Well, most words are easy to define, but there is one word for which I have never read an adequate definition. I don't think there is one; and that presents a real problem because it is the key word in our text today—LIFE.

Life is very hard to define. The dictionary I typically use is Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, the Ninth Edition, and so as I prepared this message I turned to the word "life" to check out the definition. As you would expect, there was a long string of definitions, but the first one set the tone for the others. And yet, it wasn't much of a definition. It said: The quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body.

In other words, life is the state of not being dead.

The Greek here doesn't help us very much either. The Greek word that John used was ζωή – zo'a -- and the lexicon defines it as the physical vitality of organic beings, whether they are plants, animals, or humans.

In other words, life is the state of being alive, of having physical vitality.

God in His omniscient creative genius designed this universe with two types of matter—animate and inanimate, living and non-living; and He achieved perfect balance between the two. I can't provide a good definition of this word, but we can study out its description and usage in the Gospel of John, because he uses this word life again and again and again. It is one of his themes.

You say, "Well, how many themes does John have in His Gospel." As we've looked at every verse up to this point in the prologue of John, I've used that same phrase, "This is one of the themes of the Gospel." So you may be wondering how many themes John has? Well, he has several themes, and of course he introduces them in his prologue. That's what a prologue is—it is a section at the beginning of the book that serves as an introduction. And so John says: Here is what this book is about. I'm going to tell you about these themes. It's about Jesus who is the Word. It's about Jesus who is deity. It's about Jesus who is the agent of Creation. It's about Jesus who is the Life of man and the Light of the world."

This word in John 1:3—life—is used nearly fifty times in the fourth Gospel, and I do not know of any way to explain this word "life" in John 1:3 except to show you how this word and this theme unfolds as we read through the book. We can't look up all fifty occurrences, of course, but we can look at some keys, starting with the first time this word occurs in the actual body of the book of John—John 3:15ff.

We find LIFE in John 3:15-16, 36

Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal LIFE. 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.... He who believes in the Son has everlasting LIFE; but he who does not believe the Son shall not see LIFE, but the wrath of God abides on Him.

I've been thinking of one day planning and preaching an entire series of sermons just on John 3:16, and the other day as I was studying this verse, I recalled that it has been called the Gospel in a Nutshell; and as I worked through it I saw why. Just look at that word GOSPEL. It is really there in John 3:16!

G – God so loved the world that He gave His

O – Only begotten

S – Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not

P – Perish, but have

E – Everlasting

L – Life

Now this adds an important modifier to the word life. It's a pair of adjectives that John uses over and over—eternal and everlasting. It isn't just life that Jesus gives us; it is eternal and everlasting life.

We find LIFE in John 4:13-14

Jesus answered and said to (the Samaritan woman), "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

I sometimes wonder if John the evangelist was melancholic, if he worried about the brevity of life, if he brooded over dying. The reason I wonder is because he seemed to pick up his ears every time he heard Jesus use that phrase "everlasting life" or "eternal life."

- Matthew repeats that phrase three times.
- Mark uses the phrase "eternal life" or "everlasting life" twice.
- Luke, three times.
- But in the Gospel of John, it's found seventeen times, and in all of John's writings it occurs twenty-three times.

I think one of the reasons John loved this phrase is because he knew more about it than most of us. There were two men in the New Testament were given the opportunity to preview eternal life. You might say they got to see the trailer, the previews of this coming attraction. They were able to see beyond the clouds and behind the curtain, to see what lies ahead in eternity. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul was caught up into the third heaven, but he wasn't permitted to describe the scene. In the book of Revelation, John was given the same opportunity, but he was allowed to record his observations. He was transported by divine vision into the third heaven where he saw the angels worshipping and the Holy City being prepared. He saw the events of the Tribulation unfold, and he toured the streets of gold. He described it for us in vivid detail in the book of Revelation, and God saw fit to end the Bible with a two-chapter lay-out of the new heavens, the new earth, and the New Jerusalem. So it seems to me that John had a keen interest in this subject, and he jotted down the words Jesus spoke anytime this subject came up. Here in John 4, it came up as Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman. Jesus told her that He Himself was the water of life, that He could satisfy the deepest needs of her heart and soul, that He could impart total forgiveness, that He could give complete reconciliation with the eternal God, and that His life would become like an artesian well, bubbling up, springing up, filling her to the brim, and overflowing in eternal life.

Trusting Him while life shall last,
Trusting Him till earth by past;
Till within the jasper wall,
Trusting Jesus, that is all.

We find LIFE in John 5:24-29

Now let's go to the next chapter and notice the great sermon Jesus gave following His healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting LIFE, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to LIFE. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God....

Let's pause there and just think about that incredible phrase—the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Every so often I preach a sermon, and the primary person in the audience doesn't hear a word that I say. We call that a funeral. I could shout at the departed one laid out in the casket. We could sound an air horn or crash a set of cymbals beside the coffin, and not a sound would penetrate the black curtain of death.

But when Jesus speaks, the message gets through. We see that later in John's Gospel, by the tomb of Lazarus, and we see it in 1 Thessalonians 4, where we read of that coming day when the Lord shall descend with a shout, and the dead in Christ will rise first. This is consistent Bible teaching—the dead will hear His voice...

...and those who hear will live. For as the Father has LIFE in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have LIFE in Himself....

Now, let's pause there. This is a very important aspect of the meaning of life. It tells us that there is only one living being in the entire universe that pulsates with life, that is self-sustaining and self-existing. He has life within Himself. It belongs to His nature; He has received it from no one; it is an essential attribute of His being. He Himself is the center and the source of life.

Every other living thing in the universe—everything that has life—has derived life. It's as though you and I were candles. We have not always been burning, but there is an eternal blast furnace, a consuming fire—and that fire spread to one candle which lit another which lit another—and here we are alive with life that is derived from the eternal source of life, which is God Himself. This is the essence of the theology of LIFE.

This verse goes on to say: For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have LIFE in Himself and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.

In other words, when God the Son became the Son of Man and took upon Himself the limitation of humanity, He willingly lay aside some of the prerogatives of His divine glory, but God the Father gave the Son of Man the authority to impart life, to raise the dead, and to execute judgment. So the text goes on to say:

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

This is why the matter of our salvation is so urgent. You and I do not have any guarantee that we'll have another hour or day of life on this planet. Any one of us might be dead by the time the sun sets this afternoon—and then it will be too late if you don't know Christ as your personal Savior. We must come to Him, for in Him is life, and that life is the light of men.

We find LIFE in John 6:27

This same thought is repeated in the next chapter, in John 6:27: Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.

This is a fascinating concept—Jesus Christ can give us eternal life because God the Father has set His seal on Him. In the Bible, sealing has two ramifications, and those two ramifications have to do with identity and ratification. In the book of Revelation, we read of 144,000 who were sealed by a mark placed on their foreheads. This identified them as belonging to God. And in the book of Esther, we read of how the king issued an edict and it was sealed with his ring, which ratified it and gave it its authority.

So there was a moment in the life of Christ in which the seal of Almighty God was stamped on His life, and it identified Him as the Messiah and it imparted and ratified His authority. When was that moment? It was at His baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended on Him, and when the voice of God the Father thundered from the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus was therewith authorized as the purveyor of eternal life.

We find LIFE in John 6:34ff.

And look further down the chapter at verse 34: "For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives LIFE to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of LIFE. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and He who believes in Me shall never thirst...."

And John 6:40: And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting LIFE, and I will raise Him up on the last day.

And John 6:47: Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting LIFE. I am the bread of LIFE.

And on to John 6:51: I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the LIFE of the world....

And down in John 6:53: Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no LIFE in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up at the last day.

And John 6:58: He who eats this bread will live forever.

As I read through these verses and study these references, one overriding thought comes to my mind. Whenever John the Apostle and whenever Jesus the Savior spoke about life, they had only one thing in mind—and that was life everlasting, life eternal.

Life and eternal life seem to be exact synonyms. If that is true, then we can go back to chapter one and read it this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was eternal Life—and this eternal life lights up our lives.

But we're not even finished with chapter 6. The last part of the chapter talks about the results of our Lord's message here on the subject of the Bread of Life. It was not well received. His language was too crude and plain-spoken. I don't know if you are like me, but when I'm listening to a speaker and they say something that is a little off-color or a little too coarse or crude, I just wince. Sometimes it even happens here with some speaker. I try to be very chaste in my words, but some people go a little further than I do.

Well, when Jesus was preaching this sermon in John 6, the people just winced when He said, "If you want eternal life, you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood." And with that one sermon, Jesus lost just about His entire congregation.

John 6:66 says: But from that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal LIFE."

I'm not going to continue tracing this theme through the book, because I think we're getting the idea of how important this was to John...--except that I do want to remind you of one well-known verse in John 10:10, when Jesus said: "I have come that they might have LIFE, and that they might have it more abundantly."

And that word abundantly adds a very rich dimension to this subject, for it tells us that eternal life begins the moment that we ask Jesus to be our Savior, and that it is not only a matter of quantity but of quality.

And then John ends His Gospel very much as He began it, with a statement of purpose found in John 20:30-31: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have LIFE in His name.

John's Gospel is the book of life, and Jesus is the God of Life and the Giver of Life to all who place their trust in Him. Let me close by telling you of a man who did that—the author of the Chronicles of Narnia and the man who wrote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

C. S. Lewis was born in 1898 into a bookish family of Protestants in Belfast, Ireland. He grew up reading and imagining. His mother died from cancer when he was nine, and it turned him away from God. He felt that God had not answered his prayers for her recovery, and that, coupled with some bad experiences in boarding school, convinced the boy that God did not exist. By the time C. S. Lewis entered Oxford in 1917, he was an avowed atheist. After he graduated from Oxford, he began teaching there, becoming a renowned expert on medieval English literature. He possessed a brilliant mind, and he read deeply and widely. One of his books, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, took him eighteen years to write because to write it he read every single book translated into English during that century.

But as C. S. Lewis read, he came across some Christian authors such as George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton, and he began

to have agonizing doubts about his own atheism. There were also several other brilliant professors at Oxford who challenged Lewis's atheism, and finally C. S. Lewis could not intellectually resist or refute the logic of theism (a belief in God). His journey to Christ took several years, as he moved from Atheism to Theism to Christianity and on to Christ. He once called himself the "most reluctant convert in all of England."

Interestingly, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, played a decisive role in Lewis's decision to receive Christ. On a fall evening in 1931, Lewis had dinner with Tolkien. They walked through a nearby park and talked until the wee hours of the morning, and the conversation took an interesting turn. Both men, of course, were deeply fascinated by the literature of fantasy and mythology. Tolkien suggested that the beauty of Christianity is that it is a myth that happens to be true. The universal story that is somehow in the heart of every individual, the universal hunger, the universal need that is played out in myth is in truth and actually acted out with full veracity in Christ. In Jesus Christ, God really did walk across this earth, die, and rise again.

A few days later, as C. S. Lewis pondered the conversation, he got into the sidecar of a friend's motorcycle for a trip to the zoo. He later wrote, "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did."

Almost immediately Lewis began writing books that reflected his new-found faith. His autobiographical account of his conversion is a wonderful book entitled *Surprised by Joy*.

When I graduated from Columbia Bible College, Ruth Bell Graham sent me a hardbound edition of *The Screwtape Letters*, and she told me that reading C. S. Lewis always helps her "think straight," as she put it. And it was by reading C. S. Lewis's classic book, *Mere Christianity*, that the Watergate villain and Nixon hatchet man, Charles Colson, was converted in prison. By the time he died in 1963, C. S. Lewis was one of the most influential spokesmen for Christianity in the English-speaking world.

Here's what C. S. Lewis wrote about Jesus Christ in his book on miracles:

The historical difficulty of giving for the life, saying and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity of His moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God has never been satisfactorily explained. Hence the non-Christian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment."

What Lewis was saying is this. Those opposed to Christianity have a real problem when it comes to explaining the person of Christ and His teachings. He made remarkable and extravagant claims for Himself. He claimed to be life itself. He claimed to be light. He claimed to be the water and the bread of life that quenches the hunger and the thirst of every human being. He claimed to be truth itself. He claimed to be the resurrection and the life. He claimed to be God.

If He is not who He claimed to be, He was a megalomaniac madman. And if He was a megalomaniac madman, how is it possible that He spoke such beautiful, life-changing, ethically pure, and eternally hopeful words that have so changed human history and that have so changed so many individual lives. No one has ever offered a satisfactory answer to that quandary.

Lewis said something similar, but in simpler terms, in *Mere Christianity*.

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus Christ]: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse You can shut him up for fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.

Well, the Gospel of John sums it all up when we open the first page of the fourth Gospel and we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Isn't it time for you to believe in Him, to receive Him, and to be surprised by joy?

AND THE WORD WAS GOD - 1

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God. John 1:1-2

Part 1

In the murky moral wasteland known as Hollywood, something good is actually about to happen—the release over the holidays of the famous children’s story by C. S. Lewis entitled “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” It’s a story of how a Lion named Aslan redeemed a child named Edmund by sacrificing himself in his stead, and how the white witch was defeated because she didn’t know the deeper magic the Emperor had built into the fabric of the universe. There are distinct biblical themes to this book, and to the entire set of seven books known as the Chronicles of Narnia.

In fact, I was amused to read one film critic in the newspaper who warned his readers that parents should be aware that in taking their children to this movie they may be exposing them to Christian teaching—as though that were a subversive thing.

I read the Chronicles of Narnia when I was in college and everyone at that time was reading everything that C. S. Lewis wrote (they still are). Then I read them again to my children when they were younger. Now I’m reading through the books for a third time, and they represent a unique retelling of the wonderful story of the redemption of Jesus Christ, who is pictured in the Bible as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

In whatever form we hear it or tell it, the Gospel is a story matchless in the rolling realms of human experience, as all over the world people are saying:

Tell me the story of Jesus, write on my heart every word,
Tell me the story most precious, sweetest that ever was heard.

This fall I conducted a retreat for missionaries in Japan, then flew over to Beijing, China, to visit with a young man from our church who works there with the English Language Institute. He is stationed at the Beijing Institute of Technology, which is similar to our M.I.T., and I joined his team for a few days. He told me that one of his co-workers came over one evening and the two young men played chess. In the middle of the game, the coworker put down his chess piece, looked at my friend, and said, “Tell me the Story again. I just need to hear the Story again.” So my friend began reciting once again the Old, Old Story, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. Soon the two fellows were weeping together and their hearts, far from home, were revived and strengthened to bear witness in a strange and distant land.

One of our old hymns says:

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

Well, the Christmas season gives us a splendid opportunity to hear and to tell the Old, Old Story. It is a story told in the Gospels four different times—by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In many ways, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are parallels to one another, and theologians call them the Synoptic Gospels, the word synoptic meaning “to see things the same way.” John’s Gospel appears to have been written long after the others, and scholars date it to somewhere between A.D. 85 and 95. His distinctive portrait of Jesus contains 93% original material.[1]

This book begins with a sublime introduction that has to be considered one of history’s greatest theological documents. The Scottish preacher, Alexander Maclaren, called the prologue of John’s Gospel “the profoundest page in the New Testament.” In another place, he called it “the deepest part of Scripture.”

Maclaren once preached from the prologue of John, but at the beginning of his sermon he said—and I would say the same thing—that it is absurd to attempt an exposition of these verses. They are too deep and too wonderful. They cannot be expounded; we can only note their salient points. The very first verse, Maclaren noted, for example, carries us into the depths of eternity, before time or creatures were.

The prologue of John’s Gospel, arguably the most profoundly theological passage in the entire Bible, gives us a different view of the

birth of Christ. Think of it like this: When we open Matthew's Gospel, he begins telling us how Christ came into the world, and his viewpoint is very Jewish and he almost seems to be telling the story from the perspective of Joseph the carpenter.

Mark decided to open his account of the life of Christ with our Lord's baptism, and He really just deals with Christ's ministry and so has little about the events of the nativity.

Luke, who was an outstanding historian, gives us the story of the birth of Christ from Mary's perspective, and I believe that he himself actually interviewed the Virgin Mary and incorporated her account into his Gospel. When you read Luke 1 and 2, I think it's as though you were sitting down with Mary the Mother of Jesus and listening to her describe those events from her memory.

But then you turn to John, and he gives us a different perspective of the Lord's entrance into this world. He interprets it for us from the Heavenly Father's perspective. So you have a very wonderful trio of perspectives.

- Matthew tells us about the birth of Christ from Joseph's perspective.
- Luke tells us about the birth of Christ from Mary's perspective.
- And John tells us about the birth of Christ from the Heavenly Father's perspective.

And the Heavenly Father's perspective begins with the identity of Christ Himself. John begins His Gospel with what is arguably the most profound series of sentences ever written in the entire sweep and scope of human literature about the person of Jesus Christ. And his very first sentence is a blockbuster: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

These words give us four integrants regarding the identity of Jesus Christ.

He is the Word

The first thing we notice is that the Apostle John has coined a new name and title for Jesus Christ. He is the Word. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...

And down in verse 14: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John also used this term as a synonym for Christ in other places in His writing. He opens his first letter, the epistle of 1 John, in a similar way:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life...

Then in 1 John 5:7 we read: For there are three that bear witness in heaven: The Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

The Apostle John also wrote the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation, and in Revelation 19 he describes prophetically the Second Coming of Christ, and notice what he says in Revelation 19:11ff:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.

John uses this title for Christ at His incarnation, His birth in the first chapter of His Gospel. He uses this title to describe the earthly life of Christ at the beginning of 1 John. He includes it in His formula for describing the Trinity at the end of 1 John, and he uses it to describe our Lord at His Second Coming in Revelation 19.

So then, what is the significance of this phrase? What is its meaning? Well, this is too deep for me. I'll go back to what Maclaren said, that this passage defies exposition; all I can do is make a few salient points.

It seems to me that first of all, when John uses this title Word (Logos) for Christ, He is saying that Jesus Christ is the Message of God, God's ultimate communication and self-expression to this planet. The book of Hebrews strikes this same note when it says, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the words; who, being the brightness of His

glory and the express image of His person...”

Those words in Hebrews 1:1, it seems to me, provide as good an exposition for John 1:1 as we can find. Through the ancient prophets God spoke; but Jesus is God’s megaphone. Jesus is God’s microphone. Jesus is the ultimate message. He not only came to give us the Word of God; He IS the Word of God.

Second, not only is Jesus God’s ultimate message to earth, He’s the ultimate manifestation of God to this planet. William Barclay points out something very interesting in his commentary of the Gospel of John. For many years prior to the birth of Christ, during the inter-testamental period, the Hebrew language fell into disuse, and Hebrew became, as it were, a forgotten language. The scholars knew Hebrew the way many of our scholars today can read Latin or Greek, but the ordinary people in Palestine were now speaking a newer version of Hebrew known as Aramaic.

Jewish scholars therefore translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Aramaic, and these Aramaic translations—which both Jesus and John would have known—were called the Targums.

The scholars who translated the Targums had so much respect for the majesty and transcendence of God that they tried to avoid using God’s very name, thinking it was too holy, and that they were unworthy to write it. So they came up with a phrase that served as a substitute which was, literally, the Word of God. In other words, they substituted the Word of God for the Name of God.

For example, in Exodus 19:17, it says that Moses brought out the people to meet with God, but the Targums say that Moses brought out the people to meet with the Word of God.

In Exodus 31, we read that the Sabbath is a sign between God and His people throughout their generations. The Targums say that the Sabbath is a sign between God’s Word and the people throughout their generation.

Deuteronomy 9:3 says that our God is a consuming fire; but the Targums say that the Word of God is a consuming fire.

Isaiah 48:13 says that God created the foundation of the earth by His hand, but the Targums say that God created the world by His Word.

In one particular Targum which is known as the Jonathan Targum, this phrase The Word of God appears over 300 times. It was a phrase that any devout Jew would understand, and it was a euphuistic synonym for God Himself. So in starting his Gospel with this title for Christ, John was saying—Jesus Christ is THE Message of God, and more! He is the Manifestation of God.

But there’s a third observation about this term. The Greek term that John used is the word logos, from which we get our English words logic and logical and logistics. This was a word that would have communicated not only to the Jews, but also to the Greek. And among the Greeks, we can trace the concepts of this word back to the fifth century B.C., and to the city of Ephesus, where later we believe the Gospel of John was written. In about the year 560 B.C., there was a Greek philosopher in Ephesus by the name of Heraclitus. His basic belief was that everything is in a state of flux and the world is in such a state of constant change that everything is changeable and there are no constants. He said, for example, that it was impossible to step into the same river twice. The water that was previously there is gone, and when you step into the river the second time, it is totally new water. Everything is like that, and life is in constant flux.

And yet, Heraclitus noticed, this world is not in a state of total chaos. There is some stable fabric behind the universe that keeps it from spinning apart in total disintegration. There is an underlying pattern that holds all these changing integrants together. What is it?

Heraclitus taught that it was the Logos, the Word, the Logic. There was an underlying logic, a principle of order that not only binds the universe together but also orders destiny and controls human history. It is the Logos, the Word, the Mind of God Himself. This became an underlying principle of Greek philosophy, and for hundreds of years they had been talking and writing and philosophizing about the Logos—the Word of God. And so John, who was writing both to the Jews and to the Greek—came along and he said, “You want to know about the ultimate logic that holds the world together and that makes sense of all of human history. I tell you about this Logos, this Logic. In the beginning was the Logos, the Word, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God... And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, as that of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

He is the Message of God. He is the Manifestation of God. He is the Mind of God—He is the Word.

Now what does that meant to me and you?

Because He is God's Message, I'd better listen carefully. Because He is God's Manifestation, I'd better approach Him reverently. Because He is God's Mind, I'd better think about Him rightly—for He has the power to change my life and give direction to me in all I do.

Several years ago, I came across a little paperback book entitled *Scientists Who Believe*, and it profiled a large number of eminent scientists who were genuine Christians. The one who intrigued me the most was a Russian scientist named Dr. Boris Dotsenko, who was the one-time head of nuclear physics at the Institute of Physics in Kiev, in the old Soviet Union. (Dr. Dotsenko is actually an acquaintance of one of our TDF members, Joe Henderson.)

Dr. Dotsenko grew up in Siberia where life was very hard. Food was scarce, money was nonexistent, and hunger was everywhere. At the age of fifteen, he went to work on the construction of boilers for power plants. Whenever he could, he would read, and he loved Plato, Socrates, and the clear, logical thinking of the Greek philosophers. He was a convinced atheist, and, as he put it, had absorbed political and anti-religious thinking into the very marrow of his bones. Shortly afterward, as World War II came to an end, Dotsenko moved to the Ukraine where his family had been evacuated, and he enrolled in college.

One hot and humid Saturday, he was visiting at his grandfather's home and he wandered into the old barn and fell asleep on a pile of hay. When he awoke, he discovered that he had slipped back behind the hay and was lodged against the side of the barn. As he struggled to free himself, he slipped to the floor and there by his feet was an old book. He quickly recognized it as a Bible, which was a forbidden book. He had heard about the Bible, but had never seen one. He hid it in his shirt and sneaked it back to his room, where he began to read it.

He was absolutely arrested by John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He later said, "Here was a very clear statement of what was at the beginning, underneath everything. But it completely contradicted everything that I had been taught." He secretly read the forbidden book for two weeks, and then it strangely disappeared from his room. He never did know how that old Bible vanished, but apparently someone in his family discovered his secret and removed it.

Dotsenko moved on to the University of Kiev, and as he studied physics he became more and more convinced that there is an underlying logic or pattern to the universe that gives everything meaning. There must be, he thought, a powerful organizing force that has designed the order we see whether we study a human cell through a microscope or a distant galaxy through the microscope.

He went on to work on his master's degree at Leningrad, as it was called then, and there in a most unexpected place he saw his second Bible. It was in the office of one of his professors, one of the most respected scientists in the USSR. He was deeply impressed with the fact that this great scientist in an atheistic nation would keep a copy of the Bible in his office.

Dotsenko went on to the University of Moscow where he earned his Ph.D. in physical and mathematical sciences, but even as he was establishing his career, he was growing more and more depressed, especially after he learned that his father and other family members were spying on him and reporting to the KGB. One day, just as he could stand the strain no longer, he was selected to attend a scientific conference at the University of Alberta in Canada. When he arrived, he checked into his hotel room and began unpacking his suitcase. As he did so, he saw the Bible there in the room. It was only the third Bible he had ever seen. His hands trembled as he lifted it, and it opened as if automatically to John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Dr. Dotsenko was struck forcibly by those words, and he instantly recalled reading them twenty-two years earlier in his grandfather's Ukrainian barn. He spent every available minute reading that Bible, and he subsequently received Christ as his Savior and was baptized by a minister in Edmonton, Alberta.

It is fascinating to me that God used John 1:1 to bring this brilliant man to Christ. He could have used John 3:16 or Romans 6:23 or Revelation 3:20 or one of those other verses that present the plan of salvation so succinctly. But John 1:1 is a philosophical and theological statement of logical, rational brilliance, and it was like the breath of God that melted and changed this man's desperate heart.

In the last pages of the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the great Lion, Aslan, invades the castle of the white witch in which she

kept countless statues, which were actually men and women and creatures whom she had turned to stone. Aslan bounded up to one of them after another, breathing on each one, and his warm fragrance of his breath melted away the stone and brought the monuments back to life.

It was the way C. S. Lewis pictured the Lord Jesus breathing on us by His Holy Spirit, melting away our hearts of stone and giving us new life in Christ. Would you like to know that experience today?

Breathe on me, breathe on me,
Holy Spirit, breathe on me.
Take Thou my heart, cleanse every part,
Holy Spirit, breathe on me.

AND THE WORD WAS GOD - 2

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning. John 1:1-2

How would you picture Christ? Let's say that you had to draw a picture of Him? What image would you choose? C. S. Lewis chose a lion named Aslan, who is described by one C. S. Lewis authority in this way:

No one has ever seen anything more terrible or beautiful than Aslan; in this respect, he is the perfect example of the majestic, the glorious, and the numinous. He is towering in size, larger than a horse, as large as a young elephant, and always growing bigger with respect to the person who sees him; in this respect, he is the very figure of the greatness of God. In overall aspect, he is so bright and real and strong that all else pales in comparison; light seems to radiate from him. His coat is a soft roughness of golden fur, ranging in color from tawny gold to bright yellow. During Aslan's ecstatic romp with Susan and Lucy on the morning of his resurrection, his tail lashes back and forth in intense joy. His paws are beautifully velvety in friendship and terrible in battle; although heavy enough to make the earth shake, he walks noiselessly.... His legs, haunches, shoulders, chest, and back are powerfully muscled. His shaggy mane is a beautiful sea of rich, silky, golden fur, scented with a solemn, strengthening perfume.... His golden face reveals his regal personality in all its emotions. This is especially true of his great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes which reflect the full range of his feelings, from happiness and mirth to scorn and anger. If it weren't for the calming quality of Aslan's voice, no one could stand in his awesomely beautiful presence.[2]

That almost sounds like a biblical description of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and it goes along with something that I learned last year as I read through the Bible looking for references to Christ—there are over 350 different names and titles given to Jesus in the Bible. He is so infinite, limitless, and multi-faceted that it takes all those names and more to show us the many ways in which He relates to us. But as the apostle John read through the Old Testament, thought of His own experience with Jesus, and contemplated writing an account of that matchless life, none of the 300-plus names seemed to be the exact one he wanted to use. So by divine inspiration he reached into Jewish history and into Greek philosophy and he chose another term. Jesus, wrote John the apostle, is the Word, the Logos.

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He was with God in the beginning.

The use of the term Logos or Word is so rich that I can't really explain it to you expositionally; it's too deep. I can only make a few salient points, namely, that it seems to me that the term Logos implies that Jesus Christ is the message of God, the manifestation of God, and the very mind of God.

Now let's go on to see exactly what John has to say about this One whom he called the Logos. He begins his Gospel by telling us about three aspects of our Lord's existence.

Christ's Pre-existence

First, His pre-existence. The life of Jesus Christ did not begin with His birth in Bethlehem. It did not even begin with His conception in Nazareth. It didn't begin at all. The life of Jesus did not begin and has never begun, for He is eternal in the heavens, the ancient of days, without father or mother, without beginning or ending.

Alexander Maclaren, the great Scottish expositor, made a fascinating observation about this. Both Genesis and John begin the same way, he said, but they go in different directions. Genesis starts at creation and works its way forward, telling us what started at the creation and how it developed. John begins at creation and works backward, telling us about what existed before the creation, before the beginning of time and space.

Let's say that Point X is the Beginning. What happened after the beginning? That's the subject of Genesis 1:1. What happened before the beginning? That's the subject of John 1:1. And what happened before the beginning was that Jesus Christ pre-existed eternally in the heavens with God the Father.

Before anything was, Christ existed. He was there in the beginning. He was there at the beginning. He preceded the beginning, dwelling in the fathomless depths of eternity past. This is not the only time that John tells us about our Lord's pre-existence. Let me show you how he keeps coming back to this in his subsequent chapters.

Notice what John the Apostle says about John the Baptist in verse 15: John (the Baptist) bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me."

That's a faulty translation, for in the original Greek there is no sign of that word preferred. What John the Baptist is saying is, "He who comes after me is before me." The New American Standard Bible translates it this way: "He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me."

Now John was older than Jesus by several months. Yet he claims that Jesus was in existence at the time of his (John's birth). Think of it this way. I only have one sibling, my sister Ann, who was born when I was six years old. What if I said, "My sister Ann came after me, but she has a higher rank because she was actually in existence when I was born."

That would be an illogical and nonsensical statement—yet that is just what John was saying about Jesus, and he repeats it in John 1:27: He who comes after me is before me.

Look at John 3:13: No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. Jesus wasn't just born in Bethlehem; He came down from heaven, which implies His eternal pre-existence.

In John 8:14, Jesus said, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I came from and where I am going."

And verse 23: You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.

And verse 56ff: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM."

Again in John 16:28, Jesus told the disciples in the Upper Room: I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.

And John 17:5, in our Lord's High Priestly Prayer: And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

Christ's Co-Existence

The next aspect of our Lord's existence as we have it given to us in John 1:1 is His co-existence with the Father. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." And verse 2 repeats this for emphasis: He was with God in the beginning.

This verse laid a foundation for Christian thought and theology that endures to this day. John tells us here that Jesus Christ—the Eternal Logos, the Self-Expression of God Himself—was with God in the beginning. John was alluding here to the doctrine of the Trinity. This is a doctrine that is glimpsed from one end of the Bible to the other. When we open the book of Genesis, we see instantly that God is presented in terms of a mysterious plurality. The very term, God, Elohim, in Genesis 1:1 is a noun that appears in a plural sense, though used in a singular way. Somewhat literally, the verse says: "In the beginning, the Gods, He created." Henry Morris, in his commentary of Genesis, wrote: "The im Ending is the Hebrew plural ending, so that Elohim can actually mean 'gods,' and is so translated in various passages referring to the gods of the heathen... However, it is clearly used here in the singular... Thus Elohim is a plural name with a singular meaning, a 'uni-plural' none, thereby suggesting the uni-plurality of the God-

head. God is one, yet more than one.”[3]

And then, just a little later, we see that strange phrase when God says, apparently to Himself, “Let us make man in our own image....”

From the very beginning of the Bible, there are allusions and mysterious references to the uni-plurality of God, the Trinity. And then we have overt statements attesting to this doctrine, such as in the Great Commission when Jesus tells us to baptize new believers in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And in the apostolic benediction in 2 Corinthians when Paul says, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” And notice how this very writer of the fourth Gospel, John the apostle, ends his first epistle:

“This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness in heaven: The Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one” (1 John 5:6-7).

Now the early church believed this, but it was a doctrine under attack. First, there were the Jews who were monotheistic to the core. Their most famous creed, the Shema, said: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The thought that there might be a God other than Jehovah was rightly offensive to them, and so it made it difficult for them to accept the truth of John 1:1. Then there were the Greeks and the Gnostics who rejected the idea of the incarnation. Recently I’ve been reading a new translation of the Gnostic Gospels which were dug up at Nag Hammadi in Egypt and which purport to be additional accounts of the life of Christ, and these very same documents have been utilized in our own day to mount an attack on the identity of Christ in books and movies such as The Da Vinci Code.

When Constantine the Great proclaimed freedom for Christians throughout the Roman Empire, the leaders of the church gathered for the first of the great church councils, meeting in the city of Nicaea in Turkey in the year AD 327. They were especially concerned because a man named Arius had been undercutting this doctrine of the co-existence of Jesus Christ with the Father, and the church leaders gathered to address what we call the Arian heresy. They pounded out a creed, which became the Creed of Nicaea, which said:

We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance (ousia) of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very Good, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit. And those who say: ‘There was a time when he was not...’ the catholic (universal) and apostolic church places under a curse.

That didn’t completely solve the problem. After all, this involves the two deepest and most profound imponderables of Christianity—the Trinity of God and the Duality of Christ. How can there be one God who eternally exists in Three Persons, and how can there be one Lord who eternally exists in Two Natures? The early church believed that, but there was confusion about how to state it, how to prescribe it in the face of heresies against it.

And so in AD 451, a new generation of church leaders met at the famous [Council of Chalcedon](#), and they further articulated this doctrine by saying:

Following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

And that brings us to the last of John’s three statements about the word, in which he speaks of...

Christ's Divine Existence

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

- In the beginning was the Word—that's our Lord's pre-existence.
- And the Word was with God—that's His co-existence.
- And the Word was God—that's His divine existence.

He is very God of very God. He is God Himself, even as Thomas the Doubter proclaimed when he saw the risen Christ at the end of the Gospel of John: "My Lord and My God!" And yet the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

C. S. Lewis, the author of the Chronicles of Narnia, once quipped: If you want to get the hang of it (the incarnation), think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

Can you imagine becoming a slug or a crab? And yet we are much more like slugs and crabs than the Infinite Holy God is like us. But He loved us and wanted to dwell among us and redeem us. The very name Immanuel means, God With Us.

I began preparing this series of messages while I was on a mission's trip to Japan. My little apartment was several blocks from a park, and on my last morning there I rose and went for an early walk. The sun was fresh and bright, and the dew was evaporating from the grass like steam from a frozen lake. The air was crisp. In the park was a man with his dog. The man had on a cap and jacket, and a heavy pair of shoes. The animal was a mid-sized black-and-white mutt, and if ever a dog was smiling, it was this one. He was running in lively circles around the man, bouncing on all fours, leaping and yelping, but always keeping his eyes on his master.

As I drew near, the dog glanced at me and I was afraid he was going to run over and jump on me; but he paid me no mind and his attention instantly went back to his master. The man was throwing a tennis ball into the air, and the dog would leap up, catch it in his mouth, bring it back and drop it at the man's feet, all without breaking stride in his endless loops. That dog was just one bundle of enthusiasm and exuberance because he was spending some quality time with the most important person in his life—his master.

As I watched the two of them, I couldn't help drawing an analogy. "Lord," I thought, "that old dog has more sense than I do. He knows more about the greatest thing in life than I do. Please make me more and more like that old dog."

Jesus Christ is God Himself, the Master. And so our lives should revolve around Him, we should keep our eyes continually on Him, we should leap to do His bidding, and we should bring our crowns and trophies and lay them at His feet. For He is the Word—the message, manifestation, and mind of God Himself, the Word who pre-existed, co-existed, and divinely existed yesterday, today, and forever.

Of the Father's Love begotten
'Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the Source, the Ending He
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore

ASLAN'S SONG

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (John 1:1-3, NKJV).

There once was an old professor named Digory Kirke who lived in the countryside outside London and whose house contained the wardrobe that served as a mysterious passageway into the enchanted land of Narnia. The story of how a group of four children discovered this is the subject of the famous book, and now the movie which opens this week, entitled *The Lion, the Witch, and the*

Wardrobe. This is one of seven books that C. S. Lewis wrote under the collective title *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and in most collections *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is volume two. There's great debate among C. S. Lewis scholars about the order in which the books should be read. True and authentic Lewis purists insist that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* be read first since Lewis wrote it first and it serves as the foundation for all the others. Every one of the other six books is either a prequel or sequel. But Lewis himself once suggested to a little boy that *The Magician's Nephew* be read first, because it is first in terms of the chronological order of the events related by the stories; so in modern collections, *The Magician's Nephew* is now volume one. (You wouldn't believe how people argue about these things.)

At any rate, *The Magician's Nephew* is clearly the prequel to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and it tells the story of this old professor, Digory Kirke, when he himself was a child and when he happened to arrive in Narnia at the very moment of its creation. Aslan, the great Lion, son of the Emperor-Beyond-the Seas, was the agent of creation, the one who literally sang Narnia into existence.

Let me read you a few excerpts from *The Magician's Nephew*, in which C. S. Lewis described the creation of this wonderful, fictional world:

In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it.

(As the Voice continued to sing, suddenly) ...the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one, as they do on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leapt out—single stars, constellations, and planets....

The eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The Voice rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose....

As Digory looked around him in the flushing glow of the newly created sun, the land of Narnia was being created by the singer's clarion Voice. It was literally being sung into existence. At first, the earth appeared devoid of tree and flower—not a bush, not a blade of grass to be seen. Lewis wrote:

The earth was of many colours: they were fresh, hot, and vivid. They made you feel excited; until you saw the Singer himself, and then you forget everything else. It was a Lion. Huge, shaggy, and bright, it stood facing the rising sun. Its mouth was wide open in song...

And slowly, beautifully, in swelling tones and whispered layers, the great Lion sang his world into existence, tree by tree, animal by animal, creature by creature, until everything was made that had been made, and it was all very good.

I believe this wonderful scene in *The Magician's Nephew* was C. S. Lewis' way of visualizing the creation of the universe by the powerful, omnipotent word of Jesus Christ, who is compared, as it were, with a great Lion, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. It's a fictional and fanciful rendering of creation, but behind this episode in the *Chronicles of Narnia* is sound theology. For C. S. Lewis was a converted atheist who became a great apologist for the Christian faith. And he knew John, chapter 1. He knew this about the Lord Jesus Christ—that all things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

The Bible teaches that it was Jesus Christ Himself, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, who spoke the world into existence at the dawning of the ages.

During this Advent Season, we are looking at the story of the birth of Jesus as John gives it to us in the prologue of His Gospel, and in these opening verses John strikes a series of majestic notes, like the pealing of an enormous Christmas bell of richest, deepest tones.

Jesus is the Word

The first note he strikes is that Jesus is the Word, and this is the subject we investigated last Sunday. The Greek term for Word is

LOGOS, and it means among other things that Jesus is God's ultimate self-communication to the human race. He is the manifestation of God to us. He is God's ultimate sermon, His greatest message. He is the Word of God personified and incarnate.

Jesus was in the Beginning

John's second clarion note is that Jesus was present in the beginning, which obviously means He was present before the beginning. One of the emphases of John's Gospel is our Lord's pre-existence. It's true that He was conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of Mary in the town of Nazareth and was born in a rude stable in the town of Bethlehem, but that was only the beginning of His humanity, of His incarnation. The prophet Micah said about His being born in Bethlehem, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, even from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

In his Gospel, John the Evangelist emphasizes this again and again, that the one born in the manger is from everlasting to everlasting. I'll give you just one example. In John 17:1-4, John records our Lord's high priestly prayer, which begins this way:

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, 2 as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

In John's Gospel, Jesus didn't say one word about His being born in Bethlehem; He never made reference to that. But over and over, He said things like, "I have come down from heaven." John wants us to know that Jesus Christ is God the Son, eternal in the heavens, whose comings and goings have been of old, even from eternity.

Jesus was With God

The third clarion note struck by John in his prologue is that Jesus not only pre-existed, He co-existed with God the Father: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.... This is a clear allusion to the Trinity, that Jesus Christ co-exists and is co-equal with God the Father and with the God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was God

Fourth, John strikes the richest, deepest, clearest note of all on His Gospel, that Jesus Christ was Himself nothing less than the eternal, almighty God of all the ages.

Arthur Pink, in his commentary of John, says something I have myself believed for a long time. He wrote, "Each book in the Bible has a prominent and dominant theme which is peculiar to itself. Just as each member of the human body has its own particular function, so every book in the Bible has its own special purpose and mission."

According to Arthur Pink—and this is perfectly obvious to anyone who studies the Gospel of John—the great theme of John's Gospel is the Deity of the Savior. "Here, as nowhere else in Scripture so fully, the Godhead of Christ is presented to our view." I don't have time to trace this through the Gospel, but let me just show you two times in John's Gospel where that point is made.

John 5:17-18 says, "But Jesus answered them, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.' Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God."

And in John 20:28, the skeptical disciple Thomas, seeing the living Christ, declared, "My Lord and my God."

Pastor D. James Kennedy said in a sermon,

"I remember years ago talking to a man in his home about Christ and asking him who he thought Jesus was. He said, 'Oh, He's a wonderful man. He was the greatest man who ever lived, the most loving and gracious person who ever walked upon this earth.'

"I said, 'Let me tell you something I believe will startle you. According to the Scriptures, and the historic Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter of Galilee was and is the eternal Creator of the universe, the omnipotent, omniscient, and Almighty God.'

“Instantly, his eyes filled with tears and this man of about fifty-five or sixty said, ‘I have been in church all of my life and I never heard that before. But I have always thought that is the way it ought to be--that God ought to be like Jesus.’”[1]

The great Catholic hymnist, Frederick W. Faber, wrote:

Jesus is God! O! Could I now
But compass earth and sea,
To teach and tell the single truth,
How happy should I be!
(Frederick W. Faber, 1862)

Jesus was the Agent of Creation

And now we are coming to today’s verse and to today’s great truth about Jesus—He is the Agent of Creation. John says this three times! He states it, and then he highlights it, and then underscores it.

- John 1:2a: Through Him all things were made.
- John 1:2b: Without Him nothing has been made that was made. In other words, there is not a single thing that exists in all the cosmos anywhere on earth or in the far-flung galaxies of near-infinite space that He did not personally bring into being as it is.
- John 1:10: The world was made through Him.

The teaching of the Bible is that God the Father planned the creation, but that Jesus Christ Himself—God the Son—was the agent through Whom it was accomplished. Someone said that it is as though God the Father was like the architect and owner, and God the Son was the general contractor. That’s an oversimplification, but it is not altogether wrong.

This teaching is not unique to John. The entire Bible points to this. Look at Colossians 1:15ff:

For by Him (meaning Christ) all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

And look at Hebrews 1:1-2

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds....

The clear teaching of the Bible is that Jesus Christ is the agent of creation, the one who did the Father’s bidding and brought the universe into existence. To the best of my knowledge, He didn’t sing it into existence, as Aslan did in *The Magician’s Nephew*, but He spoke it into existence. “Let there be light... Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters... Let the dry land appear... Let the earth bring forth grass... Let us make man in our image...”

He created all things by the power of His spoken word (cp Heb 1:3)—and who knows whether He might have sung out the words!

Now, of course, the scientific community and the media are engaged in a full-blown war over this issue, and this war has been raging for over 100 years. They try to frame the public argument as religion versus science—as though the evolutionists have all the evidence and the Christians have all the ignorant and misguided bias. But if you want to talk about ignorant and misguided bias, look at the blind faith with which evolutionists are continuing to cling to their flawed theory.

I want to read you something written by a Harvard geneticist named Richard Lewontin, who is one of America’s most decorated scientists. This paragraph I’m going to read to you is rather complex, but if you’ll follow it, I think you’ll see just how biased and unreasonable and misguided evolutionists can be. This is what he wrote not long ago in a newspaper article:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, not matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.[2]

Now, if you had trouble following that paragraph, let me give you my interpretation. Lewontin was saying, “It doesn’t matter how stupid evolution appears to be, we have decided in advance to cling to that theory despite all evidence to the contrary. We are determined to do that rather than admit for one moment that there might actually be a creator or a designer to this universe.”

Another scientist, Scott Todd of Kansas State University, said basically the same thing in the magazine Nature: “Even if all the data point to an intelligent designer, such a hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic.”[3]

And yet, scientists cannot evade the designing hand of God. Gene Myers, one of the lead scientists in the Human Genome project, was quoted in a San Francisco newspaper recently as saying, “What really astounds me is the architecture of life. The system is extremely complex. It’s like it was designed....”

Of all the things that I’ve every read about creationism and evolution, the observation that I think is the most pertinent to our world today is that some theories and hypothesis should be rejected purely on the basis of their implications. John Ankerberg and John Weldon wrote in a book on this subject, “Some ideas are so bad that it may be argued they should be rejected on the basis of their implications alone.”[4]

Evolution is Exhibit A in that regard. If evolution is true, then the universe and everything in it—including you and me—are absolutely purposeless and meaningless and without a shred of optimism or hope. The evolutionists admit this is true.

George Gaylord Simpson, an American paleontologist and evolutionist, said: “Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.”

Another evolutionistic author said: “Darwin’s immeasurably important contribution to science was to show how mechanistic causes could also explain all biological phenomena, despite their apparent evidence of design and purpose. By coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection, Darwin made theological or spiritual explanations of the life processes superfluous.”

Jacques Lucien Monod, the eminent French scientist who has won a Nobel Prize for his accomplishments, wrote: “Man has to understand that he is a mere accident.”

Professor William Provine of Cornell University wrote, “No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life.”[5]

Well, let me give you one more quote, one that sums up my whole argument on this subject. It was written by the great English philosopher and scientist, Francis Bacon. He said: “A little science estranges a man from God; a little more brings him back.”[6]

And interestingly, we’re on the cusp of a significant challenge taking place in the world of science today as increasing numbers astronomers and microbiologists and others are insisting on the evidence for intelligent design for this universe.

Ronald Reagan gave an interesting spin to this when he quipped, “Sometimes when I’m faced with an unbeliever, an atheist, I am tempted to invite him to the greatest gourmet dinner that one could ever serve, and when we finished eating that magnificent dinner, to ask him if he believes there’s a cook.”

Well, there is a cook. There is a creator. The book of Genesis begins with, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” And the Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word... all things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”

This is what gives Christmas its marvel and its magic. It boggles our minds and overwhelms our hearts to believe that the creator of the stars was born under the very Middle Eastern skies that He Himself created. He was laid in a bed of straw that He Himself designed. His birth was announced by angels that He Himself had made at the dawning of creation. Lying there in a manger of straw was the almighty God, maker of heaven and earth. One poet said:

I know not how that Bethlehem’s Babe
Could in the Godhead be;
I only know the manger Child
Has brought God’s life to me.

But the greatest mystery of all is given in verse 10: The world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.

And that brings it all down to you and me. Have you acknowledged him as your own personal Lord and Savior? He says, "Receive Me. Believe in Me. Let Me come into your life. Let Me forgive your sin. Let Me give you the right to be a child of God. Let Me take you to heaven."

Will you do it? Will you come?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and this life was the light of men

[1] D. James Kennedy, from his sermon entitled "Is Jesus God," printed by Coral Ridge Ministries, P. O. Box 40, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33302.

[2] Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," The New York Review of Books, January 9, 1997, p. 31; quoted by William S. Harris and John H. Calvert in "Intelligent Design: The Scientific Alternative to Evolution," in The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly, Autumn 2003, p. 536.

[3] Scott C. Todd, "A View from Kansas on that Evolution Debate," Nature 401.6752 (September 30, 1999): 423, quoted by William S. Harris and John H. Calvert in "Intelligent Design: The Scientific Alternative to Evolution," in The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly, Autumn 2003, p. 536.

[4] John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Darwin's Leap of Faith (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998, p. 18

[5] John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Darwin's Leap of Faith (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998, p. 22.

[6] Quoted by William S. Harris and John H. Calvert in "Intelligent Design: The Scientific Alternative to Evolution," in The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly, Autumn 2003, p. 537

THE LAMPPOST AT LANTERN WASTE

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and this life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it (John 1:1-5, NKJV).

Years ago when I was an elementary child in East Side School in Elizabethton, a portly old Northern gentleman used to come to our school every week to teach us a Bible story and to help us memorize Bible verses. One of the passages our class memorized—it might have been in the third or fourth grade—was this section, the opening verses of the prologue of John's Gospel. So I've known these verses just about all my life, and yet as I've worked my way through them for this series of Christmas sermons, I'm realizing how much I've missed. There's much more in the prologue of John than meets the eye. It's like a landscape that has a diamond mine just below the surface.

I was startled as I begin studying these verses to find a quotation from the great Scottish preacher, Alexander Maclaren, saying that the prologue of John was "the profoundest page in the New Testament" and "the deepest part of Scripture."

Well, as I've studied it, I've come to realize that John uses His prologue to introduce the various themes that are going to unfold in the rest of his Gospel, such as the eternal nature of Christ, the divine nature of Christ, the life-giving nature of Christ (as we saw this morning), and the light-giving nature of Christ (as we see in tonight's passage).

What I'd like to do this evening is to provide a basic exegesis for these two verses of our text, then briefly look at how this theme unfolds in John's Gospel, and then make a few points of application for your life and for mine.

And the Life was the Light of Men

Look at John 1:4: In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.... And by men, of course, it means men, women, boys, and girls. His life is the light of everyone. He is the light of humanity in general and of every individual—you and me—in particular.

Notice how closely John begins his Gospel by following the themes of Genesis 1. He begins with the same words, "In the beginning...." He introduces the concept of an eternal creating God who made all things. He describes this God as the source of created and derived life. And the first thing that God creates is light. He said, "Let there be light." John is following the same pattern, telling us that just as God created the world, now He is re-creating it through the salvation offered in Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world.

Now, here I'll have to be honest with you. I can usually study out the meaning and significance of biblical symbols and metaphors. But when the Bible uses the word "light" it frustrates me (exegetically speaking), because it is used in so many ways to symbolize so many things.

Let's take just a moment to see how the Old Testament uses the ideas of light and darkness.

Sometimes, of course, when it refers to light it is referring to literal, actual physical light. When the Bible says that God dwells in inapproachable light, I believe that includes the reality of physical light. Psalm 104 says that God covers Himself with light as with a garment. When Paul saw the risen and glorified Christ on the road to Damascus, our Lord shone brighter than the midday sun, and Paul's eyesight was instantly destroyed. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no need for the sun and moon, for the light radiating from the Lord Jesus Christ will illumine the entire city.

Sometimes in the Old Testament, light was a symbol of the holiness and righteousness of God. Psalm 37:6 says, "He shall bring forth Your righteousness as the light and Your justice as the noonday."

Sometimes it referred to salvation and deliverance. Isaiah 9 says: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelled in the land on the shadow of death, on them a great light has shined."

Sometimes in the Old Testament, light was a metaphor for truth, for the Scriptures. Psalm 43:3 says, "Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me to Your holy hill." Psalm 119 says, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my pathway."

Sometimes in the Old Testament, light referred to God's blessings on our lives. The Old Testament writers spoke of the light of God's countenance, and Job recalled those wonderful days when he had walked in the light of the Lord, referring to days of prosperity and blessing.

Sometimes light referred to joy and radiance of heart. Esther 8:15-16 says: "So Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor."

So how do you summarize all this? We have to say that light in the Old Testament, when it was used like this, described the very presence and being of God and all His manifold blessings on our lives. It represented His presence. It represented His holiness. It represented His truth and His Word. It represented His salvation and His blessings.

It is perhaps the most comprehensive figure in the entire Bible used to describe God and all He offers to us.

So John latches onto this theme in his prologue and in His Gospel. And when he says that Jesus Christ is the light, that He is the light of the world, that He is the light that shines in darkness, that He is the light that the world could not comprehend, which Old Testament idea is he employing. Well, I've finally made an exegetical decision about this. I think John is saying, "Jesus Christ is physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, morally the light of all the world and the light of everyone who walks in darkness."

In Him was life and this life was the light of men and women and boys and girls. And this is the great theme that John is going to bring up again and again in His Gospel, in his first Gospel, and in his book of Revelation.

And the Light Shined in the Darkness

The next verse, John 1:5, goes on to say, “And the light shines in the darkness.” The interesting thing to notice about this verse is the tense of the verb. The previous verse employed the past tense: In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” But note John changes tenses and uses the present tense in verse 5: And the light shines—it is shining still, it is shining right now—in the darkness.

And The Darkness Has Not Comprehended It

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it.

This is a difficult statement to translate and interpret. The Greek word for comprehend is καταλαμβάνομαι (kata-lam-bo'nomi), which has two possible meanings in the original. The first is to comprehend and the other is to overwhelm. Both meanings make sense in the context and both are true, but unless he was speaking in clever riddles, John had only one meaning in mind. More and more commentators now are choosing that second meaning—the darkness did not overwhelm, put out, extinguish the light. The plot that unfolds in the book of John is that there is a world of darkness that is opposed to Jesus and that tried to destroy Him. But the darkness could not do it, could not extinguish Him, and could not overwhelm Him.

We have a great illustration of this in the Chronicles of Narnia. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the evil witch, who, in my view, is symbolic of Satan and of evil, lands unexpected in our world, causes a great commotion in the street, and causes a carriage to crash into a lamppost, and the witch grabs a piece of this demolished lamppost as a weapon. She tumbles back into the Narnian world, still clutching the section of lamppost, and when she sees Aslan, the great Lion, she throws it at him, and it strikes him in the head. It bounces off him and falls to the ground. Later, a lamppost begins growing from that spot, and it becomes a landmark that always shines, night and day, and brings hope to the westernmost section of Narnia known as Lantern Waste.

I don't know exactly what C. S. Lewis had in mind, but it seems to me that's a great symbol of Christ. The devil tried to demolish Him, to extinguish His light, to throw Him to the ground, but Satan could not extinguish His light, and the very effort resulted in even more light growing up in the darkness of this world to give light to the Lantern Waste of planet earth.

What It Means for Us

That means that when we come to the Lord Jesus, He alone lights up our lives with salvation, truth, joy, and happiness. There's something about darkness that bothers us. The other Sunday, I said in a sermon that during the day I don't worry about very much, but at night when I turn off my light and I'm just about asleep, all the anxieties and fears try to rush in. I was surprised at the number of people who came up to me afterward and said, “Me too. That's the way it is with me.”

I read about a little boy who didn't want his mother to turn off his light at bedtime. It was during the summer, and there was a violent thunderstorm. The mother tucked him into bed and was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?”

The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. “I can't, dear,” she said, “I have to sleep with your daddy.” The little boy was silent for a long moment, and then he said, half-to-himself: “The big sissy.”

Well, sometimes we're all big sissies in the darkness of life. We need the light of the world to light up our lives. Well, let me remind you of what missionary E. Stanley Jones once said: When I met Christ, I felt that I had swallowed sunshine.

I'd like to end this message by giving you a set of Bible verses you've probably never considered before. They are the “radiant” verses. Let's put them on the screen and quote them responsively.

Leader: O God, enthroned above the cherubim, display your radiant glory (Psalm 80:1, NLT).

Everyone: I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with His glory (Ezekiel 43:2, NIV).

Leader: When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant... (Exodus 34:29-30, NIV).

Everyone: The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes (Psalm 19:8, NIV).

Leader: Eli answered (Hannah), “Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him. “Think well of me—and pray for me!” she said, and went her way. Then she ate heartily, her face radiant (1 Samuel 1:17-19, the Message).

Everyone: You will look and be radiant (Isaiah 60:5, NIV).

Leader: They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed (Psalm 34:5, NKJV). They will be radiant because of the many gifts the Lord has given them (Jeremiah 31:12, NLT). If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight is shining on you (Luke 11:36, NLT).

Everyone: Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Does your face, your life, your home—does this church—radiate with the love and life and laughter of Jesus Christ? Are we like people who have swallowed sunshine?

The whole world was lost
In the darkness of sin,
The Light of the world is Jesus!
Like sunshine at noonday,
His glory shone in.
The Light of the world is Jesus!

Come to the light, 'tis shining for thee;
Sweetly the light has dawned upon me.
Once I was blind, but now I can see:
The Light of the world is Jesus!
(Philip Bliss, 1875)

FLASHLIGHTS AND MIRRORS AT CHRISTMAS

Robert Morgan

John 1:1-10

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world (John 1:1-10, NKJV).

During these Sundays of December, 2005, I have been teaching and preaching from the prolegomenon of John's Gospel, and we've done so against the backdrop of Narnia, the fantasy world created by the great Oxford professor and Christian, C. S. Lewis. In his books about Narnia, Lewis invented a character of enormous proportions and power, a great lion named Aslan, who gave his life as a redemption on the stone table and rose again. Many people believe that Aslan is symbolic of Jesus Christ, but others who want to downplay the Christian influence of Narnia try to disparage that.

A couple of weeks ago when the reporter was here from the Tennessean, she asked me about this. “Many people,” she said, “say that the Chronicles of Narnia are just fantasy, and that we shouldn't read anything into them about Aslan being symbolic of Christ. But in one of his books, C. S. Lewis intimated that Aslan actually lived in our world, but he went by another name. And I was able to tell our reporter about a letter that C. S. Lewis once wrote to a little girl named Hila Newman who had written to him, asking about this. Lewis replied:

As to Aslan's other name, well I want you to guess. Has there never been anyone in this world who: (1) Arrived at the same time as

Father Christmas (2) Said he was the son of the Great Emperor (3) Gave himself up for someone else's fault to be jeered at and killed by wicked people (4) Came to life again (5) Is sometimes spoken of as a Lamb (see the end of The Dawn Treader). Don't you really know His name in his world? Think it over and let me know your answer.[1]

Once he became a Christian, C. S. Lewis wanted to let others know the wonders of the truth he himself had experienced, and he set himself to be a witness for Jesus Christ. He did it through radio lectures, books, personal speaking appearances, and in his personal interactions with others. C. S. Lewis knew what we all must know—that the transmission of Christianity from one person to the next and from one generation to the next is our ultimate purpose, the reason why God is leaving us on this earth. That's the subject we're coming to today in our study through the opening verses of John's Gospel.

John 1:6 says: There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

Let me first of all explain that there are two different Johns. The writer of these words is John the Evangelist, better known as the apostle John, or Saint John. He described himself as the apostle whom Jesus loved, and he wrote this fourth Gospel. But here in verse 6ff, he's talking about another John, John the Baptist, a relative (perhaps a cousin) of Jesus, who came as our Lord's forerunner.

John 1:7 says: This man came for a witness....

That is true for each one of us. Just erase John's name and put your own name there. And notice that the word witness occurs three times here in two verses: This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

This brings us to another of John's great themes. You may recall that I said last week that almost every verse in this prologue introduces us to a subject that we can trace through the book. Think of a blanket with several rich stripes running through it from end to end. John's Gospel is a blanket of Good News with several rich stripes running through it, with each of these great, colorful stripes starting in the prologue. Now we have here another great theme emerging, the theme of witnessing. John came to bear witness of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how this theme later unfolds in John's thinking.

Down in John 1:15, John amplifies on the ministry of John the Baptist, saying: John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.' And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

On down in John 1:32: And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him."

Now look at John 3:11: Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak of what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness."

And down in John 1:28: John the Baptist said: You yourselves be my witness, that I said, "I am not the Christ;" but I have been sent before Him.

Now look at John 5:31ff: Jesus said: If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.... He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a greater witness than John's: the works which the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent me.

And turn over to John 8:13ff: The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true." Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going.... I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me."

John 10:25 says: Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me."

John 12:17 says: Therefore the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead, bore witness.

Look at John 15:27, in the Upper Room Discourse: And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

And the capstone of these verses was spoken by Christ while standing before Pontius Pilate in John 18:37: Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

John uses the word "witness" a total of 26 times in his gospel, and he uses the related word "testify" another 14 times. According to John's Gospel:

- John the Baptist came to bear witness of Christ.
- Jesus bore witness of Himself.
- The works that Jesus did and the miracles that He performed bore witness to Him.
- The Father Himself bears witness to our Lord.
- The people who saw Lazarus rise from out of the grave became witnesses.
- The twelve apostles became witnesses.
- Everyone who loves the truth is His witness.
- And all of us who know Jesus Christ, who walk in His light, who know and behold the light of the world—all of us are mirrors who reflect His light. We are witnesses who declare His glory.

We are like John: This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the light, that all through him might believe. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which gives light to every person coming into the world.

Now in looking at these verses from John the apostle and in looking at the example of John the Baptist, one single simple truth struck me and that's what I'd like to share with you today. Our Lord Jesus Christ needs flashlights and mirrors in this world. None of us can be the sun shining brilliantly in the meridian of the sky, but we can be a mirror to reflect the beams to others. Not many of us can be great spotlights that rake the night sky with brilliant beams of light, but we can all be flashlights who light the path for someone else.

One of the most encouraging things I know is that God can use our smaller efforts to bring people to Christ. He can certainly use our larger efforts. In the year 2000, when we participated in the Billy Graham Crusade here, that was a great effort. Every year, we have some large venues in which we try to present the Gospel, such as our Easter Services at the Grand Ole Opry House. Every Tuesday night, a dedicated band of workers here at our church go out making FAITH visits, and it's an effort that takes a lot of planning and dedication.

But God can also use our smaller efforts to bring people to Christ, when they are fully dedicated to Him.

Years ago while I was in graduate school I worked for the Billy Graham team as a gofer for some of their crusades, and one day in Norfolk, it was my responsibility to escort a woman around town. Her name was Jeannette Clift, and she was a Hollywood actress who played the role of Corrie Ten Boom in the movie, *The Hiding Place*. Miss Clift was a radiant Christian, and the story of her conversion to Christ is very encouraging. It happened simply because of the kindness of a sales clerk in a store. Jeannette was on her way one day to an audition, and she was waiting at the bus stop when a sudden rainstorm blew up and sent torrents of rain out of the sky. Jeannette darted into a nearby bookstore, but the bookstore was closing. The clerk invited her to wait out the storm in an adjacent auditorium. "Oh," said the clerk, in effect, "I'm sorry that we're closing, but you don't have to wait in the rain. There's an auditorium next door and you can wait there." It was just a simple act of cunning, conniving evangelistic kindness. Because that salesclerk knew—as Jeannette Clift was about to learn—that there was a meeting going on in that auditorium, and the great British expositor, Major Ian Thomas, was speaking. And that message by Major Thomas triggered the series of events that led Jeannette Clift to Jesus Christ. In the years since then, Jeannette has devoted her life to Christian dramatic productions that have told multitudes of people about Jesus Christ.

Now, do you see how wonderfully cooperative evangelism is? God designed a customized rainstorm to strike that bus stop, and Major Ian Thomas just happened at that very moment to be preaching the Gospel in an adjacent auditorium. And the link between the two was a humble salesclerk who just made a kind suggestion.

As I was preparing this message, the December issue of the Gideon Magazine arrived in the mail. With apologies to the Gideons for stealing their material, I'd like to tell you what was in one of the articles. It was by a man named Christopher Jones, who told his remarkably blunt and candid story. He said that while he was finishing up in college, he sat under a professor who had political views that were at great variance with his own. In fact, the two men developed an animosity toward each other, and the professor

gave Christopher a failing grade, even though the student knew the material and was very competent in the course of study he was pursuing.

Christopher said that he was absolutely enraged, and that as time went by his rage settled down into a deep, abiding anger. “For weeks I stalked out his office and car, following from a distance to get an idea of his schedule and route. I even drew up several plans on a piece of paper.”

The day finally came when he decided to carry out his plan. His intention was to ambush the professor and beat him up—not to kill him, but to bloody him up some. Christopher waited in his car in a park near the professor’s office, and as he waited for the professor to emerge, he noticed a man walking through the park with a cardboard box under his arm. He came alongside the car and spoke through the window to Christopher, offering him a little copy of the New Testament that he was passing out. “Here, read this,” said the man.

Christopher had about twenty minutes before the professor was due, so he started to read in Matthew’s Gospel. He skimmed through the genealogy in chapter 1, and went straight to reading about the birth of Jesus Christ. The story just gripped him, and he lost all track of time. All he could do was continue reading, through the story of our Lord’s birth, through the baptism of Christ, temptation of the Savior, through the launching of our Lord’s ministry. He kept reading in Matthew 5, 6, and 7—the Sermon on the Mount. Christopher sank back into his seat in total absorption, and then he did something strange. He turned on into the little book at random, and he started reading Romans 12, and suddenly he read those words in Romans 12:17: “Repay no one evil for evil....”

Christopher said that he felt like he was suddenly waking up from a dream, coming to himself, coming to his senses, able to suddenly see things clearly for the first time. And that day, in the nick of time, Christopher Jones found Jesus Christ as his Savior—all because of a man with a cardboard box under his arm who handed a New Testament to a fellow sitting in a car in the park and said, “Here, read this.”

Several months ago, we made our way through *The Purpose Driven Life* by Pastor Rick Warren. Pastor Warren says that we have five great purposes in life—worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelism. We read the book together, studied this subject in our Sunday School classes, engaged in a night of home fellowships on this subject, and I preached a series of sermons on these five great purposes. But I realized something this week that I didn’t think about at the time. Four of these five activities are eternal in nature—we’ll be doing them in heaven. We’ll be worshipping God forever. We’ll be fellowshiping with one another, we’ll be living a Christlike life as His disciples, and we’ll be serving Him. The Lord could take us on to heaven right now, and those activities wouldn’t cease.

But one of the five—the last one—can only be done on this earth, and that’s why God is leaving us here. It’s evangelism. Sharing our faith with others. Transmitting Christianity to the next person and passing it on to the next generation. That’s the ultimate purpose that keeps us earth-bound for the encircling years that God leaves us here.

Our lives are immortal until our work on earth is done. We have been sent as a light to bear witness to the Light, who is the true light who gives light to everyone who is coming into the world. So...

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

And there was a person sent from God, whose name is your name. We have come to be a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through us might believe. We are not that Light, but we are sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every person coming into the world.

[1] Quoted by Paul F. Ford in *Pocket Companion to Narnia* (New York: Harper - San Francisco, 2005), pp. 11-12).

ONCE HE’S WITH US, WE CAN DO THINGS

Robert Morgan

John 1:10-14

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:10-14, NKJV).

One of my favorite lines in C. S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, occurs when the children show up at the beavers' house, very distraught because their brother, Edmund, has fallen under the spell of the wicked witch and is employed in her service in virtual slavery. The children want to race off and begin doing battle with the witch in an effort to rescue their brother, but the beavers have a better plan. First, they advised, we have to find Aslan and then we can follow his lead. Mrs. Beaver explained it with these simple words: "Once he's with us, then we can begin doing things."

In a way, that's the supposition behind the entire Gospel of John. We're in a mess in this planet and sometimes we're in a mess in our own lives. The evil one holds sway over the ebb and flow of world events and of he often holds sway over our lives. But The Word became flesh; God became a human being named Jesus Christ—and now that He's with us, we can begin doing things.

On this Christmas day of 2005, I'd like to deal with the passage we've just read, for it is nothing less than John's version of the nativity and birth of our Lord. John 1:14 is "Bethlehem" in theological jargon. It's the manager in doctrinal terms. It is God's perspective on the events that occurred on that wondrous day when Jesus Christ was born. On that silent night, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

In John 1:10-14, we meet three "greats" in Bethlehem.

The Greatest Perplexity in the World (John 1:10-11)

First, there is the greatest perplexity in the world. Look at verses 10 and 11: He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

Verse 10 tells us that the creator of the world was neglected, and verse 11 tells us that the Savior of the world was rejected. This is hard to understand. How could the very God who had made this world so wonderfully suited for our needs be so completely discarded by His very creation? Just think of Old Testament days when they stoned the Lord's prophets and despitely used those whom God sent to them. Think of the birth of Christ, when Herod the Great sought to destroy the child by killing the innocents of Bethlehem. Think of Calvary, when the enemies of Christ had Him stripped and whipped and nailed to a cross to bleed to death on a far-away hill. Think of the story of the early church, when every apostle except the one writing this Gospel died a violent death.

Think of the twenty centuries of Christian history in which the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church. Even in our own day and time, the social pundits, the media, and the world of commerce is attacking Christmas—and it isn't just Christmas that is under attack; it is Christianity under attack. The world is waging war against the very God who created it.

And in verse 11, when it says He came unto His own and His own received Him not, that is referring to the inexplicable fact—perhaps the greatest enigma of history—how the Jewish Messiah arrived in perfect fulfillment of hundreds of Jewish prophecies, and yet He was rejected. But His very rejection was predicted, for in Isaiah 53:3, we read: "He is 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."

It may even be that someone here on this Christmas Sunday has come to church on the very day commemorating the Savior's birth, yet in your heart you, too, are rejecting Him. That's the greatest perplexity in all the world.

The Greatest Privilege in the World (John 1:12-13)

But the next two verses, John 1:12-13, tell us about the great privilege in the world: But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. While the Jewish nation as a whole rejected Him and while the human race as a whole neglected Him, there have been and are millions of individuals who do receive Him. And to them He gives...—noticethe verb, gives. Not sells or bids off, but He gives the power or right (the Greek term, *exousia*, means the right or the authority) to become children of God.

In the original Greek, John 1:13 ends emphatically with the verb being the last word. Literally the verse says, "...who, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God were born."

And, of course, that brings us another of John's great themes—the new birth. Later in chapter 3, he records our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus in which Christ said, "You must be born again." He's talking about a supernatural birth, and this supernatural birth is

contrasted in three ways with physical childbirth.

First, it isn't of blood, or literally, of bloods. This is a Greek idea that when a couple conceived, it was the cells of the male and female coming together to form flesh and blood. John was saying, I'm not talking about literal flesh and blood, a literal physical birth, here.

Second, it isn't of the will of flesh. In other words, I'm not talking about the kind of birth that is the result of a couple's physical desires for each other. Third, it isn't the will of man. The new birth isn't something that happens because a man or a husband wants a child. I'm talking about a different kind of birth, a new birth, a birth into God's family.

The other day I picked up the memoirs of Paul Burrell, the man who served as Queen Elizabeth's personal butler, than became the butler for Princess Diana. On the day that the divorce was complete between Princess Di and Prince Charles, Diana was very distraught, and about many things—one of which was the loss of the royal title HRH—Her Royal Highness. She was still Diana, Princess of Wales; but she was no longer Her Royal Highness, for she was no longer part of the royal family. In her distress, she turned to her son, Prince William, and told him how upset she was over the loss of her title. The young prince put his arms around his mother and said, "Don't worry, Mummy, I will give it back to you one day, when I am king."

Well, few people are born into a royal family, and some who get there by marriage can't stay there. The Bible says that not many of us are of royal or noble birth. But we can all be born again. We can all be born into the King's family. He can all be royals, sons and daughters of God, possessing everlasting life, heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

How are we born again? John uses two words. We believe and we received. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe on His name.

The apostle Paul would later say the same thing in Romans 10: If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord (that's receiving) and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead (that's believing), you shall be saved.

And that's the greatest privilege and the greatest prospect in the world in the world. CS Lewis it up in one sentence: "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God."

The Greatest Person in the World (John 1:14)

And that brings us to the third "great" in this passage—the greatest person in the world. Look at verse 14, which is one of the greatest verses in all the Bible: And the Word became flesh and dwelt us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

And the Word. That, as we have seen in previous messages, was John's great, original name for Jesus Christ.

Became. This verb is the most startling word to me in the entire verse. If there is one thing we know about God, it is that He is eternal and infinite, unchangeable and immutable. And yet He did change, He did mutate. If anyone were to use this verb, became, about God outside the context of holy Scripture, I think it would be blasphemy, but here John the Apostle is using this word in his very prologue.

That word became implies that a change has occurred. If a moth becomes a butterfly, a change has occurred. If a heap of metal becomes a car, a change has occurred. If I become anything—a husband, a Christian, a soldier, an adult, a parent, a member of some organization—than a change has occurred. I am now something that I previously was not. John 1:1 says that the Word was God. The Word was a name of title for God the Son, who is unchangeable and immutable. But now He has become...

This is the mystery of the incarnation. The Son of God became the Son of Man. God became a man. He became truly and completely human, and yet without ceasing to be God. This is why He is the greatest person in the universe and the greatest personage in history.

And the Word became flesh (sarx) and dwelt among us The word dwelt was the Greek word that meant to live in a tent. It was the Old Testament word for tabernacle. He tented among us. He tabernacled among us. This sentence tells me two great things. First, the Old Testament Tabernacle that we studied in a sermon series a couple of years ago was, in fact, a divinely-designed type or prototype of Christ. Jesus Christ is the living, breathing personification of the truths symbolized in that remarkable tent called the Tabernacle and described in the Old Testament book of Exodus. It tells us that the Bible is a unified, cohesive book; and that even though much of it—most of it—was written long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, yet it is all about Him, from Genesis to

Revelation.

Second, this tells us that Jesus Christ is not just a God who is above us, He is a God who is among us. He is tenting down here, dwelling down here among us. He did this literally for thirty-three years, and now He is doing it through His Holy Spirit.

There's a little song that we sometimes sing around here: "Jesus, Name above all names, Beautiful Savior, wonderful Lord, Immanuel, God is with us...." That song was written by a middle-aged woman from New Zealand who had been studying the subject of the names of Jesus in the Bible. One day she wrote out some of the names on a piece of paper, and she happened to take that paper out to the washhouse so she could mull over it while washing her clothes. Like many New Zealanders, she had a washhouse behind the regular living quarters of her home. Well, while she was washing her clothes, she began became aware of the Lord's presence in that washhouse with her, and she began to sing the words, "Jesus, name above all names," and pretty soon she had composed the whole little song right there in that washhouse. She thought to herself, "Well, I'll write it down," and she went to the piano and wrote it out. After finishing, she said, "Lord, is that okay? Is that all right like that?" Sensing the Lord's approval, she went back to her washing, unaware that she had just written a little song that would one day be sung around the world.

He is Jesus, name above all names, beautiful Savior, wonderful Lord, Immanuel, God is with Us.

Even in the washhouse, even in the garage, even in the kitchen, even on the basketball court—we do not have a God who is merely above us; we have a God who is among us and His name is above all names. The Word became flesh and has pitched His tent among us.

John went on to say, ...and we beheld His glory. I think John is referring to that never-to-be-forgotten moment on the Mountain of Transfiguration when the veil was partially lifted for just a moment and the disciples were able to see something of the intrinsic glory which Jesus inherently possesses. Or perhaps we was thinking of the first moment when he saw the risen Christ, resurrected and glorified. Or perhaps he was thinking of that moment when Jesus rose into the sky and disappeared in the whitened clouds of glory. Or perhaps he was using the editorial "we" and remembering the vision he had experienced on the Island of Patmos when he saw the enthroned Son of God, blazing life fire and shining like the sun in its noontide splendor.

John described it as the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of (brimming with) grace and truth. This is John's Bethlehem verse, the birth of Jesus as described by the fourth Gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

He is the greatest person in the world! There is none other. As Saint Augustine put it so eloquently long centuries ago:

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; ordering all the ages from the bosom of the Father, hallowing a day of to-day from the womb of the Mother; remaining in the former, coming forth from the latter; author of the heaven and the earth, sprung under the heaven out of the earth; unutterably wise, in His wisdom a babe without utterance; filling the world, lying in a manger.

Conclusion

When I was growing up, I spent many weekends and summers with my Aunt Louise and Uncle J. B. in their home in Bristol, Virginia.

They had joined a book club of some sort, and their bookshelves were filled with interesting volumes that, to the best of my knowledge, were never read. I was too young to read these longer, grown-up books, but I would often pull them off the shelf and thumb through them. One of them was entitled "The Greatest Story Ever Told" by Fulton Oursler, which was a best-seller in its day.

I never read the book, but I knew instinctively that it was about the life of Jesus Christ. To this day, I haven't read that particular book, but I have since read some of the writings of Fulton Oursler, and one of my favorites is a Christmas story he wrote entitled "A String of Blue Beads."

It was about a man named Peter Richards who owned a little store in a small town. One Christmas, the door opened and a little girl walked in. Pete's store was cluttered with all kinds of treasures and hard-to-find items, but this little girl didn't waste much time. "Mister," she said, "would you please let me look at that string of blue beads in the window." Pete went over to the window and extracted the necklace of turquoise stones. "They're just perfect," said the child. "Will you wrap them up pretty for me, please?"

Pete studied the little girl and he asked gently, "How much money to you have?" The little girl untied the knots of a handkerchief she had drawn from her pocket and poured a handful of pennies on the counter. "They're for my big sister," she said. "She takes care of

me. You see, this will be the first Christmas since Mother died. I've been searching for the most wonderful Christmas present for my sister."

Pete now faced a dilemma, and it was a painful one; for that necklace had once been intended as a gift from him to the girl he loved, a girl with yellow hair and blue eyes, a girl whose life had been cut short by a skidding truck on a slippery road. He took another look at the little girl at the counter. Her hair was yellow, too, and her eyes were blue. Without another word, he wrapped up the turquoise necklace, gave it to the child, and deposited her pennies in the register.

The Christmas shopping season passed quickly, and Peter, with nothing to do, stayed late on Christmas Eve to tidy up and rearrange his store. Suddenly the door opened, and a young woman hurried in. Her hair was golden yellow and her eyes were piercing blue. Opening her purse, she drew out the string of beads. "Did this come from your shop?" ask the young woman. Peter raised his eyes to hers and said, "Yes, it did."

"Are the stones real?"

"Yes, they are."

"Can you remember who it was you sold them to?"

"Yes," said Pete. "It was a small girl. Her name was Jean. She bought them for her older sister's Christmas present."

"How much are they worth?" asked the women, a look of alarm on her face.

Pete replied, "The price is always a confidential matter between the seller and the customer."

"But Jean never had more than a few pennies of spending money. How could she pay for them?"

Peter took the package, refolded and rewrapped it and handed it back to the young lady. "She paid the biggest price anyone can every pay," he said. "She gave all she had."

There was silence for a moment, then the sound of the church bell was heard in the distance. The young woman said, "But why did you do it?"

Pete walked around the counter. "It's already Christmas morning," he said. "And it's my misfortune that I have no one to give anything to. Will you let me see you home and wish you a Merry Christmas by your door?" And so, to the sound of many bells and in the midst of happy people, Pete Richards and a girl whose name he had yet to learn, walked into the beginning of that great day that brings hope into the world for us all.

We were lonely, poverty-stricken, and without hope in the world. Then Jesus entered the store, selected us as His jewels, paid all He had, and made it possible for us to have a new day, a new birth, everlasting hope.

Have you believed Him? Have you received Him?

He came unto His own and His own received Him not; but to as many as received Him to them gave He the power to become the children of God, even to those who believe on His name

"ONE BLESSING AFTER ANOTHER" – A VERSE FOR THE NEW YEAR

Robert Morgan

John 1:15-18

Next week I'd like to begin a new series of messages entitled "Breaking Through: Columns in the Clouds." Some time ago as I was tracking down something in the Bible, I realized that there were five different occasions in the life of Christ in which He spoke four wonderful words, namely the phrase, "Be of good cheer!" As I have studied these five occasions, I'm come to the obvious conclusion that Jesus wants us to have a bedrock attitude of cheer on which to build our other attitudes, emotions, and reactions in

life. He wants us to be cheerful, to be of good cheer, and He tells us exactly how that can happen by giving us five different contexts coming from His life and ministry in which those words were uttered. The truths behind these verses are like shafts of light on a dismal day. So we'll devote five Sundays to that subject, starting next week.

Now today, on this New Year's Day of 2006, we are concluding our series of holiday messages from the prologue of John's Gospel. One thing we haven't done during the course of these messages is to read the entire prologue in one sitting. Week by week, I've read only the verses we were coming to with each Sunday's study. So today as we approach the last paragraph, verses 15-18, let's take a deep breath and read this entire prologue, the preface or introduction to the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believed in His name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him (John 1:1-18, NKJV).

As we've devoted these six Sundays to the study of this section of Scripture, I feel as though we have studied the entire Gospel of John, because all the great themes in the fourth Gospel are introduced to us in this prologue. Think of a single fountain, a rich spring up in the mountains that produces nine or ten different rivers going in different directions. That's the prologue of John; it's the fountainhead for nearly a dozen themes that flow through John's Gospel, and indeed through all of his writings. That's what has surprised me most about these eighteen verses—the ten or twelve themes introduced here that are developed further as the Gospel unfolds.

Let me see if I can delineate some of them for you.

First, John introduced Jesus using a particular term that he is going to use again and again in his writings. Jesus is the Word, the Living Word, the Word of God. Verse 1 says: In the beginning was the Word. This becomes a major johannian title for Christ.

Second, Jesus was, is, and always will be utterly divine—God Himself. He is fully and totally God. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This becomes a major johannian theme, the divinity of Christ.

Third, Jesus is the life. Verse 4 says: In Him was life.... This is the Gospel in which Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." John is fond of that word life, and he uses it nearly fifty times in this Gospel and over 75 times in all his writings.

Fourth, Jesus is the light. In Him was life, and this life was the light of men. John's Gospel is the Gospel of light, and it's the Gospel in which Jesus claims to be the light of the world. That imagery, which is introduced here in verse 4, is used over and over in John's writings.

And then we come to the idea of witness, with John the Baptist being the first in a long line of witnesses who identify Christ. Verse 6 says: There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light.

Then there's the perplexity of His being rejected, which is a recurring theme in all John's writings. Verse 10 says: He was in the

world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not recognize Him. He came unto His own, and His own did not receive Him.

But, **seventh**, there's also the great theme of justification by faith, of believing and belief. Those words occur so often in John's Gospel that it's been called the "Gospel of Belief." But to as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become children of God, even to those who believed on His name.

Eighth, the theme of the new birth is introduced here: Who were born, not of natural descent, neither of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. We see this theme expanded further in John's Gospel, especially in chapter 3.

Ninth, we have introduced in verse 14 the idea of Christ being the only begotten Son of God. That is a distinctively johannian phrase: The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We have seen His glory as of the only begotten of the Father...

And **tenth**, the twin themes of grace and truth are introduced in this same verse: We have seen His glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. And this is what I'd like to deal with today, especially the fact that Jesus is filled with grace. In other words, Jesus is brimming with grace, overflowing with grace, a reservoir of grace, an endless treasure house of grace, a never-ending supply of grace for His people.

Now, **grace** is a word that defies description. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great British Bible teacher, said: "There is no more wonderful word than grace. It means unmerited favor or kindness shown to one who is utterly undeserving. It is not merely a free gift, but a free gift to those who deserve the exact opposite, and it is given to us while we are 'without hope and without God in the world.'"[1]

Earlier this year, we had Dr. David Jeremiah, who came and spoke to us on the theme of heaven. Dr. Jeremiah has just completed a book on the subject of grace which will be out later this year, and I made a small contribution to the project. In one of his chapters, Dr. Jeremiah contrasts the dual themes of mercy and grace. Some people think that mercy and grace are more-or-less synonyms, but Dr. Jeremiah draws a distinction. Mercy, he says, is God's withholding the punishment we rightly deserve, and grace is God not only withholding that punishment but offering the most precious gifts instead.

Dr. Jeremiah says:

- Mercy withholds the knife from the heart of Isaac; grace provides a lamb in the thicket.
- Mercy runs to forgive the prodigal; grace throws a party with every extravagance.
- Mercy bandages the wounds of the man beaten by the robbers; grace covers the cost of his full recovery.
- Mercy hears the cry of the thief on the cross; grace promises paradise that very day.
- Mercy pays the penalty for our sin at the cross; grace substitutes the righteousness of Christ for our wickedness.
- Mercy converts Paul on the road to Damascus; grace calls him to be an apostle.
- Mercy saves John Newton from a life of rebellion and sin; grace makes him a pastor and provider of a timeless hymn ("Amazing Grace").
- Mercy closes the door to hell; grace opens the door to heaven.
- Mercy withholds what we have earned; grace provides blessings we have not.

Well, Jesus Christ came as the personification of God's grace, and there is no greater verse in the entire Bible on the subject of grace than verse 16, and that's the verse that I'd like to suggest to you as a verse for the New Year. You can take this verse and write it on the walls of your houses and on the lintels of your door for the New Year, you can inscribe it on the tablets of your heart. You can post it on your refrigerator and shout it from the hilltops. This is a great verse for 2006—John 1:16:

And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.

That's a strange phrase, we have all received, and grace for grace.... In fact, when you read it from the New King James Version, it sounds like something has been left out. What does it mean?

Well, the great theme is this word grace. When the verse says, "And of His fullness," it means "and of His fullness of grace and truth." John 1:14 says that Jesus was full of grace and truth. John 1:17 says that the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Jesus is full of grace, and so we have all received the overflow of that grace, and grace for grace.

The wording of that latter phrase is very interesting. The actual Greek is $\kappa\alpha\rho\iota\nu\ \alpha\nu\tau\iota\ \kappa\alpha\rho\iota\tau\omicron\varsigma$ (ka-riv anti kar-i'-tos)... Grace antigrace.

The word *anti* is a Greek preposition that can have several meanings. The New King James translates it using the English preposition *for*, but most linguists felt that a better rendering would be the word *upon*. In other words, out of the fullness of His own grace, Jesus gives us grace upon grace, grace on top of grace.

The Amplified Version effusively says: “For out of His fullness (abundance) we have all received (all had a share and we were all supplied with) one grace after another and spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing and even favor upon favor and gift [heaped] upon gift.

But the version that I like the best is the New International Version, which many of you have in your laps, and it simply translates this as saying: From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.

I love that verse and that rendering: From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.

William Hendrickson in his commentary on John wrote that the meaning of verse 16 is that believers are constantly receiving grace in the place of grace. One manifestation of the unmerited favor of God in Christ is hardly gone when another arrives; hence, grace upon grace. It is an incessant supply of grace. That’s the nature of our Savior. It’s...

- Like the clouds of Noah’s day that kept pouring out rain.
- Like the granaries in Joseph’s days that held endless reserves of grain.
- Like the rock in the wilderness that kept pouring out the water.
- Like the cruise of oil in Elijah’s time that kept issuing out oil.
- Like the cup in Psalm 23 that kept overflowing.
- Like the river in Ezekiel’s prophecy that flowed at ankle depth, then to the knees, then to the waist, then to swimming depths.

F. F. Bruce says in his commentary on John that “The followers of Christ draw from the ocean of divine fullness... grace upon grace—one wave of grace being constantly replaced by a fresh one. There is no limit to the supply of grace which God has placed at His people’s disposal in Christ.”

This is why Paul said, “His grace is sufficient for us.” And it’s why the hymnist declared, “Praise Christ from whom all blessings flow, praise Him all creatures here below.”

This is a great theme of John’s Gospel; but when you think about it, it isn’t just a theme of John’s Gospel, it taps into a deep undercurrent that flows throughout the entire Bible. As I began to look up parallel verses and cross references, I came to realize as I’ve never realized before the generosity of God’s springhouse and storehouse of grace.

I’m thinking of verses like Ephesians 1:3, which says the same thing in different words: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And then the book of Ephesians goes on to inventory so many of them for us. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Ephesians are all devoted to the theme of God’s infinite riches; and someone once said that Grace is: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.

Ephesians 1:6 says that God has blessed us with His riches to the praise of His glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One He loves.

Ephesians 1:18 is a prayer that God would open our eyes to see how very rich we are in the spiritual blessings flowing to us at Christ’s expense; and Ephesians 2:7 talks about the coming ages when Christ will show us the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

In fact, you could make a case that the first three chapters of Ephesians are simply a sermon based on the text of John 1:16

Or you could turn to the Old Testament and see the same thing in places like Psalm 103, which begins: 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, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

Even the weeping prophet Jeremiah, in the middle of a funeral dirge, said: This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I hope in Him!”

The Twenty-Third Psalm makes the same point when it says: My cup runs over... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Grace is God's mercies new morning by morning, His great faithfulness, His overflowing cup, His goodness and mercy—given to us each day. His grace gives us one blessing after another.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

James reminds us: Every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of Lights, from whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Peter said that our Lord's divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises....

All of this is a commentary of and an expansion of John 1:16: From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. They roll into our lives like the incessant waves of the ocean, one cresting and breaking before the other has receded.

The Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest wrote,

“There is enough grace in God's heart of love to save and keep saved for time and eternity every sinner that ever has or ever will live, and then enough left over to save a million more universes full of sinners, were there such, and then some more. There is enough grace available to give every saint constant victory over sin, and then some more. There is enough grace to meet and cope with all the sorrows, heartaches, difficulties, temptations, testings, and trials of human existence, and more added to that. God's salvation is an oversize salvation. It is shock proof, stain proof, unbreakable, all-sufficient. It is equal to every emergency, for it flows from the heart of an infinite God freely bestowed and righteously given through the all-sufficient sacrifice of our Lord on the cross. Salvation is all of grace. Trust God's grace. It is superabounding grace.”[2]

What does this mean? It means that it's going to be a blessed New Year, and we should anticipate it—whatever it contains—with thanksgiving, praise, optimism, and simple, childlike faith.

We know we're living in a most challenging time. We can hardly imagine what our great-grandparents thought as they entered a new year, one hundred years ago. Here's what they were facing:

- The average life expectancy in the United States was 47 years.
- Only 14 percent of the homes in the U.S. had a bathtub.
- Only 8 percent of the homes had a telephone.
- A three-minute call from Denver to New York cost eleven dollars.
- There were only 8,000 cars and just 144 miles of paved roads in the U.S.
- The maximum speed limit in most cities was 10 mph.
- The average wage in the U.S. was 22 cents per hour.
- Sugar cost four cents a pound.
- Eggs were fourteen cents a dozen.
- Coffee was fifteen cents a pound.
- More than 95 percent of all births in the U.S. took place at home.
- Most women washed their hair only once a month, and they used borax or egg yolks for shampoo.
- The American flag had 45 stars.
- The population of Las Vegas was only 30.
- Only 6 percent of all Americans had graduated from high school.
- Marijuana, heroin, and morphine were all available over the counter at the local drugstore.
- There were about 230 reported murders in the entire U.S.

Well, things have changed for both good and bad in the last 100 years, and we don't have any idea what the new year will bring, let alone the next 100 years. But there's one thing you can count on in this coming year if you're a child of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and nothing can take this away from you, whatever the circumstances—you can count on one blessing after another. Blessings on top of blessings on top of blessings on top of blessings as we go from blessing to blessing and from glory to glory.

Frances Ridley Havergal, who wrote the great New Year's hymn, "Another Year is Dawning," wrote several other hymns for the New Year, and one of them says:

The fullness of His blessing encompasses our way;
The fullness of His promise crowns every brightening day;
The fullness of His glory is beaming from above,
While more and more we realize the fullness of His love.

If you don't know Christ as your own Savior, what better time to receive Him than on this first day of a brand new year. For as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become sons of God, even to those who believe on His Name... and the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have seen His glory, as that of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; and from the fullness of His grace we have all received grace for grace, we have all received one blessing after another

MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB

Robert Morgan

John 1:29

"The next day he sees Jesus coming to Him and says, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)

All of us are familiar with the nursery rhyme, "Mary Had A Little Lamb." There have been those who have claimed to be the author but to the best of my knowledge it was written by a lady named Sara Josepha Hale. The "Mary" of the poem is thought to have been a little girl named Mary Elizabeth Sawyer. Her little lamb actually followed her to the Old Redstone Schoolhouse near Sterling, Massachusetts. The teacher who made the lamb leave the building was Polly Kimball. It's a wonderful piece of poetry. I doubt you will find anyone who can't quote at least some of it.

When John the Baptist said the above words in the text, I have no doubt he was very excited and enthusiastic. He may have said it like this: "Look! Here comes Jesus. He's the One I've been trying to tell you about. He's the One that can take your sins away!" In the spirit of the holiday season, let's look at another Mary who brought to us the Lamb of God. In the spirit of the holiday season, I want you to indulge me as I rewrite the poem.

Mary had a little Lamb

Mary. She is the mother of our Lord. She was blessed among women, not above them. She was only a teenage girl when an angel of the Lord appeared to her to tell her she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus. I can't even begin to imagine how she must have felt. In her culture it was bad enough to have a baby without being married, but to have a baby without an earthly father had to make matters worse. How did her own parents feel? Did they feel they had somehow failed in the moral training of their daughter? We don't know the answers to these questions but we do know that Mary exhibited an incredible amount of faith and courage.

Lamb. The Lamb was Jesus. It has been said that the most logical place for a lamb to be born was in a stable. You must understand that this Lamb is a reference to the sacrificial Lamb of the Old Testament. This was no accident. It was divine prophecy. The Old Testament pictures a variety of different animals that were used as sacrifices. There were turtledoves, bulls, goats, and lambs. Whatever the animals there were certain characteristics that had to be maintained. The sacrificial animal had to be the firstborn, without physical blemishes, as perfect as possible. It could not be blemished or marred. As the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus met everyone of these criteria. He was the firstborn; He was without sin; there were no imperfections to be found in Him. No wonder John the Baptist got excited when he saw Jesus!

His life was white as snow

Obviously, I mean His character and not the color of His skin. No man ever lived as He lived. He was perfect in His birth; perfect in His life; perfect in His conduct on earth. In theological terms this is known as being impeccable. That means He was without sin. He was tempted to sin just like we are, and yet He did not. Some of His critics even had to admit that no one had lived like Him. When He was ultimately crucified, the charges brought against Him were made up. Officials had to pay people to say something against the Lord. He was without fault; He was sinless.

And everywhere that mankind went, the Lamb was sure to go.

Wherever you find humanity, you will find God. There is no place you can go to get away from the presence of God. He is literally everywhere. That can be either a source of comfort or conviction. It's a comfort to know that we're never alone. The Psalmist David said it like this: "Where can I go from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). The answer is actually very simple. Nowhere. On the other hand it can be rather convicting to say God is everywhere. That means you can't hide from God. He knows all about you. But don't look at it like that. Look at in the light that God has come to be with you. In fact, one of the very names He was given is Emmanuel, which means God with us (Matthew 1:23). Jesus came to be where we are. God didn't send an angel. He sent His Son. He didn't send His Son into some empty mass of nothingness. He sent Him to be with mankind.

He followed us to earth one day

When Jesus came to earth to be born in a manger, that was not the beginning of His existence. He has always been. Coming to earth as a baby in a manger was when He became human. That's called the incarnation. That means God became flesh. Deity became human! God became man. The Apostle John says it like this: "...he dwelt among us..." (John 1:14). If you like the outdoors you'll like the image John had in mind. To dwell among us means He pitched His tent. He came to camp out with us. He became part of us. He identified Himself with us. He came to be like us so we could come to be like Him. He put on a robe of flesh so we could put on a robe of righteousness. He put on sin so we could take ours off. He was born of a woman so we could be born of God. He humbled Himself so we could be lifted up. He became a servant so we could be made heirs. He suffered rejection so we could be His friends. He denied Himself so we could freely receive all things. He gave Himself so He could bless us in every way. No wonder Paul put it this way: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

Which was a gift of grace

Gift and Grace. What a wonderful combination. A gift is something you receive from someone with no strings attached. To truly be a gift it has to be absolutely free. The gift we receive in Christ is truly free. You can't be good enough, or do enough good things to receive it. It's totally a gift. You can't earn it; you can't buy it. It's a gift. Again, notice how Paul describes it: "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: Not of works lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) No doubt you remember one of the most famous verses in all the Bible that speaks to the same thing: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

Grace has been defined as the unmerited favor of God. It's being treated in a manner in which you don't deserve to be treated. It's promising you a place in heaven when in reality you deserve to go to hell; it's giving you promises instead of punishment. Bible teacher, Warren Wiersbe, contrasts grace with mercy this way: "Grace is receiving what I do not deserve; mercy is not receiving what I do deserve." Another way to understand the grace of God is with an acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Everything I need has been provided by faith in what Christ has already done.

He makes the Christian sing and pray,
The Lamb who took our place

Think about it! Because of Christ you can be free from your past. You can be free from the fears of the present and the uncertainty of the future. You can be free from sins. All of them. Past, present, and future. Forgiveness from your sins is not because of something good you have done. It's because the Lamb of the manger took your place on the cross. Jesus literally died in your place. He paid the price that was demanded. That price was His death, and His death alone. Knowing forgiveness from your sins puts a song in your heart and sometimes even on your lips. That's what the gospel story is all about. Jesus came to earth to die in our place. His death on the cross was not an accident, or the result of some so called plot. It was actually a fulfillment of the plan of God. His death was both finished and final. That's what the scriptures mean when they say that Christ died once for all (Hebrews 9:10). When Jesus was on the cross and said "...it is finished..." it was a cry of victory, not of defeat. What He came to earth for had been accomplished. He died once for all men, and once for all time. He will never die again! It's no wonder that Christian people should be happy. Our sins are gone. That puts a bounce in your step and a song in your heart.

Recently I read an article in Newsweek Magazine about the power of faith and prayer. Medical doctors and scientists are beginning to recognize there just may be something to it. People who pray and have faith seem to be healthier; seem to be able to cope with circumstances; seem to get over surgery faster, and seem to have better attitudes about life in general. It's hard for unbelievers to

get it, but the truth is when the Lord is in your life, you can face adversity. You can do what you don't think you can.

And yet the world has turned Him out

The Apostle John puts it like this: "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:12). When John wrote that what he was saying is actually this: Jesus came to his own things, but his own people did not receive him. We know from the events that occurred when Jesus was on earth that things in nature always responded to Him. He spoke to water and it became wine; He spoke to stormy waters and wind and they became calm; He spoke to a fish and it appeared with a coin in its mouth; He spoke to diseases and they were healed; He spoke to a fig tree and it withered up on the spot. He prayed over some bread and fish and had enough to feed thousands and still had bread and fish left over. It was humans who refused Him. That shouldn't surprise you when you realize that creation itself came into existence merely by Him just speaking. It was, and continues to be, humans who defied Him. People still turn Him away. People still refuse Him. Are you one of them? Have you turned Him away?

You may know the story about the very rich, young man who turned away from the Lord. You can read it in Luke 18:18-24. He got into a conversation with the Lord about eternal life. He wanted to know what he had to do. He even called the Lord, "...Good Master...". The Lord asked the young man about his personal character and he was evidently above reproach. He knew the commandments. More than likely in his way he had kept them. But when the Lord told him to get rid of his money, the young man balked. He couldn't do that. He loved his money more than he loved himself and because of that we are told that he "...was very sorrowful for he was very rich." That young man was not the first, nor the last, person to go away from the Lord. It's not only riches that make people go away either. It can be a number of things but whatever it is that causes you to go away from the Lord, you will go away sorrowful. You will go away full of sorrow. You will regret it in this life and the life to come.

But still He lingers near,
And waits so patiently about

The scriptures teach He wants us to come to Him. It is His desire to forgive mankind. Our Lord has more patience with us than we have with each other. However, the scriptures teach that it is possible for an individual to wait until it's too late. You have examples of that throughout the Old Testament in such stories as the flood, the travels of the Children of Israel and a host of others. The Lord is patient and wants as many as will to come to Him. Don't be one of those who waits too long.

By faith He does appear

Salvation is a matter of faith. You cannot be saved by works or by being morally good. Salvation is believing. It's not believing in a philosophy but a Person. It's believing in the God of the universe. It's believing in what has already been done. It's not so much believing in something as it is believing in Someone. It's not just believing in what, but believing in whom.

Two poems. One is just poetry. The other is a promise. The choice is yours. It's okay to read, and even enjoy, the lines of poetry, but it's far better to respond to a personal promise. The Lamb of God that is promised is Jesus Christ. Have you accepted Him? If not, will you accept Him today?

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me,
But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room
For Thy holy nativity.

Thou camest, O Lord, with the living word
That should set Thy people free,
But with mocking scorn and crown of thorn
They bore Thee to Calvary.

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus:
There is room in my heart for Thee.
-Emily E.S. Elliott, 1864

A Piece of Poetry

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow.
And everywhere that Mary went,

The lamb was sure to go.

He followed her to school one day;
Which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play,
To see a lamb in school.

And so the teacher turned him out;
But still he lingered near,
And waited patiently about,
Till Mary did appear.
-Sara Josepha Hale

A Personal Promise

Mary had a little Lamb,
His life was white as snow.
And everywhere that mankind went,
The Lamb was sure to go.

He followed us to earth one day,
Which was a gift of grace.
He makes the Christian sing and pray,
The Lamb who took our place.

And yet the world has turned Him out,
But still He lingers near,
And waits so patiently about,
By faith He does appear.
-Ken Riggs

JOHN 3:16

Robert Morgan

Here at , we have begun a series of studies called ten2, centered around 100 Bible verses that everyone on earth should know by heart. The first four are bedrock verses in the Bible. You might think of them as anchors on the four corners of a ship that stabilize it and keep it sound and secure. We began with Genesis 1:1: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Then last week we moved to John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And then John 1:14: The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Now today we're going to look at verse number 4, which is the best-known and most famous verses in the Bible—

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This verse has been called:

- The Bible in miniature, or...
- The Gospel in a nutshell

It's actually not an easy verse to preach about because it's so simple it doesn't need a lot of explanation. One of the great expositors of yesteryear, Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, said: "This is a text I never attempted to preach on, though I have gone around it and around it. It is too big. When I have read it, and there is nothing else to say."

Nevertheless, we do preach about it, and I read of one man who had collected over 600 sermon outlines based on John 3:16.

Let me give you a couple of good outlines on this verse. Someone once preached a sermon on this verse entitled "Love in Four

Dimensions.” His points were:

1. The Breadth: “God so loved the world”
2. The Length: “that He gave His only begotten Son”
3. The Depth: “that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish”
4. The Height: “But shall have everlasting Life.”

Someone else preached a sermon entitled “The Gospel in Miniature.” His outline was:

1. “God”... ..The greatest Lover
2. “So loved”... ..The greatest degree
3. “The world”... ..The greatest number
4. “That He gave”... ..The greatest act
5. “His only begotten Son...” ...The greatest Gift
6. “That whosoever”... ..The greatest invitation
7. “Believeth”... ..The greatest simplicity
8. “In Him”... ..The greatest Person
9. “Should not perish”... ..The greatest deliverance
10. “But”... ..The greatest difference
11. “Have”... ..The greatest certainty
12. “Everlasting Life”... ..The greatest possession

One British preacher who spoke from John 3:16 had only two points:

1. When God Loves, He Loves the World
2. When God Gives, He Gives His Son

And then there’s a well-known and much used outline of this verse that uses the word GOSPEL as an acrostic, for the word Gospel is actually encoded in John 3:16 in acrostic form.

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and Only Son that whoever believes in Him should not Perish but haveEverlasting Life.

Well, I don’t have a particularly clever outline to this verse, but if we simply divide up the thoughts that are strung together here we have nine powerful, life-changing concepts. If we had time, I’d like to devote one message to each of these concepts, and make this a nine-part series of sermons. But since we can’t, let’s see what we can do with the time we have. Let me show you these concepts by highlighting the key words.

For (1) God so (2) loved the (3) world that He (4) gave His (5) one and only Son, that (6) whoever (7) believes in Him shall not (8) perish but have (9) eternal life.

1. For God

This verse begins with the idea of God. That’s where the Bible begins as we saw with Genesis 1:1: “In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” That’s where the Gospel begins as we saw in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And that’s where John 3:16 begins. And for some people today, that’s where John 3:16 ends, because they claim to be atheists. There’s a new militant form of atheism asserting itself today. But as a philosophy atheism can never be logically supported.

Some time ago, Charles Colson, the Christian thinker and humanitarian, was attending a Governor’s Prayer Breakfast in a particular state. He found himself seated beside a very distinguished looking gentleman who greeted him with a blunt warning. The man told Colson in no uncertain terms that he was an atheist.

Colson said that he was glad to be seated beside him because, Colson said, “I’ve never really met an atheist.”

The man’s eyebrows went up, so Colson explained, “An atheist believes the existence of God can be disproved. So please, tell me how you’ve done that.”

The man looked momentarily uncomfortable. “Well,” he said, “perhaps I should say I’m an agnostic.”

Colson asked “When did you give up studying about God?”

The man seemed frustrated and said that he had never really tried very much to study about God, to which Colson replied, "But an agnostic is one who says he doesn't think God can be known, and you can only be an agnostic if you've tried to know Him and exhausted the search."

And then he added, "So I would say that while you appear to be a very well-educated person, you've made an unsupportable statement." The man seemed offended and was quiet for the rest of the evening. But some weeks later, Colson received a copy of the editorial page of the state's largest newspaper. It turned out that his dinner companion was the publisher. His lead editorial was an explanation of how Colson's visit had affected his view of life and changed his ideas about possibility of the reality of God. (Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36-37.)

Well, everything begins with God. The Bible... the universe... the Gospel... and this verse—John 3:16. But the second core concept tells us something about God—that He is a God of love, that He loves us.

2. So Loved

Love is a wonderful and essential attitude in life, the greatest attitude of all according to the Bible. Jesus said that love fulfills the greatest two commandments of God—that we love Him and that we love others. The apostle Paul said that there are three great things in the world—faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. And we know that's true when we experience it. I have ten grandchildren, and one of them is in the crawling stage. Sometimes I'll lie down on the carpet and she'll locomote over to me on all fours. She's too little to know very much about hugging, but she will lean her head into me and nestle against me and lean into me. If I could package and bottle the kind of love that we're feeling at that moment, I'd be a billionaire. Everyone wants to love and be loved.

Well, the consistent teaching of someone already has a patent on life. It's available only from one manufacturing company. The sole source and supplier is God Himself. The book of 1 John says that God is love, and that we love Him because He first loved us.

3. The World

That brings us to the third key concept—what is the object of God's love? The answer is the world. Does that mean the universe? Does that mean the planet? Does that mean the plants and animals? Does that mean human beings? Yes! All the above! But especially men and women and boys and girls. Especially you and me. And it makes such a difference when we realize that.

Trula Cronk is a dear friend of mine and of our church. For many years she and her husband, Dan, were missionaries to India. One of her lasting impressions of India is that most of the people don't think of God as a person who can love them. She recalled a little Hindu girl who visited her house one evening and who stayed just a little too long. Suddenly she realized that darkness had fallen and she was afraid to walk home in the dark. Trula explained that darkness is nothing except that the light was gone, and that she should not be afraid. "Dolan," she said, "God loves you and He will take care of you as you walk to your house."

But the little girl, looking up, replied very solemnly, "No, memsahib, God does not love little girls." Trula was never able to forget that simple statement and it made her want to tell all little girls everywhere that God does indeed love them. "As a small girl," Trula wrote, "I could have made the same assertion, but someone came along and said to me, 'Jesus loves you.' I believed it and that has made all the difference." (From unpublished portions of Trula Cronk's memoirs in my personal possession.)

And I can tell you today on the authority of God's Word that He does love you with all His heart and with all His being. But it isn't just an emotional love, it is an active love; and that brings us to the next core concept.

4. That He Gave

For God so loved the world that He gave. One of my favorite theology books is a comprehensive introduction of biblical doctrine written by Professor Wayne Grudem. It's simply called *Systematic Theology*. I looked up the entry on the subject of the love of God in this book, and Dr. Grudem gave a definition of the love of God. He said, "God's love means that God eternally gives Himself to others.... This attribute of God shows that it is part of His nature to give of Himself in order to bring about blessing or good for others." (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (published jointly by Inter-Varsity Press in Great Britain and by Zondervan Publishing House in Grand Rapids, 1994), 198.)

It is in the very DNA of God—in His very nature—to give of Himself to make us happy, to meet our needs, and to care for us at every point in our lives. The Bible constantly refers to the gifts He gives out of His love for us. John 1:16 says that out of the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. Psalm 23:6 says that goodness and mercy follow us all the

days of our lives. Ephesians 1:3 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." Psalm 103 says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." The apostle Peter said, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3).

But nothing that we have ever received or will ever acquire can compare to history's ultimate gift. And I want you to understand that is implied by that word "give." It doesn't simply mean that God handed us a little envelope of money like we do on someone's birthday or gave us a little box of candy like we do on Christmas. This is talking about the incarnation and the atonement—about the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ.

Let me show you something interesting. In John chapter 3, we really do not know for sure whether Jesus spoke the words of John 3:16, or whether it was John's commentary. This was originally written in the Greek and the Greek did not have quotation marks. And in John 3, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, and we don't know whether all these verses that include verse 16 and continue down to verse 21 are a direct quotation from Jesus, or whether the quotation ends with verse 15 and the remainder of the paragraph is John's own explanation and commentary. My own view is that these are all the words of Jesus and that Jesus Himself spoke verse 16.

But I do think that John supplied a very wonderful commentary on this verse. Later on, in the book of 1 John, the apostle John explained our Lord's words (as I believe them to be) and made his own analysis of them. It's found in 1 John 4, verses 9 and 10: This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So when Jesus used that word "gave" it was deceptively simple. Never did four little letters contain so much suffering or so many eternal ramifications.

5. His One and Only Son

That brings us to the very heart of John 3:16 and to the fifth great dimension of this verse—the gift itself—God's One and Only Son.

Many of us who memorized John 3:16 in the older translations when we were children struggled with the phrase His only begotten Son. It often came out "only forgotten," to the amusement of our parents. But now we notice that our modern translations have replaced His only begotten Son with phrases like His one-and-only Son.

Why is that?

The Greek adjective is Μονογενής -- **monogenes** (mon'-o-ga-nase'). The prefix "mono" means "one" or "only." The word "genas" is the word that means race, stock, family, class, kind, or of the same nature. So monogenas really means the only one of its kind.

When the New Testament began to be translated into Latin, the first versions rendered that word with the Latin word unicus, meaning "unique". It was understood that the word monogenas was the Greek equivalent of the Latin word unicus and, by extension, of the English word unique.

But at the beginning of the fifth century, the great scholar, Jerome, made a critical change. Perhaps he was influenced by theological lectures he heard or from a concern to protect the orthodox doctrine of the Person of Christ. He was clearly influenced by the decision of the church councils to define the orthodoxy of Christ by using the term begotten to refer to the fact that God the Son possessed the same essential nature as God the Father. Jerome may have also had the mistaken notation that the Greek word genas was derived from the term gennao, meaning begotten, which it wasn't.

At any rate, when Jerome created his famous Latin translation known as the Vulgate he did not use the term that had been used by earlier Latin translators, unicus. He used the word unigenitus, which meant "only begotten." So instead of "God's one and only Son" the verse now said "God's only begotten Son." Well, there's a sense in which Jesus is the only begotten Son of God as we see in the incarnation. But in this verse it is probably not the most accurate way of putting it. But at any rate, Jerome's translation became the standard Bible for a thousand years, and it led to many of the early English versions (including the King James Version) using the term "only begotten."

Today there is widespread agreement among modern scholars that the word monogenes means unique, precious, one of a kind, one and only.

Jesus is absolutely and utterly unique in human history and in the chronicles time. He existed before the world began, yet was born

under Judean skies in the days of Herod the Great. He is in very nature God, yet He slipped into humanity like a hand into a glove. He is the Son of the Highest, yet the Son of Jewish virgin. He is King of the angels, yet He was crucified with thieves. He was vilified by the world but deified by the Father. He is morally perfect, yet He became sin for us. He was killed by torture, yet He rose in power. He is a Man of Sorrows, yet He manufactures joy for the entire universe. He came unto His own, but His own received Him not, but to all who received Him He gave them power to become children of God. Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.

6. That Whoever

Now the next term is "whoever." And that is such a great word. It means anyone. It means everyone. It means that no one is excluded. It means that this is universal, global, and without borders or boundaries. Like the old song says, "Whosoever surely meaneth me."

7. Believes in Him

The next term lays out the condition for receiving this gift. It is by faith alone. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes..." This is the only biblical requirement or condition for salvation—simple believing faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins, faith that causes us to repent of our sins and acknowledge Him as Lord.

I had a couple of very interesting meetings recently with a couple, and when I inquired about their salvation, the wife and mother said this: "I don't know for certain if I am going to heaven, but I try every day to live a life that will please God so that I can go to heaven. I try to live a good life." And I tried to explain to her that her approach was doomed to failure. We can never work our way into heaven. We're certainly to do good works and to live a good life, but we're to do it because we are saved—not in order to be saved. When I told her that, her face brightened up and she said, "I had never understood it that way before."

The Bible says, "For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourself, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:9-10). Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

8. Shall Not Perish

Now, the next phrase is a very interesting one and it's the only negative word in the entire verse—shall not perish. To perish means to be eternally separated from the presence of God. Another biblical word for this is hell. Hell is a place of eternal conscious banishment for those who are separated from God by sin. It is described many times in the Bible, and the Bible uses vivid language as a warning.

- Jesus called it a place of outer darkness (Matthew 25:30)
- He said it was a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30)
- He described it as a place of eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41)
- He described it as a place of eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46)
- It's called the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43)
- It's called a place of torment (Luke 16:28)
- It's called a lake of fire and sulphur (Revelation 20:10)

But, of course, the point of John 3:16 is to tell us how to avoid all this: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

9. But Have Eternal Life

And that brings us to the final component of this verse. Jesus died and rose again to bear our sins on Himself so that by faith we might become heirs of eternal life.

Recently I received a wonderful letter from Mrs. Lyn Cook, whose family owns and operates a well-known company known as Cook's Pest Control. She had read some of my books, and she sent me one of her own—it was a beautiful hardbound copy of the story of Cook's Pest Control and the story of its founder, John Robert Cook, who was her father-in-law. My wife and I read this book with delight and great interest. John Robert Cook was a young man from Alabama who served in the Navy during World War II. He shipped out to the Pacific theater, but while en route received the news that Japan had surrendered and the war was over. Eventually he returned home, married his sweetheart, and enrolled for studies at Georgia Tech.

Well John and Jo Cook had a couple of close friends, another couple named Johnny and Marie Lynch, who invited them to attend church with them and to have dinner afterwards. They began going on a regular basis, and they discovered they enjoyed the habit.

One Sunday when the pastor rose to speak, he announced that his message was entitled, "Do You Really Belong?" and his text was John 3:16. Even though he had not been a religious man, John actually knew this verse; he had memorized it as a child. But it had never been anything more to him than a collection of so many words. But on this Sunday the sermon seemed directed toward him, and especially the title. It was as if the Lord was saying, "John Cook, do you really belong in God's Kingdom?" And he suddenly realized that his only answer was "No."

Morally he had lived a good life, but he also knew that he was a sinner. That day he realized that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to pay the penalty for his sins, and when the invitation was given he looked over to his wife Jo and said, "I'm going down." She said, "I'm going with you."

He later testified that when he walked out of church that day it was as if a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. Peace and satisfaction came into his heart, and he understood that he had eternal life and heaven not because he was a "good person," but because of Jesus Christ alone.

Later, when Cook's Pest Control was formed and John served as president of the company, he referred to himself as "Employee Number Two," which became the title of the book I read about him. He explained that Jesus Christ always had first place in everything related to his life. (Employee Number Two: The Story of John Cook and Cook's Pest Control (Decatur, Alabama, 2008), adapted from the contents of chapter 4.)

I wonder if there's someone like that here today. You've tried to live a good life; you want to go to heaven. But you realize that it's not by works of righteousness that we do; it is by simple faith in Jesus Christ. Would you be willing to say what John Cook said? "I'm going down.... I'm going to confess Jesus Christ as my Lord.... I want to belong.... I am claiming this verse today as my own... I am going to be the whoever in John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Who Can You Win to Christ This Year?

Robert Morgan

John 4:1-4

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples. When the Lord learned of this, He left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now He had to go through Samaria. (John 4:1-4)

Through the years, my greatest privilege has been the joy of winning handfuls of people to Jesus Christ. I frequently wish that I had more to show for it, and I've often prayed, asking God to give me a greater giftedness in the area evangelism. I feel that my primary gifts, to the extent that I have any gifts at all, are in the areas of being a Bible teacher. But I envy people who have a very distinct gift of evangelism.

Some people have the gift and ability to win hundreds and thousands of people to Christ, but even if we aren't gifted evangelists, we can do the work of an evangelist, as Paul tells Timothy to do. I was greatly encouraged recently by something that I read in an old, yellowed paperback entitled *The Art of Personal Soulwinning* by Lorne Sanny of the Navigators. Sanny pointed out that there were two brothers in the New Testament, both of whom did evangelistic work. There was Peter, and he fished with a net as it were. We see him on the Day of Pentecost preaching to great crowds, and three thousand people came to Christ during that one event. Andrew, however, fished, not with a net, but using the pole and line method. In other words, he won people one-by-one. But one of the first people whom he led to Christ with his pole and line was his own brother Peter who led thousands to Christ. In catching the one, he caught all the others. "We, like Andrew, might lead someone to the Lord, and that one, in turn, might lead thousands," concluded Lorne Sanny.[1]

Recently I've been studying the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in John's Gospel, chapter four. It's one of the best examples of personal evangelism in the Bible or in all of Christian history. It is a laboratory for learning the way to do it. I've found several principles in this story that have been encouraging to me, and today I'd like to share them with you so that all of us might make the 2005 a year of evangelism for .

Rule Number One: We May Have To Go Out Of Our Way To Evangelize

In this account, Jesus and His disciples had left Jerusalem to return to Galilee, but instead of taking the normal route through the

Jordan Valley, Jesus selected a more difficult route that wound its way through the rugged mountains of Samaria and threaded its way through various Palestinian settlements. The Jews generally avoided this itinerary because, though it was a little shorter as the crow flies, the terrain was much more difficult and took them in and out of unfriendly towns.

Since 1973, I've visited the Holy Land six or seven times. The basic itinerary that we follow is roughly the same on each trip. We fly into Tel Aviv, spend the first several days in the Galilee, and then drive down the Jordan Valley to Judea, Jericho, and Jerusalem, usually headquartering in Jerusalem for the final segments of the trip. In every one of those pilgrimages except for one, we have driven down the Jordan Valley, along side the Jordanian border, because that is the simplest, easiest, fastest way to travel North and South in Israel. It is today, and it was in biblical times as well. It avoids the rough mountainous middle section of Israel.

But on our last trip, since Van Stewart and I were in charge of the itinerary, we told the guide that we wanted to go through ancient Samaria. They complained a little and said that it wasn't their normal route and so forth. We told them we didn't care; we wanted to go through Samaria. And so we did. I was amazed at the rugged beauty of the terrain and we were all wide-eyed at the towns and villages we passed through. On the outskirts of the city of Nablus is a Russian Orthodox church which has been built over the site—authentic as far as we can tell—of Jacob's well. We stopped, and the caretaker of the church took us down into the crypt to Jacob's well and lowered the bucket into its depths and let us drink some of the water.

Now today, in 2005, it is more difficult and dangerous to visit Nablus. It is a Palestinian city under Israeli occupation, and it is very tense. Just this week, five Palestinian men were shot by Israeli soldiers, and only a few weeks ago a Hamas leader was assassinated there when an Israeli rocket hit his taxi.

But even in our Lord's day, this was a steep, rugged, and difficult area. He had to go out of His way to reach this city and to evangelize this woman.

It tells me that we must deliberately, intentionally, consciously go out of our way to win people to Christ, and that may take us out of our comfort zone.

When I surrendered my life to the Lord in September, 1974, I instantly had an urge to share my faith in Christ with someone, but with whom? I was on a Bible College campus and everyone there was presumably a Christian. Well, on the same floor of my dormitory was a fellow named Steve Cheatwood. He was a zealous evangelist; in fact, he probably had more zeal than knowledge. He began taking me every Friday night to Columbia's big new shopping mall, Dutch Square. The last time I was in Columbia, I drove by this place. It's abandoned and boarded up now; but in the mid-1970s, it was modern, new, and packed with people. We'd split up and walk around, looking for people who were just sitting around, waiting on others. We'd find a seat beside them, strike up a conversation, and try steering the conversation toward the Gospel message. This was clearly outside my comfort zone, but I remember two people who responded. One was a young man whom we later followed-up in his home. He was Hispanic, if I remember correctly. And when we visited him, the house was full of friends and relatives. We ended up having an evangelistic service in that home, Steve shared the Gospel, and to the best of my knowledge every single person prayed to receive Jesus Christ as Savior.

The other incident I recall involved a boy of perhaps twelve years of age. I led him to Christ at the shopping mall, and the next day, Saturday, Steve and I drove to his home to give him some follow-up material. But when I walked up the steps to the porch and knocked on the door, the boy's father met me. He was furious that I was trying to evangelize his son, and he stuck me and shoved me off the porch. I fell backward; I can't remember if I fell into the bushes or just stumbled backwards down the steps and fell in the grass. But that is the first and only time I've ever been assaulted for the sake of Christ. I thought, "Wow! This is neat! This is just like it was with the apostles!" Well, in that I was a little over ebullient; but I have through the years wondered about that boy. I hope the Holy Spirit took him in hand and did the follow-up Himself.

But those early experiences were new to me and exciting and even nerve-wrecking. The funny thing is, I'm still nervous and excited whenever I have an opportunity to share Christ with someone. I feel that same way every week when I go out on FAITH visits. This is Christianity in the trenches, and we often have to go out of our way and out of our sphere of comfort to share the Lord Jesus with others.

Rule Number Two: We're to Evangelize Even When Tired

The second rule of personal evangelism is: We're to evangelize even when tired

Let's continue reading the story:

But Jesus had to go through Samaria. So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

I want to read something to you that helped me understand this better. I found the record of a man who was traveling through this very area in the year 1908. That's nearly one hundred years ago, and the land of the Bible was just about the same a hundred years ago as it was two thousand years ago. His account gives us a vivid picture of the setting here in John 4. Here is what this gentleman wrote:

We turn aside from the open but roundabout way of the will-tilled Wadi Farah (Jordan Valley) and take a shorter, steeper path toward Shechem, through a deep, narrow mountain gorge. The day is hot and hazy, for the Sherkiyeh is blowing from the desert across the Jordan Valley... At times the walls of rock come so close together that we have to wind through a passage not more than ten feet wide. The air is parched as in an oven. Our horses scramble wearily up the stony gallery and the rough stairways. One of our company faints under the fervent heat, and falls from his horse. But fortunately no bones are broken; a half-hour's rest in the shadow of a great rock revives him and we ride on.

The wonderful flowers are blooming wherever they can find a foothold among the stones. Now and then we cross the mouth of some little lonely side-valley.... Under the huge, dark sides of Eagle's Crag—bare and rugged...—we pass into the fruitful plain... where the silken grain fields rustle far and wide, and the rich olive-orchards on the hill-slopes offer us a shelter for our midday meal and siesta. Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim now rise before us in their naked bulk; and as we mount toward the valley which lies between them, we stay for awhile and rest at Jacob's Well.

This could have been one of the disciples describing the journey of John 4, except for the horses. Our Lord's party was presumably traveling by foot through these steep, oven-like valleys where the parching winds torment the skin and lungs, and where the steep passageways through narrow gorges strain the muscles. Forget the lovely Sunday School pictures of a well-rested Jesus sitting serenely beside the well as the woman approaches with her water jar. Our Lord was probably dehydrated, caked with dust and sweat, and so exhausted He couldn't go on. The disciples left Him there while they went to find Him some nourishment.

Why didn't they draw out some water for Him to drink? They had nothing to draw with and the well was deep (verse 11). He'd have to wait on someone to come to draw the water, but at least they could go off in search of food.

But it is just then, in His exhaustion and weariness, the opportunity comes He has been waiting for. He evangelizes, and the act of sharing Himself with the woman not only converted her, but it revitalized Him. When the disciples returned, He was like a new man—refreshed, energetic, and renewed.

Let me share with you a sermon within a sermon. As I studied this passage, I consulted the writings of the great Scottish expositor, Alexander Maclaren. He once preached a profound three-point sermon on this story. His three points were: The Wearied Christ, the Devoted Christ, and the Reinvigorated Christ. Let me read you a little of his sermon:

Thus, utterly worn out, Jesus Christ sits on the well, whilst the western sun lengthens out the shadows on the plain. The disciples come back, and what a change they find. Hunger gone, exhaustion ended, fresh vigor in their wearied Master. What had made the difference? The woman's repentance and joy. And He unveils the secret of His reinvigoration when He says, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of"—the hidden manna. "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish the work."^[2]

Maclaren goes on to say that when we find ourselves doing the will of God in a way that makes a difference in the world, it fills us with enthusiasm, and enthusiasm lifts us above our physical necessities and our lower desires.

I think I have been tired every time that I've ever gone on a FAITH visit. This semester I was in charge of a Monday night team, and some nights I just could not do it. After the demands of Sunday and the rigors of a normal workday on Monday, I was just too washed out to function on Monday nights. Other nights, I may be tired, but I can function. Well, our Lord is telling us here by His own example that fatigue is no excuse for failure to evangelize if the opportunity presents itself.

Rule Three: Be Aware of the People Around You

It struck me as I read this passage that the twelve disciples, had they been traveling without Jesus, wouldn't have given the Samaritan woman a second glance. They would have avoided her. They would have seen her just as Jesus did, but Jesus had a consciousness and sensitivity for souls. The disciples didn't.

One of the secrets of soul-winning is to become conscious of the lost souls around you. When Katrina and I were in Florida in December, we visited a friend who is ninety-one years old and living in a retirement condominium. As we left, she walked us down the hallway of her floor, and a door opened. A woman was just coming out to do an errand. She looked to me to be about seventy years of age. We stopped to chat, and I was shocked when she told us she was precisely one hundred years old. After chatting a few minutes, we proceeded down the hall toward the elevator. Our friend, Mrs. Antoinette Johnson, said, "This was very providential. I've been waiting for a chance to meet that woman and to develop a friendship with her. I've been concerned about her soul."

Mrs. Johnson went on to tell us, "This complex is full of Hispanic employees and workers, and I've found that many of them are

Christians. But the residents of this complex are just old, rich people who don't know the Lord. So I've recruited the Hispanic workers into prayer groups to pray for me while I look for opportunities to share Christ with them. Why else do you think that He's put me here at my age?"

Rule Four: God Leads Us to Those He's Preparing

And that brings us to the third rule of personal evangelism. If we are in the will of God, He will deliberately lead us to the people whom He is preparing to hear the Gospel. Let's read on: When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give Me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

Now Jesus truly needed a drink of water, parched as He was; but He was especially eager to use this conversation as a means of opening a dialogue with the woman because He knew in His heart that she was ripe for the Gospel. It's no accident that she showed up at the well just minutes after our Lord's arrival. This was a divine appointment, a divine rendezvous.

I believe that when we are in the will of God, He will send to us—and send us to—the people whom He is preparing to be saved.

A couple of weeks ago, Craig Warner gave me a marvelous little book entitled *Secret of an Open Door*, written by a colleague of his named David Morel. One of the chief concerns of the book is that Christians should develop a burden for the lost. Morel suggests that we cultivate the art of praying a particular prayer, one that Paul offers in Colossians 4:3, that God would open a door for us to share the Word with another.

In his book, David Morel gave several personal examples of this. One day, he said he was boarding a flight, and he prayed the Colossians 4 prayer. Within minutes, a young man in a military uniform came and sat in the seat next to him. They began talking about the military, and as the plane took off the two had a pleasant conversation. He was twenty-four years old, and after awhile David said to the young man, "You sure have your head screwed on right for a twenty-four year old." The soldier looked at him in surprise and replied, "Now, you don't know me very well." Then he began to pour out his problems and the confusion of his life and heart. He was besieged with personal problems. David pulled out his New Testament and showed him that God's Word offers help and healing in dealing with life-situations. He went on to share the plan of salvation with him. As the plane made its descent for landing, the young man looked at David and said, "God put you next to me, didn't He?"[3]

If we're in the will of God and developing a concern for souls, God will have a way of putting us in the right place at the right time and leading to us those who have spiritual needs in their lives.

Rule Five: Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere

That leads us to the next rule: Anyone, anytime, anywhere. The Gospel ministry cuts across all barriers, and the Lord may send us to anyone, anytime, anywhere. Look at verse 9: The Samaritan woman said to Him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For the Jews do not associate with the Samaritans.)

Well, one Jew did. With one glorious act of social defiance, He jumped across the cultural, racial, and sexual barriers and began to share the Gospel with her.

Rule Six : Share Conversationally

The fifth rule is—share conversationally. Notice how naturally the conversation flowed. It didn't seem forced or unnecessarily awkward. Jesus just started with the known and went to the unknown. He started with asking for a drink of water and proceeded to talk about the water of life. Verse 10 says: Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water."

The most natural way of evangelizing is to begin with simple conversation and to turn the conversation toward the Gospel without the person even realizing what is happening. The best soul-winners that I know work on developing this as a skill. I read about one man who badly wanted to share Christ with the woman who regularly cut his hair. One day he told her he needed a haircut because he was going to a funeral. That brought up the subject of funerals and funeral homes. While she snipped away at his hair, he asked her if she had ever been called into a mortuary to prepare the hair of a deceased person prior to the viewing. She said that she had often been asked, but she had never accepted the invitation. "It would give me the creeps," she said.

"Why is that?" the man asked.

"I'd be afraid that just when I was in the middle of styling the hair, the dead person would move or his eyes would open. I know it sounds silly, but I'd just be afraid the dead person would suddenly sit up."

The man said, "I know One who did."

And that provided the opening for him to share with her the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

Rule Seven: Understand the Two Sides of Evangelism

Rule Number Seven is—Understand the two sides of evangelism. There is the Hard Work, and there is the Hallelujah Work.

There is a remarkable postscript to this story. In the passage, Jesus evangelizes the woman, and she immediately returns to her village and shares the message with others. Let's skip down to John 4:27-38:

Just then His disciples returned and were surprised to find Him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do You want?" or "Why are You talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward Him. Meanwhile His disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then His disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought Him food?"

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest?' I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop of eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying, 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

This is really profound. Jesus said, "Others have done the hard work." In other words, others have been here before us. Others have already come and tried to sow the seed. We've just shown up at the right time to do the hallelujah work and to reap the harvest.

Who were the "others" who had done the hard work? We don't know, but I believe they were the disciples of John the Baptist. As we read the first three chapters of John's Gospel, we're introduced to the very vigorous and wonderful ministry of John. He remains more or less stationary in the Jordan Valley, preaching and baptizing. But his converts and followers come from everywhere, and they go back spreading the message of repentance far and wide.

It's my opinion that some of John's disciples had passed through this town and tried to share the message of repentance. They had sought to share the Gospel. No one had responded. This Samaritan woman had listened, but she had not responded on the spot. The disciples of John had done the hard and thankless work. They had shared, and the door was slammed in their face, as it were. No one had responded. No one had repented. No one had been saved. They went on their way, perhaps thinking that they had failed.

But they had actually been sowing. They had been doing the hard work and planting the Gospel here and there. The Holy Spirit had taken this seed and watered it and nurtured it. And by the time Jesus and His disciples had showed up, it was time for the harvest. Jesus told them, "You think the harvest is still four months away, but look there—see that group of Samaritan villagers coming, dressed in their white cloaks? There's the harvest. Someone else has done the hard work, and we have the privilege of doing the hallelujah work and leading them to faith and to eternal life."

About a year ago, I was asked to visit a family in an attempt to evangelize the husband. When my FAITH team arrived at his house, he was surprised, but seemed to have little interest in the Gospel. Somehow the Lord led me to keep pressing him, and by the end of the evening, he had been saved. His name was Paul Sachtjen. I had the joy of baptizing him, and he and his wife have been very faithful members of our church.

Last summer, Paul asked if I would visit a friend of his, a man named Burley Holmes. Burley was a well-respected community leader in Laverne, and he was suffering from very serious cancer. Burley was not a Christian, and Paul was very burdened for him. We made the visit, and I did my very best to lead Burley to Christ. I shared the Gospel up one side and down the other. Burley seemed intrigued and interested, but I could not bring him to a point of receiving Christ as his Savior. "Well," I said to Paul, "we've done our best. Let's just pray that God will use it." So we prayed and left the matter in God's hands.

A couple of Sundays ago, Paul stopped me after church and said, "Did I tell you that Burley gave his heart to Christ. A pastor in Laverne went to see him, and he was able to lead him to give his heart and life to the Lord."

Well, I was just as thrilled and happy as if I had led him to Christ myself. Jesus said here in John 4 that the sower and the reaper will rejoice together.

And that's why we're to dispel discouragement when we go out witnessing. Sometimes I'll go out week after week on FAITH visits without seeing anyone come to Christ. Well, those are sowing seasons. The Bible says we're to be faithful in season and out of season. Sometimes we do the hard work and sometimes we do the hallelujah work. But we'll grow discouraged and depressed if we

don't understand the two sides of soul-winning—sowing and reaping.

Well, look at the conclusion of the story:

Many of the Samaritans from the town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I did." So when the Samaritans came to Him, they urged Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. And because of His words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

So as we begin this New Year, there's a question in John 4 for you and me. Who can we win to Christ this year? How can we share of faith on a regular basis? What is there for us to do? For the Bible says, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise" (Proverbs 11:30).

[1] Lorne Sanny, *The Art of Personal Witnessing* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 9.

2 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: St. John, chapters I to VIII* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1982), pp. 188-189.

3 David A. Morel, *Secret of an Open Door* (Nashville: www.davidmorel.net, 2002), pp. 21-23.

FULFILLED PROPHECY – THE CASE AGAINST ALL ODDS

Robert Morgan

John 5:31-40, 46

As we welcome our soldiers home from Iraq, it might be a good time to remind us all that we are currently in a war in our society that is as dangerous and deadly as any war that is being fought anywhere in the world. You and I are soldiers in a spiritual battle. Christianity is under attack.

The number one book on the New York Times bestseller list is entitled *The Da Vinci Code*. I'm reading it now, and I have seldom read a more gripping novel. And I have seldom read such an effective, devastating attack on the foundations of the Christian faith and upon the historic truths about the person of Jesus Christ. According to this book, Jesus Christ is not God Incarnate. That was a myth perpetrated by Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. According to the *Da Vinci Code*, the real truth about Jesus is found in the Nag Hammadi Documents and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and those documents prove He was a great teacher, but a mere man who was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child, and that His bloodline exists on the earth to this day.

This book has the potential of seriously undermining Christianity in America. Especially when the movie version comes out. It is a frontal attack on the historic person of Jesus Christ. And it cuts to the very heart of our subject today—how do we know that Jesus Christ is really who the Gospels claimed that He was? How do we know that Jesus was God made flesh, the Messiah, the King?

We're devoting this month of January to a series of morning and evening messages entitled *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*. It's a condensation and revision of a series that I preached some years ago on the subject of *Christian Evidences*. How do we know there really is a God, how do we know Christianity is true, and who do we know that Jesus Christ is really who He claimed to be?

Fortunately, the skeptics and critics in our Lord's day asked Him that very question, and I'd like to show you His answer in John 5:31ff.

If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true.

The word "true" here means "valid." In other words, in a court of law, one needs more than one's own testimony. We need other witnesses as reinforcements to the truth. Jesus is going to say, I have three collaborating witnesses. I have three people who are going to prove to you that I am who I say I am. My first witness is John the Baptist.

There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.

Now, Jesus is going to say, I have a second witness who will vouch for My identity:

But I have a greater witness than John's: for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent me.

He's referring to His miracles. I don't have time to deal with the apologetic value of the miracles of Christ, but they comprise His second collaborating witness. And now, Jesus calls His third witness:

And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified to Me.

God the Father is My witness. But how? Our Lord's Jewish critics were thinking to themselves: "How is God the Father His witness? We have neither seen God's form or heard His voice. How can He vouch for Jesus' claims?"

Anticipating their question, Jesus is going to tell them to look in their Scriptures—by which He meant the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. John 5:37f:

And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures (the Old Testament), for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

The Old Testament Scriptures represent the Father's witness as to My identity. God has testified about Me in the Old Testament. He has filled the Old Testament with information about Me. Just open your eyes and see the hundreds of predictions, inferences, and indications that describe Me to a "T."

These are they that testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

And look down at John 5:46:

For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.

Moses wrote the very first books of the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, and so on. Jesus was saying, "If you want to know I'm who I say I am, just read Genesis, Exodus, and on through Malachi and see how everything about my birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and My earthly roll was predicted in detail hundreds of years in advance."

Jesus appealed to fulfilled Messianic prophecy to attest to His own identity. As A. T. Pierson put it, the Old Testament writers added "feature after feature and touch after touch and tint after tint, until what was at first a drawing without color, a mere outline or profile, comes at last to be a perfect portrait with the very hues of living flesh."

This is such an immense subject, that I'm overwhelmed trying to summarize it in one message. One of my goals in life, if the Lord wills, is to write a series of books on the subject of Jesus in the Old Testament. I've already preached a series of messages on Jesus in Genesis and Jesus in Exodus and Jesus in the Tabernacle. My next step is "Jesus in Leviticus."

But I can hardly wait to get to Isaiah. Recently I studied the book of Isaiah for all the names and titles that Isaiah gave in advance to Jesus Christ. Remember, Isaiah lived about 700 years before Jesus was born. And yet Isaiah has profound and detailed descriptions of Jesus in prolonged passages in His book. I don't have time to survey those for you, but let me just list for you the names of Jesus given to Him 700 years in advance by Isaiah the prophet. He is:

1. Man of Sorrows – Isaiah 53:3
2. Lord of Hosts – Isaiah 8:13
3. The Mighty One – Isaiah 19:20
4. Emmanuel - Isaiah 7:14
5. God with Us - Isaiah 7:14
6. Wonderful Counselor – Isaiah 9:6
7. Mighty God – Isaiah 9:6
8. Everlasting Father – Isaiah 9:6
9. Prince of Peace - Isaiah 9:6
10. A Covenant to the People – Isaiah 42:6
11. A Tender Plant – Isaiah 53:2
12. A Root out of Dry Ground – Isaiah 53:2
13. The Root of Jesse – Isaiah 11:10; Romans 15:12
14. A Banner to the people – Isaiah 11:10
15. The Light of Israel – Isaiah 10:17
16. A Light to the Gentiles – Isaiah 42:6 & 49:6
17. The Sanctuary – Isaiah 8:14
18. The Child – Isaiah 9:6

19. My Strength and My Song – Isaiah 12:2
20. My Salvation to the Ends of the Earth – Isaiah 49:6
21. A Sure Foundation – Isaiah 28:16
22. A Hiding Place – Isaiah 32:2
23. A Shelter from the Tempest – Isaiah 32:2
24. Rivers of Water in a Dry Place – Isaiah 32:2
25. The Shadow of a Great Rock in a Weary Land – Isaiah 32:2
26. The Majestic Lord – Isaiah 33:22
27. Our Judge – Isaiah 33:22
28. Our Lawgiver – Isaiah 33:22
29. The Glory of the Lord – Isaiah 40:5
30. My Elect One – Isaiah 42:1
31. The Angel of His Presence – Isaiah 63:9
32. A Polished Shaft – Isaiah 49:2 – (A Polished Arrow – NIV)
33. The Servant of Rulers – Isaiah 49:7
34. The Arm of the Lord – Isaiah 53:1
35. An Offering for Sin – Isaiah 53:10
36. The God of the Whole Earth – Isaiah 54:5
37. A Rod from the Stem of Jesse – Isaiah 11:1
38. The Branch of the Lord – Isaiah 4:2; Isaiah 11:1
39. A Precious Cornerstone - Isaiah 28:16
40. A Tried Stone - Isaiah 28:16
41. A Stone of Stumbling - Isaiah 8:14
42. A Rock of Offense - Isaiah 8:14
43. Savior - Isaiah 19:20
44. A Tender Plant - Isaiah 53:2
45. A Lamb to the Slaughter - Isaiah 53:7
46. A Sheep before the Shearers - Isaiah 53:7

And so the Old Testament is as full of Jesus as the ocean is full of salt. In the remainder of my message, I want to divide it up like this:

First, the Old Testament predicted the Messiah's family tree. The Jews, more than anyone else in antiquity, valued their ancestry and kept meticulous records of their genealogies. Priests, for example, who couldn't trace their family backgrounds were removed from office; and national genealogical tables for all the families of Israel were carefully preserved in Jerusalem until they were all destroyed in the destruction of that city by Roman forces in A.D. 70. Interestingly, the only genealogical records surviving the destruction of Jerusalem were those of Jesus Christ, which had been preserved by being included in the Gospels. This means that A. D. 70 ends the window of possibility into which any other Israeli could establish his claim to be in the Messianic lineage.

What is that lineage? In Genesis, we're told that of the three sons of Noah, the Messiah would come through Shem (Genesis 9:26-27, Luke 2:32). Of the descendants of Shem, we're told the Messiah would come through Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3, 22:18). Of the two sons of Abraham, the Messiah would come through Isaac (21:12). Of the two sons of Isaac, he would come through Jacob (Genesis 34:10-12; Numbers 24:17). Of the twelve sons of Jacob, we're told the Messiah would come, not from the noble Joseph, but from the scoundrel Judah (Genesis 49:10, Psalm 78:67-68). Of the descendants of Judah, all were rejected except the family of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1-2). Of the sons of Jesse, all were rejected but the youngest, David (Jeremiah 23:5).

The Lord narrowed down the Messiah's family tree until it could only be a descendant of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David. The first words of the New Testament are: A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).

Consider these other prognostications:

We're told that not only would Jesus be born from David's family, but in David's city — Bethlehem. Micah 5:2 says, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

We're told that he would be born of a virgin and named Immanuel. Isaiah 1:12 predicts, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The

virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Malachi 3:1 and Mal 4:5 say that the Messiah would be preceded by an Elijah-like figure who would live in the wilderness and cry out a message warning people to prepare the way for the Lord.

We're told that the coming Messiah will fill three different offices that had only been fulfilled in one other person in human or Jewish history, the Genesis figure named Melchizedek, namely: Prophet, Priest, and King (Deuteronomy 18:18, Psalm 110:4, Zechariah 9:9).

We're told that the Messiah would exhibit superlative character traits, that He would be holy, righteous, good, faithful, innocent, zealous, meek, forgiving, patient, loving, and full of justice (Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-5; 52:13-53:12).

We're told that His ministry would begin, not in Judah or Jerusalem as one might expect, but in a predominantly Gentile area in the northern reaches of Israel called Galilee (Isaiah 9:1).

We're told that His ministry which began in Galilee would climax in Jerusalem which the Messiah would humbly enter, riding on a young donkey before suddenly appearing boldly in the temple (Zechariah 9:9, Haggai 2:7, Malachi 3:1).

We're also told the Messiah's ministry would contain the element of the miraculous, that he would heal the blind and deaf and lame (Isaiah 35:5-6); and that he would teach the people, uttering parables (Psalm 78:2). We're told that, as incredible as it seems, this long-awaited prophet, priest, and king would be publicly rejected by his own people, the Jews (Psalm 118:22). We're told that he would be betrayed by a friend for thirty pieces of silver, and that the silver would be thrown on the temple floor and be used to buy a Potter's field (Psalm 41:9, 55:12-14; Zechariah 11:12-13).

We're told that he would be smitten and that his followers would disperse like sheep who have suddenly and violently lost their shepherd (Zechariah 13:7). We're told that the Messiah would be attacked and rejected, accused by false witnesses, and that he would remain silent, refusing to come to his own defense (Psalm 35:11, 38:13; Isaiah 53:7). We're told that he would be beaten and whipped and slain for the transgressions of those he came to save, and that his death would be painful.

Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, as woven together below, present a powerful and remarkable portrait of the details of the execution of the Messiah, including these elements:

He was plunged into sorrow and rejected by both God and Man: He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.

He was publicly disrobed, and his clothing was gambled away by his executioners: I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. (Ps 22:17,18)

He was executed with criminals: He was numbered with the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12)

His hands and feet were pierced: But he was pierced for our iniquities. They have pierced my hands and feet.

He would question why God had forsaken him: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22:1, Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34)

Nearby mockers would scornfully say, "He trusts in God; let the Lord deliver him": All who see men mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him. (Ps 22:7-8)

He would suffer acute thirst after massive losses of bodily fluids. His bones would be twisted from their joints, and his heart would melt and break from grief. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me.

Despite severe pain and sorrow, he would utter no complaints. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. (Isa 53:7)

This amazing rejection, humiliation and death of the Messiah would prove redemptive, being God's plan for saving his people: Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. For the transgression of my people he was stricken. It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for transgressors. (Isa 53:4,5)

His corpse would be laid to rest in the borrowed tomb of a rich man: He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death. (Isa 53:9)

After his suffering and death, he would again see the light of life: Though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. (Isa 53:10-11)

His death would justify many: By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. (Isa 53:11)

Following his return to life, he would be considered great. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great...

These are some of the prophecies made about Christ hundreds of years before his birth. Overall, about three hundred predictions stretch through all the books of the Old Testament. Peter Stoner, former chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy of Pasadena City College, chairman of the Science Division of Westmont College, and professor Emeritus of Science at Westmont, wrote a book called *Science Speaks* in which he applied the mathematical principles of probability to various Old Testament predictions. In the chapter relating to Messianic prophecy, Stoner selected eight of the many predictions in Scripture relating to Christ's life and ministry and formulated the mathematical probability of their coming true in one man. He and his students wanted to know what the chances were that any one man, in accordance to predictive prophecy, would be born in Bethlehem, preceded by a forerunner, enter Jerusalem as a king riding a donkey, be betrayed by his friend for thirty pieces of silver, be placed on trial and though innocent make no defense for himself, and be crucified.

What is the chance that any man might have lived from the day of these prophecies down to the present time and fulfilled all eight of these predictions? His answer? The chance calculates to 1 in 10¹⁷. What kind of chance is that? Cover the state of Texas with silver dollars to a depth of two feet, then mark one of those silver dollars and drop it somewhere into the pile, stirring it thoroughly. The chance of a blindfolded man choosing the marked silver dollar is equal to the chances of all eight of those prophecies being fulfilled in one man in history.

Yet there are not eight but over three hundred predictions. No wonder on the Emmaus Walk of Luke 24, Jesus spent several hours telling the two despairing disciples all the things written about Him in the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets.

O tell me the story that never grows old

The story of One whom the prophets foretold.

Jesus warned His audience that they searched the Scriptures for in them they thought they had eternal life, yet they rejected Him of whom the Scriptures foretold. Today I want to invite you to come to Jesus of Nazareth, to the predicted Messiah. Take Him as your Lord and Savior, and find in Him the eternal life you so desperately need.

DEATH INTO LIFE

Robert Morgan

John 11:4

Today we are coming to the conclusion of our winter series of messages, which I have called God's Guarantee. It has been based on a consistent set of promises in the Bible, telling us that all things work out for God's people. We can't look at every passage in the Bible in which a variation of this promise occurs, of course, or I'd be preaching on this theme for months. But we've looked at some of the major references in Scripture, and before plunging into today's message I'd like to review one last time. God has guaranteed:

Ø All things work together for our good. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." And Isaiah 38:17 says, "It was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish."

Ø All things work together for the good of others. We learn this from the example of Joseph whose long years of suffering not

only worked out for his own good, but they even worked out for the good of the very brothers who sold him into slavery. Genesis 50:20 says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Ø All things work together for God's glory. Ephesians 1:11-12 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, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory."

Ø All things work together to further the Good News. In Philippians 1:12, Paul wrote: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel."

Ø All things work out in human history. Esther 9:1 says: "On the day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, the opposite occurred."

Ø And today's topic: All things work together for good, even in the graveyard. All things work together throughout eternity.

Our Scripture is John 11:4:

"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

More space is given to the resurrection of Lazarus than to any other miracle in the Gospels, so we know it's a very important episode in the life of Christ. It comes at the end of His earthly ministry and triggers the chain of events that results in His arrest and crucifixion. But more than anything else, it displays the authority of Jesus Christ over the very processes of death itself and shows us how He can reverse even that, making it work for our good.

Modern visitors to Jerusalem often visit a suburb of the city that lies less than two miles from the Old City and the Temple Mount. This suburb is Bethany, and there we can still find the traditional tomb of Lazarus. The traditions associated with this tomb stretch back into the earliest centuries of Christian history. Writing in the early 300s, the historian Eusebius said about Bethany, "There the place of Lazarus is still shown," referring to his tomb. In the year A.D. 333, a guide pointed out to the Pilgrim of Bordeaux the tomb where Lazarus had been laid. In A.D. 390, St. Jerome mentions a church built near the place (or tomb) of Lazarus. Today we can still visit that tomb, although its current appearance and surroundings look differently than they did in biblical times. But this cemetery is nevertheless holy ground, and by visiting there we can learn how the cemetery itself is fertile ground for the truth of Romans 8:28. Here in the graveyard of Lazarus, we learn several things.

Death is a Reality

First, Death is a reality. Not that there's any question about it; but sometimes it just comes home to us in a blunt way, and in our text today Jesus put it very bluntly. He told the disciples in verse 14: "Lazarus is dead."

No bones about it. He was dead as a doornail. Deceased. Inanimate. Demised. Defunct. Departed. Room temperature. His heart stopped beating, his lungs heaved a final time, and suddenly his life processes ceased and death occurred. Mary and Martha were in the grip of grief, for their beloved brother had not survived his final illness.

In one way or another that's going to happen to every one of us. The other day as we drove through the cemetery for a funeral, I remarked to my wife, "Today it seems like only one person in the world has died and it is a great individual tragedy because it's our friend. But really, thousands of people died today and within just a few years there will be over six billion deaths, because every single person on this planet will be dead within our own narrow span of time and history."

Something like 108 people on this planet die every single minute. While I'm preaching this sermon this morning, over three thousand people will die somewhere on earth. That's just reality.

Recently I purchased cemetery plots for my wife and me in East Tennessee, and the lady at the cemetery took me to several different places in the graveyard to see which ones I wanted to buy. It was a strange experience, looking down at a little plot of ground and knowing that within just a little time I'll be buried beneath that plot of grass to wait until Jesus comes. The Bible doesn't deny the reality of death; it explains it, but it doesn't deny it. Lazarus is dead.

Death is a Phase, Not a Finality

But that is the first point, not the closing point, of my message. The second truth about death that we discover in this chapter is this: Death is a phase, not a finality.

For the follower of Jesus Christ, death is a tunnel but not a cave. It's a one-way route to glory, not a dead-end street to oblivion. Jesus used two different phrases in this story to communicate this to us. Let's back up and read the story from the beginning, and I'll point them out to you.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death."

Notice that! That's the motto we can print in calligraphy and post on the hospital wall of every Christian who ever faces a terminal illness. Theoretically, I could go into the sickbed of any Christian and quote that verse, and sometimes I do so in a careful and sensitive way. I don't want to sound cavalier, but after all, these are the words of Jesus. He was saying that about his friend, Lazarus, and within ninety-six hours, Lazarus was dead. His sickness included death, but it did not end in death. Death is a phase, not a finality. It's temporary, not terminal.

The second phrase is found in the next paragraph: This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then He said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

In other words, Jesus was saying, "I have a little window of opportunity to accomplish my remaining work before twilight falls on My earthly work."

After He had said this, He went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up." The disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but His disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

That's the second phrase that tells us death is a phase, not a finality. Dying is falling asleep in Jesus. This is New Testament language. This is Jesus-language.

All three Synoptic Gospels tell us about a ruler named Jairus who came to Jesus in great urgency, begging Him to come and touch his twelve-year-old daughter who was dying; but before Jesus arrived, the little girl passed away. As Mark tells it:

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and sent to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at Him.

Jesus threw them all out, took the child's father and mother and a handful of His disciples, and He proceeded to take the child's hand, saw a few words to her, and immediately she opened her eyes, looked at them in amazement, and stood up and started walking around.

"She is not dead, but asleep," said Jesus. "Lazarus is asleep," He said. That's the way He looked at it.

And then in Matthew 27, we have the strange account of what happened the moment Jesus Himself died. It says:

Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many (Matthew 27:51-53, NKJV).

In Acts 7, we have the account of the first person to be martyred for his faith in Christian history. His name was Stephen, and he was stoned to death by a Jewish mob because of his preaching. Here's the way the writer put it in Luke 7:59-60:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 13:36 takes this same concept and applies it to the Old Testament saints:

For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; and he was buried with his fathers.

In a remarkable passage, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians and told them to stop partaking of the Lord's Supper in a careless and casual manner. This is the reason some of you are sick, he told them. First Corinthians 11:30 says:

This is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

Four chapters later, in the Resurrection Chapter—1 Corinthians 15—Paul wrote that when Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, He was seen shortly afterward by about five hundred people, “most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:6). Then he says in 1Cor 15:20: But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We have the same thing in that wonderful passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 about the rapture:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. (1Th 4:13-14)

This is Jesus-talk. This is New Testament-talk. This is the way God views it. And that's the way Christians throughout all the ages have viewed it. In fact, our very word cemetery comes from the Greek word that is used here, κοιμῶμαι, and it means: “sleeping places” or “sleeping chambers.”

Now, we do have to understand something very clearly. The Bible does not teach that the soul goes to sleep. In fact, the Bible teaches that when we die, our soul goes to be with Jesus and we're very awake and aware of things. Jesus said to the dying thief on the adjacent cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” The soul doesn't fall asleep, but the body does. What is the significance of that term sleep? There are two wonderful implications here.

The first is rest. When someone falls asleep, he or she is resting. Revelation 13:14 says:

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord... they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”

The second is rising. Sleep is a temporary state. We fall asleep only to awaken in the morning. We die only to rise again. This same body will be reconstituted and resurrected at the Last Trumpet, and we shall rise again.

Jesus is our Loving Friend

The third thing that struck me as I studied this chapter is that Jesus is our loving friend. I was amazed at how often this showed up in the text. Notice it with me:

Ø John 11:3: Lord, the one you love is sick.

Ø John 11:5: Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Ø John 11:36: Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him.”

And in verse 11, Jesus refers to Lazarus as “our friend.” Because of that, Jesus responded very emotionally to Lazarus passing. Look at verses 33ff:

When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him.”

Why did Jesus weep when He knew He was going to raise Lazarus to life? I think He saw that scene as a microcosm of all the death and sorrow that strikes this earth 108 times every minute. I think Jesus felt the grief for every death that ever occurs, as represented by the tomb of that one man, Lazarus. In so doing, Jesus was telling us that it is all right for us to weep and grieve and sorrow when our dearest ones pass away. And He was telling us how much He loves us. You can put your name in this very passage. You are the one Jesus loves. See how He loves you! He loves us in the cemetery. I know from personal experience that when both my mother and my father passed away, I had a special word from the Lord Jesus that comforted and sustained my heart on both occasions. He comes and speaks to us just as He did to these two sisters.

But notice that Jesus wept, but He didn't wail. He sorrowed, but not as those who have no hope. He grieved, but not excessively. In so doing, He set the pattern for us.

Samuel Willard (1640-1707) was a prominent New England Puritan who once delivered a funeral sermon upon the death of Mr. John Hull, who was America's first silversmith and who became the wealthiest man in America in his day. Willard's sermon was entitled “The Death of a Saint,” and he had three points:

1. When the Saints die, let us mourn.

2. When the Saints die, beware of irregular mourning.

Though we are to lament their death, yet we must beware that it be after the right manner. A dying saint may say to his weeping friends that stand round about, wringing their hands, after the same language that Christ did to those weeping women, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but for yourselves... (Luke 23:27). We may therefore weep for ourselves, and there is good reason for it; but to mourn for them is superfluous. Is their death precious in God's (sight)? Let it not be miserable in our esteem: and tell me you whose hearts throb, and eyes run over with sorrow, is it not a precious thing to be asleep in Jesus? To lay in the lap of His providence, and rest from the labors and sorrows of a troublesome World?

3. Is the death of the saints precious in God's sight? Let it be so in ours also.

One of the greatest preachers in the entire history of the church was John, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who was called Chrysostom, which means "The Golden Mouth" because of the power of his sermons. He once preached a message on the subject "Excessive Grief at the Death of Friends." Jesus doesn't want us to sink down in hopeless, lonely, depressed, dispondent despair when a believer goes on to glory.

Neil and Carol Anderson served for many years as missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea, and it was their great mission to bring the Word of God to a tribe of people who had never heard the Gospel. One of the things that happened, of course, is that the new Christians changed the way they dealt with the subject of death. Carol told this story about a man in the village of Fukutao. His name was Erima, and he passed away while the Andersons were on a trip. They returned shortly after his death to find his widow sitting in front of the house mourning. She looked a little haggard, but she was smiling. That was utterly amazing, because in that society when a man died, his widow was expected to sit by his graveside day and night, wailing and mourning, scarcely eating or sleeping.

She explained, "My husband died while you were gone, but he told me not to wail and mourn for him because he was going to God's place." Then she told them the entire story. Erima had been very sick and it was obvious he was dying. The family gathered around him very close, and finally the old man stopped breathing. The friends and family members, as the custom was, began wailing loudly, sobbing, crying, and mourning.

Suddenly to their great surprise, Erima opened his eyes. Instantly the wailing ceased and everyone looked at the man in shock. Erima told them he had been to the Lord's place. He said it was brilliantly lighted and the surface of the ground was like a rainbow laid out flat. He told them not to mourn for him, and then he closed his eyes and died again.

Now the family was faced with a great dilemma. In that culture, they were expected to engage in excessive and prolonged and vociferous mourning. It was also the custom to burn the clothing of the deceased, and to kill his pigs and destroy his garden; but Erima had returned to life, as it were, to tell them not to do that. So his widow, being a Christian, decided to obey her husband's advice. She grieved, but not excessively. She didn't burn his clothes or destroy his pigs or crops. She did not put mud on her face and remain by his grave day after day.

It was the talk of the village. And it was a powerful witness that when Christ comes into a culture and into a home and into a heart, it changes the way we view the process and the act of dying. We sorrow, but we sorrow not as those who have no hope.[1]

The reason brings us to the fourth point of today's message: Jesus is our Resurrection Victory

But Jesus is not only our sympathetic friend, He is our resurrection victory. Notice what He said to Martha in verse 23:

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "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 will never die. Do you believe this?"

Notice that Jesus said: I am the resurrection. Then He also said: I am the life. There were two parts to the "I am" statements. Then He said, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." This is the amplification of the phrase: I am the resurrection. Then He said: And whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. This is the amplification of the phrase: I am the life. The first part refers to the body and the last part refers to the soul.

In other words, Jesus said, in effect: Now as it relates to the human body of the believer, I am the resurrection. The person who believes in me will live again, even if he dies. And as it relates to the soul, I am the life, and the person who lives and believes in me

will never actually die. The believer has unbroken continuous everlasting life (see Hebrews 2:14-18).

And then, in a mighty and massive demonstration of the power and authority behind those statements, He asks to be escorted to the tomb of Lazarus where He commands, to the shock of those present: Take away the stone. I am going to show you the glory of God.

Then Jesus looked up toward heaven, offered a prayer of thanksgiving to the Heavenly Father, and then gazed at the tomb and shouted with a loud voice: "Lazarus, Come Out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face.

Now, this is a preview. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 we read that when Jesus comes again, He will descend from heaven with a shout, a loud command. Paul doesn't tell us the nature of that loud command, but John 11 leaves us with little doubt. It will be the command, "Come forth!" And the dead in Christ shall rise first; then those who are still alive at the coming of the Lord will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Our Lord's authority to reverse the circumstances of life and death is stated for us in Isaiah 61, words which Jesus Himself read in the synagogue of Nazareth and applied to Himself.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Death is a reality; but it's a phase and not a finality. Jesus is a sympathetic friend, but He's far more. He is our resurrection victory, the Resurrection and the Life.

When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh, may I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.
On Christ the Solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand.

1 Carol Anderson, "Going to God's Place" in JARRS Beyond, Volume 28, Number 2, p. 6-7

WHAT THE RESURRECTION GIVES ME

Robert Morgan

John 14:19

It's exciting to be back here at the Grand Ole Opry House for another Easter Celebration. The Lord is so good to allow us to come here year after year for Easter, and our friends at Opryland have been wonderful. I'd like to take a moment to thank Zana Hembree who has been our primary contact here, along with all the people who have given up their Easter Sunday to help us make this service possible, including the stage crew, the sound and light technicians, the greeters and ushers and hosts, the security personnel, and everyone else - we extend to all of you our heartfelt thanks!

I'd also like to say a word of thanks this morning to some of the greatest servants in all the world – our children's ministers and child care workers who are volunteering their Easter Sunday to be one exit away at watching over our nursery and preschool children. They are serving sacrificially, and I am very grateful to them.

But we're here today at the Grand Ole Opry House to announce the grandest and greatest message in the world. The tomb in Jerusalem is empty! Christ the Lord is risen today, and we serve a risen Savior.

That one event, the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb is the single greatest event in the entire history of the world. It literally makes all the difference in our lives, and this morning I'd like to share with you one of the Bible's greatest Easter verses—John 14:19—in which Jesus said, "Because I live, you will live also."

Jesus spoke those words on the night before He was crucified. He was in an upstairs room with His disciples somewhere in downtown Jerusalem, having a meal with His friends and trying to help them grasp what was about to happen. He began John 14 by saying: Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Is there anyone here today with a troubled heart? There are many things to be troubled about, and many troubles enter our lives. Perhaps you're troubled today by the behavior of a loved one. By financial pressure. By family problems. By issues of your physical health. By some sort of grief or sadness. Well, the twelve disciples had lots of reasons on this particular evening to be troubled; but Jesus forbade it. He said, "Let not your hearts be troubled." And He went on to provide some effective antidotes to the troubled heart.

I had an uncle on my father's side of the family whom I never knew. He died long before I was born; he died when he himself was only a child. It was in 1918 during a flu epidemic that swept over our nation. According to what I've read, the epidemic started when soldiers at an army base near Boston suddenly began to die. The cause of death was identified as influenza, but it was unlike any strain ever seen. It became the worst epidemic in American history, and over 600,000 people perished, including my father's little brother. There was no antidote for it. How terrible to be caught in an epidemic for which there is no antidote.

Today we have an epidemic of trouble on every side. There are global problems and there are national problems and there are personal problems. Some of you may be very troubled this morning, and you wonder if there is any cure. But we have an antidote, and it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In verse 19 of this chapter, He gives a powerful antibiotic for the troubled heart: Before long, the world will not see Me anymore, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also.

What powerful words those are. Because I live... Because I am risen from the dead... Because I overcame the grave... Because of Easter... Because I live, you have everything you need to heal your troubled heart.

Let me list five things for you.

1. Because He Lives, We Have Hope.

This is the specific application Jesus is making here. Because I live, you shall live also. Whenever I quote that verse, many people instantly think of the popular song by Bill and Gloria Gather that says, "Because He lives I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all care is gone. Because I know who holds tomorrow, and life is worth the living just because He lives."

As I worked on a book that I wrote about hymn stories entitled *Then Sings My Soul*, Gloria Gather shared with me how she and her husband, Bill Gather, came to write one of their most popular songs, "Because He Lives." She said:

When Bill and I started our family in the sixties, racial tensions were tearing the country apart. Civil rights activists had suffered and some had been killed. The Vietnam conflict was claiming thousands of lives, and tensions boiled over on university campuses. Many young people were growing disillusioned and "dropping out." In this climate, Bill and I sought to write songs with lasting answers to the turmoil of the human spirit. But in the fall of 1969, several things happened to test the reality of our own convictions. We realized we were expecting another baby. Though we had always intended to have another child, we weren't planning on a baby so soon. My body hadn't quite recovered from the last pregnancy. Making matters worse, Bill contracted mononucleosis, which left him exhausted and depressed. This combination of national turmoil and personal trouble discouraged us, and we occasionally asked each other, "If this world is like this now, what will it be in fifteen or sixteen years for our baby? What will this child face?" While pondering and praying about these things, we came to realize anew that our courage doesn't come from a stable world, for the world has never been stable. Jesus Himself was born in the cruelest of times. No, we have babies, raise families, and risk living because the Resurrection is true! Our baby arrived safe and sound, and we named him Benjamin, which means "most beloved son." A few weeks later "Because He Lives" was born in our hearts and poured from our souls:

How sweet to hold our newborn baby
And feel the pride and joy he gives;
But greater still, the calm assurance –
This child can face uncertain days because He lives.

Over the years this song has reassured us that our Lord's resurrection is the central truth of life. Because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Many times since, as our children grew, our business-life changed, our fortunes shifted, or our direction clouded, our family has found assurance in this very personal song. It's "our song," but we're grateful others have loved it, too.

Well, we love the song because we love the truth behind it. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled.... Because I live, you will live also." Because He lives we have hope.

2. Because He Lives, We Have Happiness.

When I was a little boy, my father took us on a vacation out west. We were gone for an entire month, and we visited Indian reservations and gold mines and all kinds of things like that. In one place, I think it was in Colorado, there was a pile of rocks, and I discovered a rock that glittered like gold. This was gold mining territory, and I was tremendously excited because I thought I'd actually discovered some gold. My dad let me keep it, but he explained to me that it wasn't really gold at all; it was a metal called pyrite, which looked so much like gold that it was commonly called "fool's gold." In the old days, a miner would discover this metal, and he would think he had struck it rich, only to find out later that he had nothing on his burro but a sack of fool's gold.

Happiness is like that. There's a counterfeit happiness that's all most people discover; but then there is the real thing, which the Bible calls "Joy." Someone said, "Happiness depends on happenings, but Joy depends on Jesus." When you walk through the shopping malls and the amusement parks of the world, you see a lot of people experiencing "Fool's Joy." They think they're happy, but it fades quickly and it doesn't really endure in the heart. It doesn't really characterize their lives. It doesn't really glitter and glisten in their personalities like the real article.

But the Bible teaches that the fruit of the Spirit is joy, and that the joy of the Lord is our strength. As Jesus talked to His disciples in that Upper Room, He was only hours away from death by crucifixion; and yet, in this Upper Room discourse, He repeatedly talked about joy.

John 15:11: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 16:20: I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.

John 16:22: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

John 16:24: Until now, you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, that your joy will be complete.

John 17:13: I am coming to You now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them.

Do you have the joy of the Lord in your life? Are you happy because of Jesus? Is it fool's gold or is it the real thing? Let not your heart be troubled. Because He lives we have happiness.

3. Because He Lives, We Have Holiness –

Holiness is a very powerful concept. Hebrews 12:14 says: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." In other words, the sin that we have in our lives separates us from God, for nothing or no one who is sinful can ever dwell in the holiness and purity of God's presence. But none of us can achieve holiness by our own efforts. So God entered into humanity and took upon Himself the form of a man and was made in the likeness of sinful humanity and became sin, as it were for us. And Romans 4:25 says: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." In other words, by His death and resurrection, He made it possible for our sins to be reckoned to His account, and His holiness to be reckoned to our account. That's why it's so important to receive Jesus Christ as our own personal Savior and Lord. Have you done that?

4. Because He Lives, We Have Heaven.

In this passage we're looking at today, John 14, Jesus began by saying: 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 am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me, that you also may be where I am.

The other week I was with a well-known preacher who is on television and radio all across the nation and all around the world. He told me, "I'm going to preach a series of sermons on Heaven. I can't believe that I've been in the ministry all these years, and I've never preached an entire series of messages on Heaven when the Bible has so much to say about it."

Well, I have preached a series of messages on heaven. I've done it twice, if I remember correctly; but not in a while. And next year, I want to do the same thing from Revelation 21-22. The Bible has a remarkable amount of material for us to study about our heavenly home, and the more we contemplate our mansions in heaven, the less we'll worry about our messes on earth. Because He lives, we have heaven. If you were to die today, do you know for sure you'd go to heaven? You can know for sure, if Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life.

5. Because He Lives, We Have Healing.

Fifth, because He lives, we have healing. Our ultimate emotional, physical, and spiritual healing was guaranteed by the empty tomb.

Our church began this year with a terrible tragedy as one of our teenagers, Emily Mynster, was involved in a car wreck and went to be with the Lord. At the funeral, I shared the Gospel, and then I invited people to pray, asking Jesus to come into their lives. I also said, "Even if you are watching this service on a videotape or DVD, you can pray this prayer and make this decision."

A couple of weeks ago, Dr. and Mrs. Mynster gave me a letter they had received from a girl named Terreka, and I have asked permission from all involved to share it with you today:

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Mynster & Molly:

You may not recognize my address or my name and that is because you do not know me. To be quite honest I do not know anything about you three either. On January 7th, I received a phone call from one of my best friends. She called to tell me that Beth was in a car wreck... Beth was OK, but things were not looking good for the other driver. I headed to Lebanon to check on Beth.

She was kind of shaken up and at this point had not heard anything else from Vanderbilt on the condition of the other driver because she did not know the girl's name. I checked on Beth and made sure she was OK then headed back to Nashville. The next day Beth told me the driver in the other car was Emily Mynster and that she was only 16 years old and that she had passed away.

As time went by, I knew Beth was having a hard time because she would cry a lot and was really sad. She said she believed in her heart that it was not her fault, but she felt really bad about what happened.

On Thursday night, February 10, 2005, I made my usual late night call to Beth and the conversation normally ends in like five minutes, but on this night she wanted to talk. We talked about the chapel (at David Lipscomb University in which Emily's boyfriend, DJ, had shared his experiences), and Beth told me about the DVD of Emily's life and of the memorial service.

Something came over me and I told her I wanted to see it. It was almost 1:45 am, but I went over and we turned it on. It went through the slide show of Emily's life, and then the funeral service. It came down to the last preacher (I am sorry that I cannot recall his name), but he said no matter if you are watching this on DVD or tape, close your eyes with me and repeat this prayer with me.

I found myself closing my eyes and saying that prayer and he said now you have to mean it. He proceeded to say after you have recited this prayer, call and let the Mynsters know. It weighed heavy on my heart as my eyes filled with tears.

After the DVD ended I still had tears streaming down my face. I gave Beth a hug and headed home. On my way home my heart was filled with so much sadness. Sadness to know that I am 22-years old and I had not fully accepted Christ into my life.

Yes, I grew up in church. Yes, I graduated from Lipscomb University, but it was not enough. It didn't matter if I went to church three days a week or none at all. My heart was still in the condition that it always had been in. I came home and went into my room and I pulled my Bible out. That has never happened to me at all. I got this orange journal that a friend of mine bought me a long time ago and I opened it and it was empty, just like my heart and my soul. For the first time ever I prayed over my closed Bible and I said, "Lord, I am ready to follow Emily's Savior."

I opened the Bible and there were two subtitles that jumped out at me: "Excuses of a Lazy Man" and "The Making of a Fool." I always had excuses of why I didn't go to church or why I didn't read my Bible or why I didn't give money at church. Now God was telling me straight up that play time was over. I had never seen things so clearly.

I have never felt so at peace in my life and understood what the Bible was saying to me. It was all because of a girl named Emily that I didn't even know. Your daughter's death brought life to many people and I am here to tell you that one of those people was Beth and another was me.

I know that if I had not watched that DVD last night that I would be lost forever. I am now a firm believer that everything happens for

a reason. I just wanted to tell you thank you.

Perhaps today you need healing in your life. Perhaps you need to make the same decision. That brings me to my final point, and this is the greatest thing of all...

6. Because He Lives, We Have Him.

The devotional writer Samuel D. Gordon knew a woman who had memorized much of the Bible, but age took from her memory all the verses except 2 Timothy 1:12: ...I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. In time, she could only remember: ...what I have committed to Him. When she came to her deathbed, her loved ones noticed her lips moving. Bending low, they heard her repeating one solitary word over and over: Him, Him, Him. Dr. Gordon noted that she had lost the whole Bible but one word. But in that one word, she had the whole Bible.

Do you have Him? Do you have Jesus in your life? Is Easter a living reality for you every day? Do you have His Hope? His Happiness? His Holiness? His Heaven? His Healing? Do you have Him?

Today it's my privilege to invite you to become a follower of Jesus Christ who is alive and present here today. You ask, "What do I have to do?" You have to be willing to confess your sins to Him and to turn from them with His help. And you must be willing to ask Him to come into your life as your own personal Lord and Savior. If so, I'd like to ask you to bow your heads and pray this prayer after me:

Dear God, I confess to you that I am an imperfect person, a sinner. I know that You are a holy God who cannot tolerate sin. Yet I believe that You sent Jesus Christ to bear my sins on the cross. Today I am confessing my sins and asking Jesus Christ to come into my life and to save my soul. I receive Him now as my personal Savior and Lord. Help me to live for Him from this day forth. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

GOD IN THREE PERSONS – BLESSED TRINITY (PART 6)

Robert Morgan

John 14:16-17

The Holy Spirit

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.

The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

John 14:16-17

Today is our Day of Celebration, a day of thanksgiving for God's leading during the past several years in the expansion and renovation of our facilities. And providentially today in our series of messages entitled God in Three Persons: Blessed Trinity, we are coming to the subject of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, who is the force and energy behind all that our church (or any church) does in this world. I'm reminded of the two old songs. One says, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down." The other is a little children's song we sang when I was in Sunday School, "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning." That's still the way I feel today. All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down; so, Lord, give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning; keep me burning till the break of day.

The reason that we feel that way is because of what the Bible teaches about the Third Person of the Trinity, who is the Holy Spirit, and we feel that way even more passionately when we understand two aspects of His person and work.

The Identity of the Holy Spirit

The first is the identity of the Holy Spirit. Who is He? (1) The Holy is a Person, not just a force or an influence. Jill Briscoe talks about this in her book, A Little Pot of Oil. She wrote that she was six years old when the German Luftwaffe bombarded Liverpool during the Battle of Britain. The docks were pounded night after night, forcing Jill's family and friends into the bomb shelters. One night in her fear she tried frantically to remember the Apostles' Creed, which was recited in her classroom at school. It began, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." And then it goes on to say, "...and in Jesus Christ...." The explosions and the bombing were so intense that Jill repeated those words over and over to calm herself.

But then she got to the line that said, “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” and she wondered who in the world that was. The last thing she wanted to think about in those dismal bomb shelters was a ghost, let alone a “holy” ghost. All in all, it was a disquieting thought to her, and that memory stayed with her for many years.

It was only after she had become a Christian during her college days at Cambridge that she finally came back full circle to the question she had asked as a six-year-old girl in a Liverpool bomb shelter: Who is the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit?

“In the years following,” wrote Jill Briscoe, “I have never stopped learning about the Spirit’s sweet, abiding presence. He has drawn me to Christ as Savior and Lord and has ignited a passion in my soul for those who do not know Him. He has taught me how to pray when I didn’t have a clue what to say, enlightened my mind to the Scriptures and thoroughly applied them to my life, and overwhelmed me with grace. He has strengthened me when I was weak, humbled me when I was proud, and sensitized me to sin. In fact, He has been all that I have needed Him to be, whenever I have needed Him.” (Jill Briscoe, *A Little Pot of Oil* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), chapter 1, quote on p. 22.)

Notice that she used the pronoun “He.” The Holy Spirit is always referred to as “He” in Scripture, not as “It.” The Holy Spirit is a person who possesses the attributes of personhood. According to the Bible—

- He thinks
- He knows
- He teaches
- He testifies
- He guides
- He speaks
- He prays
- He loves
- He feels
- He can be grieved
- He can make choices.

(2) He is not only a person; He is a divine person.

He is God. There are many ways to see this in the Scripture, but one of the simplest is to notice how co-equal He is in the basic formulas in the Bible. We are commanded to baptize people in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We’re to repeat the Apostolic Benediction in 2 Corinthians about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Everywhere He is seen alongside the Father and Son in perfect agreement and unity.

But let me show you another interesting passage. In Acts 5, we’re introduced to a couple named Ananias and Sapphira who tried to deceive the early church. Look at verses 3ff: Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.

When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he was lying to God.

We also notice as we study this subject in the Bible, that the Holy Spirit bears the divine names. He is called:

- My Spirit
- The Spirit of God
- The Spirit of Our God
- The Spirit of the Lord
- The Spirit of the Lord God
- The Spirit of Christ
- The Spirit of Holiness
- The Spirit of Wisdom
- The Spirit of Counsel
- The Spirit of Truth
- The Spirit of Might
- The Spirit of Power

- The Spirit of Glory
- The Breath of the Almighty

The Holy Spirit also shares the divine attributes or characteristics:

- He is eternal and everlasting
- He is omnipotent and all-powerful
- He is omnipresent and everywhere present
- He is omniscient and all-knowing

And yet, (3), He is distinct from the Father and the Son. This is so obvious that it's hard to miss it wherever you turn in the Bible. A few weeks ago as I was thinking about this, my daily Bible reading was in Acts 5, when Peter and the Apostles were summoned before the Jewish Ruling Council and taken to task for preaching the Gospel of the resurrection of Christ. Look at Peter's response in Acts 5:29-32: Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.

Notice the distinctions there between the three members of the Trinity. You have God the Father in the first part of the passage, then the emphasis shifts to God the Son, and then it ends with God the Spirit. God the Father is the Sovereign Controller. God the Son is the Sacrificial Savior. God the Holy Spirit is the Divine Enabler.

One other example will suffice. Our initial text today was John 14:16, in which Jesus said: And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor (parakletos = In the Greek, παράκλητος – par'a-clay-tos; literally, one who comes alongside to help) to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. Notice that word "another." Jesus is our great Counselor or Comforter or Helper. But when He went to heaven, He promised that He would send another Counselor or Comforter or Helper. The Spirit is God, but He is distinct from the Father and the Son.

The Imparting of the Holy Spirit

So the Holy Spirit is a person, He is a divine person and a member of the Godhead, and yet He is not the Father and He is not the Son. Now if you want to understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the Bible and in Christian history and in our own lives, we have to notice something very important about His imparting—how He is bestowed and given to us according to Scripture.

In the epochs of history, we see Him

(1) At the Creation, superintending or hovering over of birth of Planet Earth. It is fascinating to me that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the second verse in the Bible. Genesis 1:1-2 says: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

(2) And then we see Him throughout the Old Testament and in the Gospels, working in a particular way in the days from Adam to Jesus. During this epoch, it was the Holy Spirit who came upon certain men and women at certain times for certain tasks that had been assigned to them from the Lord. Let me give you some examples:

- Exodus 31:1ff: Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze. This was a craftsman who was working on the furnishings for the Tabernacle, and God endowed him with the Holy Spirit for that task.
- Numbers 11:16ff: The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is in you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.
- Judges 15:14ff: They bound (Samson) with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

- Now, look at the story of King Saul. In 1 Samuel 10, Samuel anointed Saul with oil, which was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and he told him in verse 6: “the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power.” In verses 9ff., we read: As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul’s heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him; the Spirit of God came upon him in power.
- But now, look at what happened. Saul was disobedient and insubordinate and rebellious; and Samuel anointed David to replace him. Look at 1 Samuel 16:13: So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah. Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul....
- Later, when David sinned against the Lord in the Bathsheba affair, notice what David prayed in Psalm 51: Do not cast me from Your presence, or take Your Holy Spirit from me.

So in the Old Testament, we are nowhere told that the Holy Spirit indwelt every believer. We’re simply told that the Holy Spirit came upon certain people at certain times to equip and empower them for certain works. And just as the Holy Spirit came upon them, the Holy Spirit could be withdrawn.

One of the most important aspects of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the Old Testament was in the inspiring of the Hebrew prophets and the Hebrew Scriptures. David said in 2 Samuel 23:2:

The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; His word was on my tongue.

Later the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:21:

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Now, when we turn to the Gospels we see that Jesus and John the Baptist were the final recipients of this Old Testament economy of the Holy Spirit. Notice the prophecy given about John the Baptist by the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:13ff.

The angel said to (Zechariah): “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

And then Christ came, and at His baptism recorded in Matthew 3, the Holy Spirit descended on Him and it was seen visibly by the people who were present, for the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove, and Jesus was empowered and equipped for the ministry that was before Him.

This was predicted by the Prophet Isaiah:

- Isaiah 11: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord....

Fifty chapters later, Isaiah 61 says:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

John 3:34 says that God gave the Spirit without measure to Christ.

In Acts 1:1, Luke said that Jesus gave instructions to His apostles “through the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 10:38 says:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil.

So in the Old Testament era and even to the days of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked in particular and individual and isolated ways, coming upon certain people at certain times, to empower them to do specific works for the Kingdom of God.

But throughout these days there are indications that a day was coming in which the Holy Spirit would be more liberally poured out on God's people. The prophet Joel predicted in Joel 2:28: And afterward I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

In John 7, Jesus Himself made a prediction: If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. Notice John's commentary on this statement in the next verse: By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

In John 14:16-17, Jesus said something very important and He used two very interesting prepositions:

I will ask the Father and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit lived with them and will be (future tense) in them.

In John 16, He added,

I tell you the truth: it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He said:

I am going to send you what My Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49).

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples,

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be My witnesses.

And that brings us to:

(3) The Day of Pentecost, which is described in Acts 2:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly the sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit....

Notice:

- They were all together
- The sound filled the whole house
- The tongues of fire rested on each of them
- They were all filled with the Holy Spirit

And at that moment the church of Jesus Christ was really born in this world. At that moment, a new economy or epoch or dispensation started. On that day of Pentecost, a new chapter in the history of this world was opened. From that moment and until the church is taken away from this world, every believer at the moment of conversion is indwelt and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

That's the marvel and miracle and ministry of the church.

It is as though there are millions of Moses in this world. Millions of Gideons and Samsons. Millions of Samuels and Davids. Millions of John the Baptists and millions of Jesus Christs.

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was rationed, as it were. In the New Testament He was released to empower the Church of

Jesus Christ to take the Name of Jesus Christ to all the nations of the world.

This is the age of grace, the age of missions, the age of evangelism, the age of the Church, the age of the Spirit. "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words," said the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:4, "but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."

He told the Thessalonians,

"Our Gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction."

Dr. A. J. Gordon once told of visiting the Chicago World's Fair and in the distance he saw a man dressed in bright and flowing clothes and he was turning a crank on a water pump and the water was gushing out of a pipe. Gordon said to himself, "There is a man who is working hard and accomplishing splendid results." But as he drew closer, he saw that the man was made of wood, and instead of the man turning the crank and making the water flow, the flow of water was turning the crank and making the man go.

That's the way it should be with us. It's not a matter of what we're accomplishing for the Lord in our own strength, it's a matter of what He's accomplishing through us by means of the river of living water that flows from our innermost being. The Holy Spirit supplies the power and He achieves the results for His glory.

Or—to change the figure, let's each one have this as our prayer as we dedicate this church afresh to Him: "Lord, give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning; keep me burning till the break of day."

BE OF GOOD CHEER! I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD

Robert Morgan

John 16:33

This week I received a delightful letter from our soldier in Iraq, Loren Bailey, who came to faith in Christ here at not long before shipping out. I'd like to read you a little of what he wrote as an introduction to our Bible study this morning.

Dear Pastor Rob,

This is the desert, but it still gets very cold at night. It drops about 20 to 30 degrees from day to night. Food here isn't bad, at least when we get some. Because of the improvised explosive devices (I.E.D.s), our vehicles don't always make it back with food and water supplies. Don't worry. We always get a minimum one meal a day here and we have a very large stockpile of water in one of our bunkers. Speaking of IED's we got hit by one today. This may not sound funny but what happened afterward was. My fellow brothers-in-arms (referring to a couple of members of the Iraqi National Guard), lekar (pronounced eye-car) and Kohail were walking out to inspect a civilian car when it exploded. They were about 15 meters away, and both got hit with shrapnel, lekar in the face and Kohail in the knees. Both injuries were superficial and nowhere near serious. But they both were blown back about 100 feet or so. The hilarious part is when they got up, they both looked each other up and down for other injuries. They stopped and started yelling and laughing. lekar came back screaming, "Yee-Haw! I'm still alive! Praise God Almighty, I'm alive!" He had the biggest smile in the world on his face.

This reminds me of Winston Churchill's famous quote: "There is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at without result." Loren continued his letter to say this:

When he got back, he asked me to help him do something. I said sure, and he asked if I would pray to God for thanksgiving with him. God works in profound ways. I was not hit by the way. I'm more of the sniper target type. I have all the antennas and radios on me. Snipers seem to like us most. The sniper threat here is higher than anywhere else in Iraq, as well as the IED threat.

Then Loren continued:

I am so glad your church came into my life. Jesus has been the BEST companion over here. He listens to my every prayer and answers me every morning with renewed strength and a clear mind. I don't know if I can ever thank you for helping me with my decision to accept Christ. Thank you so very much.

Well, the Bible teaches that we're all in the combat zone of life, and we're faced with Satanic IEDs and demonic snipers every day. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." Even in a war zone, we can

have a peace that passes all understanding. We can find One who listens to our prayers every day and answers every morning with renewed strength and a clear mind. And that's the subject of our message today.

We're in a series of messages entitled "Breaking Through: Columns in the Clouds," on the five "Be of Good Cheer" statements of Christ. We're already looked at three of these:

- Ø Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven.
- Ø Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you whole.
- Ø Be of good cheer. It is I; do not be afraid.

Now this morning we're going to look at the fourth time Jesus spoke those words by joining Him and His disciples in the Upper Room on the eve of His crucifixion and death. John 13-17 contain what we call the Upper Room Discourse, the words Christ spoke to His disciples shortly before He was arrested and dragged away to be condemned. I'm only going to deal with one verse today—John 16:33: These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

In this one verse, the Lord Jesus gives us His several principles for inner peace.

In Me You May Have Peace

Notice how deliberately he spoke in John 16:33: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace." The word "may" is used in the sense of "can" or "will." Jesus said: In Me you will have inner peace. Our peace comes from being in union with Christ.

This is arguably the most powerful little phrase in the Bible—in Me. In Him. In Christ. It was the very theme of the message of the apostle Paul, who used that phrase about 160 times. What does it mean to be in Christ? In means that we are in union with Him, that we have united our lives with Him, that we are in Christ and He is in us, that we have received Him as our personal savior and He has come to live within us by His Holy Spirit.

Suppose we were walking alongside the ocean and I saw a bottle. I unscrewed the top, walked over the surf, and filled the bottle up with ocean water. Then suppose I screwed the top back on and tossed the bottle as far as I could out into the surf. The water would be in the bottle, and the bottle would be in the water.

When we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord, He comes to live within us by the Holy Spirit, which is likened in the Bible to living water. And we are positioned in Him. We are in Christ and Christ is in us—and from that moment on He gives us a set of promises that meets every need in our lives both for time and for eternity. From that moment, all our sins are forgiven. From that moment, we have eternal life. From that moment, we have an abundant life. From that moment, we know we're going to heaven. From that moment, we know that all things work together for good to those who love Him. From that moment, we know He has a purpose for us.

And in Him we have peace. Amy Carmichael, in one of her prescient observations from Scripture, pointed out that Jesus did not say, "These things I have spoken to you, that in your circumstances you might have peace." He did not say, "These things I have spoken to you that in the love of others you might have peace." He said: "In Me!"

D. L. Moody once said that if he saw a man in a cellar, shivering some from the cold and dampness and trying to see in the dim light, he would say to him, "Come on up, out into the sunshine. It's warm and bright up here." But suppose the man said, "No, I'm trying to see if I can make my own light down here, and I am trying to work up a warm feeling."

That's where a lot of people are today. They're in the cellar of life, trying to generate a little light and trying to work up a warm feeling when what they really need is the light and the warmth of the sunlight of Jesus Christ. He said, "In Me you will have peace." So our peace comes from being in union with Christ.

These Things I Have Spoken...

But here's the second thing. Our sense of inner peace grows from being in His Word. Look at this sentence again: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace."

What did Jesus mean by "These things I have spoken to you"? There are three dimensions to that. In the very broadest sense, we

can claim the entirety of the Word of God. Every verse of every chapter of every book. The entire Bible was given for our peace and well-being. In another sense, Jesus was perhaps thinking of all the teachings He had given to His disciples since He called them from their nets by the shore of Galilee. When He spoke here in John 16, He was at the end of His earthly ministry. Within a few hours, He would be arrested, convicted, condemned, and crucified. No doubt His thoughts were stretching back over the three years of His ministry and recalling all the things He had spoken, the truths He had revealed, and the lessons He had uttered.

But the most immediate and accurate interpretation is to say that “These Things” referred specifically to the words He had just given in this Upper Room Discourse. These chapters, John 13-17, are remarkable for two reasons.

First, Jesus spoke these words in an atmosphere of incredible tension, trauma, and fear. A sense of foreboding filled that room like a malevolent fog. Fear flickered like ominous shadows against the wall. The devil himself entered the room and took possession of Judas. The drama of all the ages was about to be unleashed like a nuclear device in that very room. It was the final moments of the Messiah’s ministry, when He washed the disciples’ feet, instituted His Last Supper, dipped his bread in the bowl with Judas, and loved His disciples to the very end.

Second, even though Jesus spoke these words in an atmosphere of incredible tension, His message was one of supernatural peace and tranquility. The contrast between the situation Jesus faced and the syllables He spoke is startling. Sometimes we don’t see it because of the chapter divisions, but let me show you. Look at the end of chapter 13, starting with verse 36:

Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.”

Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.”

Jesus answered him, “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied me three times.”

Imagine the gasp, the pause, the shock, the hurt, the mummer, the outburst caused by that accusation. A fresh vibration of emotion rolled through the room like the rumble of thunder or the growling of an animal, followed by a tense silence. And then Jesus said, “Well, don’t worry about it.”

Let not your heart be troubled.

Let not your heart be troubled! Here we are, tucked away in an Upper Room, hidden like spies behind enemy lines, meeting behind locked doors, the whole city on the verge of explosion. You’re speaking in ominous, enigmatic tones and saying things we don’t want to hear. We have a traitor among us, and You’ve just told us that we’re going to fall apart at the seams and deny You before the rooster crows. The shadow of sudden arrest and merciless torture hangs over us, and everything we believe in is about to be drained from our lives like the blood will be drained from Your body while you hang like a carcass of an animal on a splintered cross. And you say: Don’t let your hearts be troubled!

But in the rest of His Upper Room message, Jesus is going to tell them one reason after another why, even at that black moment of despair, they should be optimistic, hopeful, peaceful, strong, and serene.

First, He said, you can trust me. Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.

Second, we have the brightest future that could possibly be imagined: 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.

Third, Jesus said, “I may be going away, but I am coming back.” And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

Fourth, we have a great work to do. Verse 12 says: Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the words that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.

Fifth, we have absolute assurance of answered prayer. Verse 13 says: And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

Sixth, we have someone else who is going to help us—the Holy Spirit. Verse 16 says: I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him or knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you.

Seventh, we have the very peace of Jesus Himself at our disposal. Verse 27 says: Peace I leave with You, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

Eighth, we have the very joy of Jesus Himself at our disposal. John 15:11 says: These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.

We don't have time to work our way through the entire Upper Room discourse, but I don't know of any portion of Scripture that contains more comfort, more insight, and more peace than these several chapters of Scripture. And Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace." Our peace is based in Christ and it grows as we get into His Words.

In the World You Will Have Tribulation

But we aren't finished with our key text—John 16:33, because the verse goes on to give us a warning. Our sense of inner peace which is based on our union with Christ and which grows as we study the words of Christ—that sense of inner peace is going to be under constant assault from the world. It is challenged by the world. In the very next sentence, Jesus warned: In the world you will have tribulation. You will have problems in the world. You will have opposition. You will have difficult circumstances. You will have persecution. You will have Satanic attacks. You will have misunderstandings and hurts and heartaches and things that will challenge your faith.

We know that is true. The other day I received a letter from a young man in Hong Kong who read something that I had written and wanted to ask me about it. I have his permission to read to you his letter.

Just want to say hello to you. I have been a Christian for many years, and have completely read the whole Bible around five times. But the trials in my life always bug me, and there are times I even doubt God. I know God is sovereign, but I can't understand why He allows some painful things to happen to me. Sometimes the trials make me bitter, and I don't see how these help me in my spiritual growth. In fact, these trials weaken my faith, take up a lot of time so that I do not have much time for my church activities. I have a problem understanding why God allows some things to happen. Thank you for your time. Regards, Johnno.

I know just how he feels, and so do you. I've never expressed it quite as honestly as he did, but we've all been there. But Jesus predicted it. In this world we will have troubles. Tribulation. Pressure. Stress. But He did not end His teachings there. The very last thing He said in this Upper Room Discourse before beginning His great prayer to the heavenly Father in chapter 17, His last official sentence of teaching to His disciples, the concluding sentence of His three years of ministry, the last syllables of the last sermon that He preached prior to Calvary, His last word to us is:

BUT BE OF GOOD CHEER;
I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD.

But Be of Good Cheer. I Have Overcome...

Now when Jesus said that, He was on the lam, moments from capture, hours from scourging, and just one evening away from death by torture on the cross. Yet He said, "I have overcome the world." What did He mean? I think He meant this:

I have come into the world and lived here for thirty-three years without sinning, so that I could serve as an innocent, sacrificial victim whose blood can atone for the sins of all the world.

I am not going to be killed; I am going to lay my life down willingly.

And if I lay my life down willingly, I will take it up again. And the grave cannot hold Me. And death cannot keep Me. And I'm going to burst from that tomb like a fist through a paper bag. And I am going to penetrate the skies, resume My throne in glory, build My church on earth, come again in My own good timing, banish the devil, set up My kingdom, judge this planet, usher in eternity, and give My people the eternal life they have always wanted and needed.

I have overcome the world.

And if Jesus Christ can overcome the world, He can come over your life and overcome your anxieties and make all things work

together for good in your experiences.

And so He says in His last ex cathedra utterance: Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. As the old hymn says:
Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?
On Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.
(Edward H. Bickersteth, Jr., 1875)

GOD IN THREE PERSONS, BLESSED TRINITY (PART 8)

Robert Morgan

John 17

Today we're continuing our series of studies on the Trinity, and I have to tell you that I had originally intended this to be a five-sermon series and it has turned out to be ten messages. I've have a general impression that everyone is staying with me through this series, more or less, and that there haven't been too many casualties, so to speak. But in case you've gotten lost, I am planning a one-hour seminary summary (complete with lectern outline and PowerPoint and a Q&A) on Sunday night, October 19, and we'll try to pull it all together that evening.

For now, let me tell you where we are today. Today we are starting Major Point Number Six. To review, here are Major Points Numbers One through Five.

1. The Trinity is the Most Unique Aspect of Christian Truth.
2. The Trinity is Easy to State: There is one God who eternally exists in three persons.
3. The Trinity is Impossible to Understand
4. The Trinity is Revealed Progressively in the Bible. It is implied in the Old Testament and more fully disclosed in the New Testament.
5. The Trinity is Extrapolated From Scripture.

This last point is where we've been for the last several weeks. In order to demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity, we have to study the Bible and determine that it teaches that God the Father is God, but He is distinct from God the Son and God the Spirit. Then we have to do the same with God the Son (and I spent two or three weeks discussing the deity or God-nature of Jesus Christ). And then we have to do the same thing with God the Holy Spirit, and that was the subject of our last two messages—the identity, imparting, and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Now today we are coming to our next major heading. Major Point 6:

6. There are Relationships and Roles Within the Trinity.

As we study this subject in the Bible, we get indications that there are observable roles and relationships within the Trinity. Just like there are roles and relationships in the home and in the church and in any organization, there are roles and relationships within the

Trinity. We cannot peer very deeply into this; it's too deep and mysterious and the Bible only gives us some clues and hints. But we do have those clues and hints given to us purposefully in Scripture, and we can learn some things from them that actually have profound implications on our own attitudes.

So I want to deal with this today and next time, and our Scripture reading today is from John 17, which is the great priestly prayer Jesus offered just before He was arrested and crucified. This is one of the most profound passages in all the Scriptures, and it is God the Son talking to God the Father about the eternal roles and relationships that exist between them and among the members of the Trinity. Join me as I read some selected verses from John 17:

After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began...."

All I have is Yours, and all You have is Mine. And glory has come to Me through them....

My prayer is not for them (the disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one....

Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world.

The essence of worship is giving glory to God, glorifying Him, praising Him, and building Him up. God demands and deserves glory, and God possesses all glory. But when we talk about God glorifying Himself, we are not talking about a narcissistic self-glory. We aren't talking about self-glorification or self-love or self-exaltation. When we talk about God glorifying Himself, we mean that the Members of the Trinity are deferring glory to One Another. God is glorified on the divine level by the Father glorifying the Son, the Son glorifying the Father, the Spirit glorifying the Son. This is a truth that runs like a thread through the Gospel of John. For example:

- Jesus said in John 8:50ff.: I am not seeking glory for Myself.... If I glorify Myself, My glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the One who glorifies Me.
- In John 12, Jesus said: Now is my heart troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your Name!
- This is even why Jesus answers our prayers, because in doing so it brings glory to the Father. In John 14:13, He told us: And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.
- And in John 16:14, Jesus said about the Holy Spirit, "He will bring glory to Me."
- But there is nothing like the richness of this subject in John 17, as Jesus pours out His heart to the Father in the most earnest and poignant prayer found within the pages of Scripture, and He said: "Father, glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You." Now there is a great implication of this for our lives, and this goes to the very heart of all our relationships. When we love one another and seek to build up one another, we are entering into the patterns of the Holy Trinity and participating in the ancient and everlasting love of the Triune God. When we love one another and glorify one another and build up one another, we are experiencing God Himself. We are reflecting the roles and relationships within the Trinity and projecting them into our lives. It is the Trinity spilling over into the church. We are to praise one another, to appreciate one another, to build one another up.

Within the Trinity, we see the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, the Spirit loving the Son. The Three Members of the Trinity aspire not for Their own glory but for the glory of the other. Within the Trinity, we have a God who loves His neighbor as Himself. Within the Trinity we have Someone who has a face-to-face relationship with one who is like Himself, but different.

This is why the apostle Paul took the Trinitarian conception of the person of Jesus Christ and applied it to the church in the passage we looked at a few weeks ago, Philippians 2. In reading back through this passage in preparation for this message, I noticed something I had never seen before. We have the entire Trinity here, and the truth is applied to our own relationships:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make My joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love...

The same love we see between Christ and the Spirit...

...being one in spirit and purpose....

One as God is One, though Three.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others....

Just as the Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father and the Spirit glorifies the Son.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God (the Father) exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father...

And then, to make sure we don't miss the point, Paul gets back to it in verses 14ff: Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation.

When we love and encourage and praise and build up one another, we are acting in Trinitarian love. When we accuse and attack and tear down and sow discord, we are acting according to the wisdom from below. One person who has helped me with some of these insights is Dr. Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. He said in his lecture this subject, "When you have people who don't know how to express gratitude, who don't know how to communicate love and affection and praise and encouragement, the problem is that that person is not acting like God."

That's what's wrong in so many of our homes, churches, and other relationships. When we understand the nature of the Trinity, we understand the eternal and divine mechanics behind the way we should praise and glorify and build up one another.

The power of encouragement and edifying is crucial. I read recently of a freshman in college who hit a very, very rough stretch. He was hit by a series of hurts and disappointments that left him more depressed than he thought was possible. One day he was walking across campus to catch his bus home, and he saw an old man walking toward him. He'd never seen this man before, but this freshman knew that his own depression and pain was all over his face. In fact, he was fighting back tears, and he turned his head to pass the man because he was embarrassed. But the man moved directly in front of him and blocked his path. The freshman looked up, and the stranger said in a quiet voice, "Whatever is wrong will pass. You're going to be OK. Just hang on." Then he smiled and walked away.

The writer of the story said, "That was thirty years ago, but I have never forgotten that moment." The power of encouragement came into him like a jolt of divine adrenaline, and that brief encounter became a moment that would live forever in the chambers of his heart.

One Another

Now, the New Testament letters (the epistles) apply this to our own experiences with a powerful little biblical phrase of two words—one another, and that phrase reflects the Trinity. God is One, and yet God is One Another. I'd like to conclude today by showing you some of the "one another" passages in the epistles.

Romans 12:9-10 says, Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.

I had a man named Denny Repko write to me a year or so ago who had worked for many years with the Navigators, which is a wonderful worldwide ministry, especially to service men and women and to college students. He said that in 1960, he had six Navigator buddies from college and from his early years on the Navigator staff. He wrote a letter to one of them, told about his life and struggles and victories and insights. And this friend wrote a similar letter and sent both of them to the third man. The third man

added his letter, and so the letters made the rounds among all seven men. They have been doing that regularly for forty years. They are scattered all over the world still, and they get together for a reunion every three years. But twice a year, this chain letter goes from one to the other, and Denny said, "The encouragement and love the letters have been is incalculable." Well, we all have to find ways of building on our friendships and being devoted to one another in brotherly love.

And then look at the next phrase: Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10). This goes right to our Trinity model in John 17, where the Father honors the Son and the Son honors the Father and the Spirit honors the Son. Ask yourself, "How can I honor my wife? How can I honor my husband? How can I honor my fellow LifeGroup member?"

A few weeks ago I had a husband who came to see me. He was distressed because his marriage, which had been very good, but had become a little bit strained and maybe a little threadbare. He had some frustrations. I told him to humble himself and forget about himself and just to take care of his wife, to pour himself into loving her and meeting her needs. Sometime later he sent me an e-mail and he said, "I took your advice and it was like flipping a switch. You said to put away my pride and cherish and treat my wife with gentleness and respect. Of course in my pride I always assume that I am respecting her, but when I put some conscious effort into it, it made a big difference. We are so much closer now, and the romance is back. I wouldn't have thought our problems were serious, but when I put myself in her shoes and try to think and feel the thoughts and feelings I imagine she was having, I realize she really needed a different kind of attention than I was giving her." That's what it means to honor another above yourself.

And look down at verse 16: Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Let's go over to Galatians 5:13: You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

Ephesians 4:32 says: Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 5:19ff. says: Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The next verse, Ephesians 5:21, says, Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Colossians 3:16 says: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...

This is one of the reasons we encourage everyone to be in a LifeGroup. One of the great purposes of LifeGroups is relationship-building and friendship building, the kinds of relationships and friendships in which we can teach and admonish one another. It's sort of like going to a Titan's game. When you're in that stadium with 60,000 or 70,000 people there's a sense of unity and excitement—at least among the home fans. But do you know one of the reasons for that? It's the tail-gate parties before the game where friends and family get together and enjoy each other. We don't have 60,000 or 70,000 people in our worship services, but we have a large number and we have a sense of unity and excitement here. But one of the reasons is that we have these tailgate parties going on each week, which we call LifeGroups, when we can enjoy and encourage one another. And we can teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and with the Word of God.

Hebrews 3:13 says: Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

And then, as it specifically relates to church attendance: And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

One evening a couple of weeks ago, I was, frankly, worried and weary, and I drove by the church and noticed several cars. There usually are cars parked here for various things every evening of the week, but for some reason I decided to pull in and see what was going on. It was the Young at Hearts having a dinner. I had not known about it, but I stayed awhile and took a couple of plates home for Katrina and me for supper. And that hour of fellowship was like a tonic for me. I told Katrina about it, and she said, "Yes, people at church are my family. I'm closer to them than to my own flesh and blood." The old song says, "The fellowship of kindred hearts is like to that above." Our fellowship is an overflow of the fellowship that exists within the Trinity.

And then in the book of James, we have a negative: Brothers, do not slander one another. Slander and accusations and gossip and an argumentative spirit voids all the other “one anothers” and is very destructive .

And then Peter wrote: Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others.

Later in the same book: All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

These are not all of the “one anothers” in the letters of the Bible; it’s only a sampling. But just look at the list:

- Be devoted to one another
- Love one another
- Honor one another
- Live in harmony with one another
- Serve one another
- Forgive one another
- Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
- Submit to one another
- Admonish one another
- Encourage one another
- Do not slander one another
- Offer hospitality to one another
- Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another

Each and every one of these represents the relationship of love and fellowship that exists within the Trinity itself, and when they spill over into our homes and churches and relations, we are Trinitarian people who are experiencing and imaging the ancient love that exists within the Godhead itself. And you know, that spills over into evangelism.

This week I met a Japanese man who is in his 70s. Until he was 67 years old, he knew nothing about Christianity. In fact, he knew nothing about any religion. He had no beliefs whatsoever of a religious nature. He was totally secular. But then word came that his daughter, to whom he was devoted, had died suddenly. And he found among her effects a Bible, and as he looked through it he realized that she had become a Christian. Her church took care of the arrangements and they flooded him with love and care. They made him feel like he was the most important person in the world during his time of grief, and he had never seen or felt such love. He started attending church, and soon, at the age of 67, this man who had never known anything about the Lord before, opened his life and received Christ as Savior. He soon became part of a Christian businessmen’s group, and that’s where I met him during a speaking engagement. He told me, “It was the love that overflowed from that church that brought me to Christ.” And I can tell you that the love that overflowed on him had first overflowed from the Trinity itself.

Perhaps the most amazing verse in John 17 is this one: (Father), I have given them (you and me) the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one.

In Christ, the divine glory is extended even to sinners like us, that we might be one as He is One in Three and Three in One. Every one of us, out of reverence for Jesus Christ, can encourage and serve and love one another

The Enemy: Moral Relativism

Robert Morgan

John 18:37-38

Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” John 18:37-38

We are currently in a series of messages entitled Night Vision, looking through the night-goggles of Scripture to locate and identify

some of the great enemies that are massing against the gates of the church of Jesus Christ in these last days.

We began on Easter Sunday by looking at the subject of death itself, which the Bible calls “the last enemy.” Then we looked at Militant Islam. Last week, we studied the discredited hypotheses of evolution. Now today, I want to deal with the subject of moral relativism.

I want to begin in an unusual way today by talking about the Roman Catholic Church and its new pope, Benedict XVI. Obviously, I’m not a Roman Catholic and I do not subscribe to Roman Catholic doctrine and dogma. But interestingly, it is the new pope that has brought this subject back into the headlines; and on this particular issue, I very much agree with him.

This is what happened. When Pope John Paul II died last year, the College of Cardinals selected German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to become Pope Benedict XVI. Shortly afterward, I read a fascinating book analyzing his election, and the writer explained why Ratzinger was elevated to the papacy.

Back in the days of the Cold War, when the Berlin Wall was still standing like an ugly scar across the city and the Soviet Union was threatening the world with nuclear apocalypse, the old pope died and the College of Cardinals choose a fiercely anti-Communist Polish churchman to become pope—John Paul II—because at that time the greatest enemy to the Roman Catholic Church in the Western world was Communism. Almost instantly Pope John Paul II starting making history-altering trips into his native Eastern Europe, and I remember sitting transfixed in front of the television, watching the news reports from Warsaw as Pope John Paul returned to his homeland and attracted such immense crowds—millions of people flooding the streets and squares—that it became only a matter of time before the old Communist Block collapsed.

But now, a generation has passed; and the church in the west is facing another enemy, one that is even more dangerous than Soviet Communism—and it is moral relativism. So when John Paul died, the College of Cardinals selected an intellectual and a scholar whose entire life had equipped him to combat this enemy.

John Allen, Jr., the CNN Vatican correspondent who wrote a book on the election of Cardinal Ratzinger, put it this way:

We can say that Pope Benedict XVI believes relativism is ‘the gravest problem of our time’ because it subverts traditional Christian teaching; because it undercuts efforts to bring the Gospel to the world; because it fosters utopian political thinking and ultimately totalitarianism; and because it compromises the basis for human rights and leads to abuse of power by the State, even over life and death. Given that diagnosis, one can understand why, for Pope Benedict, the defense of objective truth is not simply a matter of abstract philosophical interest. It is the burning issue of our times, and in an era in which relativism seems to have the upper hand and a social order built on truth is crumbling, it is up to the Church to keep the candle of objective truth burning.”[1]

I’m quoting this paragraph because this isn’t really a Roman Catholic issue; this is an issue that the church of Jesus Christ has faced from its beginning, and even from its pre-Christian origins in early Jewish history. This has been the central issue of Christianity throughout all its history in all three of its major branches (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox).

The entire superstructure of Christianity is based on the foundation that there is a God and that He has spoken and that His divine Word is authoritative. He has revealed His objective and certain truth to humanity; He has done so in His Word; His Word is truth; and this truth is valid and binding across time, culture, and personal experience.

Now some of you may be wondering what in the world I’m talking about, so let me give you a simple definition. What is moral relativism?

In simplest terms, it is the rejection of absolute moral standards, of divinely revealed law, and of transcendent truth.

It is the philosophy of setting one’s own standards by personal preference or societal consensus rather than by the dictates of Scripture.

It’s the natural implication of atheism and evolution, for if there is no God and no Creator, then we’re free to write our own rules and draft our own laws and set our own standards. If there is no absolute right or wrong, then we can do whatever we want.

This isn’t anything new, of course. It’s the oldest human philosophy in the world. It goes back to Genesis 3: “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”

In the Garden of Eden, God established an absolute and objective standard. Since He is God, since He is the Creator of all things, and since He is omnisciently wise and inherently good, He has the prerogative of doing that. He said, "You may eat of any tree in the Garden, but do not eat of this one tree." That wasn't a rule or a law or a standard that Adam and Eve concocted on their own. That was the standard of the God who had created them. But the devil whispered in Eve's ear, saying, "You can disregard God's laws and write your own." And that, in essence, is moral relativism.

It is really nothing more or less than a truth issue, and that's why we're looking at this subject today as we have it laid before us in the Gospel of John, because one of the key concepts that runs through the Fourth Gospel is the idea of and the nature of truth. The words true and truth occur 45 times in this book, and John wants us to know that there is nothing soft or moldable or relative about Truth. If I were a translator of a new version of the Gospel of John, I would spell the word Truth with a capital "T" because that's the way John intends for us to understand it. We'll not look at all 45 occurrences, but let me show you a few critical passages:

John 1:14, 17

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and Truth... For the law was given through Moses, but grace and (objective, timeless, universal, absolute) Truth came through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was the very incarnation of God Himself and He was filled with objective, absolute Truth. He was the personification of Truth. He was Truth itself in human form.

John 3:20-21

For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the Truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen that they have been done in God.

Jesus was saying that those who hold to the Truth live an open life in the light of God's reality, but those who live by situation ethics and moral relativism hate the thought of there being an objective, timeless, absolute body of Truth in the universe.

John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and Truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and Truth.

In other words, you can't just worship God and live your life any way you'd like, for God is the touchstone of reality. He is Truth, and if you worship Him and live for Him you must do so according to the Truth that He reveals in His person and in His Word.

John 8:31-47

These earlier verses have introduced the subject, but now in John 8, Jesus expounds on this entire subject of Truth and Relativism in a major way. Begin reading with me in verse 31:

Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free."

This is a very important passage on this subject, because it tells us two things. First, the basis for all Truth in human literature, knowledge, and conduct is found in the Word of God. When we abide in His Word, we discover the Truth. In His Word, we discover the Truth about God, about life, about death, about holiness, about moral standards, about salvation, about heaven and hell, about right and wrong. The Word of God is the revealed and unchanging Truth of God, and when we study the Bible, we come to know the facts, the Truth.

Second, this Truth is enormously liberating. This points out the demonic and hellish lie of moral relativism. What do the pundits say? They say, "What a constrictive and restrictive religion is Christianity! What rules and regulations! What guilt-producing, unrealistic laws and standards. Let's throw off the shackles of Christian thought and be liberated."

But what happens instead? Two things. First, when followed to its own logical conclusions, moral relativism leads to political totalitarianism. At first glance, it appears to be an intellectual expression of tolerance and appreciation for diversity; but it really opens the door for totalitarianism by undercutting any basis for asserting that there are moral limits to what a secular power can do.

Just look at Nazi Germany. I have never visited the remains of the death camps in Eastern Europe, but I have read that when you visit Auschwitz, there is a plaque on one of the walls bearing this quote from Adolf Hitler: "I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality... we will train young people before whom the world will tremble."

Moral relativism frees people from the "stupid and degrading fallacies" of an enduring moral authority, but in so doing it places the responsibility for establishing our morality in the hands of sinful men and women, and the results can be catastrophic. As Ravi Zacharias says, "There is nothing in history to match the dire ends to which humanity can be led by following a political and social philosophy that consciously and absolutely excludes God."

Moral relativism led to the holocaust, to the era of colonial slavery, and to Apartheid in South Africa. It results in a reversal of moral conduct, and to people calling good evil, and evil good.

And yet, isn't that what most of our movies and television shows and the entire entertainment industry is propagating now? They want to free us from the degrading fallacies of conscience and the restrictive bonds of biblical morality.

But when a society has no divine restraints and no timeless, absolute values of right and wrong, it undercuts any basis for asserting that there are moral limits to political power.

As Dostoevsky said, if God is dead, then everything is justifiable.

That's really what's behind the effort to remove the Ten Commandments from public places. The Ten Commandments express a philosophy, a belief, that there are absolute standards of right and wrong that originate from the holy character of God. Our society wants to discard that philosophy and replace it with whatever seems right at the moment; thus those Ten Commandments are a symbol that our secular society cannot tolerate if it is to be free to follow its own multi-cultural and pluralistic demands.

This is also the backdrop for our society's current debate regarding traditional values.

Moral Relativism closes the door on the sanctity of life and opens the door to abuses in the areas of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, cloning, bioethics, and social engineering.

Moral Relativism closes the door on the concept of traditional marriage between one man and one woman and opens the door to the arrangements of living together, homosexual marriages, polygamy, and every other sort of agreement anyone can think of.

Moral Relativism closes the door to the entire notion of sexual immorality, so pornography, prostitution, and even deviant and disgusting expressions of sexual perversion are permissible if the individual or society decides they are.

Moral Relativism closes the door on humility, freedom, and human restraint, and opens the door to political tyranny by whoever is able to impose his or her moral standards—or lack thereof—on the masses.

Moral relativism, by its very nature, leads to political totalitarianism. And second, moral relativism leads to personal slavery. Let's keep reading from John 8:

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever; therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

Just one example will illustrate this. Let's take pornography. It's the most profitable internet business today on the world wide web; and with our blackberries and Palm Pilots and iPods, it's portable and available day and night.

Now the Bible tells us what is right and wrong in this matter. The Ten Commandments say, "You shall not commit immorality." Job said that he made a covenant with his eyes not to look on a woman with lust. The Psalmist said that he would put no worthless thing before his eyes. Jesus warned that if we look at a woman with lust in our hearts, it is akin to committing sexual immorality. Romans 1 warns against strange and perverted sexual sins. And Ephesians 5 says that among us there should not even be a hint of sexual immorality.

But moral relativism says, "As long as no one is harmed, it's not a bad thing -- and it may be good. How dare anyone tell you what you should or should not have on your iPod!"

And, just like that, a young person or a husband or a father becomes as addicted to pornography as he would to crack cocaine. In casting off moral restraints and rejecting moral standards, a person expects to find freedom but he finds slavery instead. So moral relativism leads to political totalitarianism and to personal slavery.

Well, let's continue reading with verse 34:

Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.... You seek to kill Me, a man who has told you the Truth which I heard from God...."

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the Truth, because there is no Truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell you the Truth, you do not believe Me.

There are two sources of morality in this world—the Truth of God or the opinions of society. One leads to freedom and liberation and happiness and holiness. The other leads to political totalitarianism and personal slavery. Jesus came to give us the Truth, but the human race prefers its own devices.

More Passages in John

Now, just to press home this issue, Jesus continued peppering His messages and sermons with references to objective truth. Because of time, I don't want to expatiate on them, but let me read some of them to you.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the Truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"—John 14:6

"I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper... the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive... but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you"—John 14:16-17

I am the True Vine—John 15:1

But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me—John 15:26

Nevertheless, I tell you the Truth—John 16:7

And then we come to the climatic words of John 17, which is the great High Priestly Prayer that Jesus offered just before His arrest and trial. Notice the way He began:

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh..."

Now, notice that. That's a critical concept. Jesus Christ has authority over all flesh. He is the Lord of all humanity. He is the Creator/Controller of the Universe who alone has the authority to establish the moral code for all the cosmos and for all mankind. And where is that moral code revealed? How does He communicate it to the human race? Look at verse 17:

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth.

Jesus Christ has authority over all the world, and He has revealed His holiness in His Word, and that is the only legitimate and authoritative basis for personal morality or for public law.

Conclusion

Now let's review what we see in the Gospel of John. Here's what we read: The Word was... full of grace and Truth... Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ... Those who worship Him must worship in spirit and Truth... You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free... (I am) a Man who has told you the Truth... I am the way, the Truth, and the life... I am the True vine... I

tell you the Truth... Father... sanctify them by Your Truth. Your Word is Truth.

And against that backdrop, we come to this climatic interchange between Jesus and the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, which encapsulates and summarizes the conflict of the ages.

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

All of human philosophy and social ordering is summed up in that one snippet of conversation that still rings and reverberates through the corridors of the ages. Jesus said to you and me and to the human race: I tell you the Truth. I reveal the Truth. I bear witness to the Truth. I am the very personification of objective, absolute timeless Truth, and My Truth is authoritative and binding across the epochs of time and the cultures of society.

But the human race shrugs, and the philosophers shrug, and Hollywood shrugs, and the social pundits shrug, and they all mutter, "What is Truth?" Their point: "There is no objective truth. Truth is whatever we want it to be." That's the attitude of contemporary society. But the attitude of the Christian is:

The Word of God is strong and sure,
Forevermore it shall endure,
When oceans cease to kiss the shore,
When suns shall set to rise no more...
Upon its firm foundation strong,
I plant my feet thro' the ages long.
(Haldor Linnenas, 1919)

Perhaps today you want to know Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the one who said, "You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free." That one man, Jesus Christ, died and rose again to provide eternal life to all who come to Him in faith. And today I invite you to come to Jesus Christ and let Him change your life.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word...
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled

A IS FOR ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Robert Morgan

John 20:30-31, 1 John 5:13

A couple of years ago, the Fox Television Network introduced a "reality" television show called "The Simple Life" in which television and movie stars, particularly Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, ventured into small town America to see what it was like to live an ordinary, simple life. I've never seen the show, but I think all of us would like a simpler life.

Nearly two hundred years ago, America's great philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, was advocating the same thing in his classic book, *Walden*. He said that to live simply was to live wisely, and that one of the most basic rules for healthy living was to "simplify! Simplify!"

My wife and I have been trying to do that. We call it de-cluttering. It's especially true because of Katrina's wheelchair. We can't have a lot of clutter lying around the house, so we're trying to be as simple and as frugal as we can. I keep thinking of something that Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. He said that he once had three pieces of limestone on his desk as souvenirs or paperweights or something. But he realized they had to be dusted and re-arranged and handled every day while his mind often remained undusted and disarranged; and so he tossed the rocks out the window.

Well, if there's anyone who should be an expert in simplicity, it's the Christian. We are not simple-minded, because we deal with the deepest and most wonderful truths under heaven. But we are simple of heart and simple of lifestyle. And while our beliefs are so deep that the world's greatest philosophers can't fully grasp them, they are simple enough for a child to understand. Success in Christian living comes from remaining close to the simple truths of Jesus and from always coming back to the basics.

We should never stray too far from the basic ABCs of our Christian faith. The great thing about Christianity is its simplicity. Even a child can become a Christian and understand the basic elements of the Christian walk and lifestyle. As long as we stay true to those basics, we'll be successful. In this series of messages, I'd like to devote the five Sundays of July to five essential, basic, fundamental truths and habits of the Christian Life, and we'll do it in ABC order:

- Ø Assurance of Salvation
- Ø Baptism
- Ø Church Involvement
- Ø Daily Devotions
- Ø Evangelism

Today, we'll begin with topic: Assurance of salvation. Can we know without a doubt, for certain, for sure, that we are Christians, born again, saved, converted, children of God, going to heaven when we die?

Some years ago, a lady in our church said, "Well, I hope I'm saved and going to heaven, but I don't think we can really know for sure until we die."

I read about another woman who was dying. On her deathbed, she told her son, "I have tried to be a Christian and believe I have trusted in Jesus, but I am scared and uncertain. I can only hope that I'm all right. I can only hope I'm going to heaven."

Another man who had been saved out of a horrible life of alcohol and drug addiction had similar concerns. One day, during a period of trouble and discouragement, he relapsed and started drinking again. "I'm not going to heaven now," he said. "I'm no longer a Christian."

Another family had a loved one at death's door, and they came to me wanting me to somehow assure them that their dying relative was really going to heaven. "How can we be sure?" they said. Now this man was a wonderful Christian, but for some reason his family was insecure about his eternal destination.

These are not uncommon experiences. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, once wrote, "My experience in counseling thousands of students and laymen through the years since I met Christ personally has convinced me that there are literally tens of thousands of good, faithful church-goers who have received Christ in prayer, but who are not sure of their salvation."^[1]

How different was the attitude of the apostle Paul! He exclaimed, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Elsewhere he wrote, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Even in the Old Testament, the patriarch Job said: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26, NKJV, emphasis mine).

The Psalmist David said, "Now I know that the Lord saves His anointed" (Psalm 20:6, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Let me begin with three preliminary thoughts:

Ø Assurance of salvation isn't a matter of whether or not we feel saved. I like what the old Bible teacher, Dr. R. A. Torrey, wrote in his book for new Christians: "We may feel forgiven, or we may not feel forgiven, but that does not matter. It is not a question of what we feel but of what God says."^[2]

Ø It isn't a matter of knowing the exact time and place of your conversion. Some people are bothered because they do not know exactly when and where they were born again; but consider this: There is not a person in this room who can personally remember

the moment you squirmed out of your mother's womb and were born, naked and wailing and hungry. But neither is there a person in this room who doubts that it happened. You may not remember, but God does. It's not a question of what we remember, but of what God has done and of what God has told us in His Word. And what has God told us in His Word? Acts 16:31 says: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." There is no "maybe" or "might be." The Bible uses the vocabulary of certainty: "You will be saved."

Ø On the other hand, it is possible to have a false assurance of salvation. That is, some people think they are saved and going to heaven, but they are mistaken. In Matthew 7:21-23 is a stark passage of Scripture in which Jesus says: Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the Day of Judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, "We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles." But I will tell them, "I will have nothing to do with you!" (CEV).

So there are two vitally important questions to ask and to answer. First, do you know Christ? Second, do you know that you know Christ? Are you saved, and do you have assurance of your salvation?

Those are the two questions I want us to consider, and I'd like to approach this theme from two different passages of Scripture, both of them written by the Apostle John. When you read your New Testament, you'll find five different books written by John. He was very prolific, and his writings are very profound.

The apostle John could reasonably be called our Lord's best friend on this earth during the three years of His ministry. John referred to himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He was the disciple who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper and to whom Jesus entrusted the care of His mother as He was dying on the cross. John became the last surviving member of the original apostolic band, and according to our best knowledge, he was the only apostle to have died a natural death. His five books are:

Ø The Gospel of John, consisting of 21 chapters. This is the last of the four Gospels and written after the others. It is different from the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in that it stresses the fact that Jesus was both divine and human, the God-Man who was sent by the Father as a light into the world.

Ø Three short letters near the end of the New Testament, which we call First John, Second John, and Third John.

Ø And the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

One of the things I like best about John's writings is that he was clear in stating his reason or his purpose in writing. In my years of studying the Bible, I've become convinced that God gave us a collection of sixty-six books because we have sixty-six different needs in our lives; and one of the richest elements of Bible study is discovering the specific, unique purpose addressed by each of the sixty-six books. Often it takes a lot of digging to figure out the exact purpose for some book in the Bible or another. Right now, I'm reading through the book of 1 Peter, reading the chapters over and over, looking for the exact reason why God included that book in the Bible. In John's case, he tells us simply and plainly why he wrote as he did. His Gospel and his first epistle are very similar, and both of them contain purpose statements at the end of their respective chapters, and that's what I'd like to show you this morning and this evening.

This morning, let's look at his Gospel, the fourth Gospel and the fourth book of the New Testament. He states his purpose in writing his Gospel near the end of it, in chapter 20, verses 30-31:

1. Our Salvation John 20:30-31

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Our Salvation is Centered in Christ

There are three parts to this purpose statement found at the end of the Gospel of John. The first part of the statement tells us that our salvation is centered in Christ. It begins: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. The word "sign" was the codeword used by John for our Lord's miracles. In His Gospel, John describes eight different miracles that Jesus performed. J. Sidlow Baxter called this "the octave of miracles in John's Gospel. "As all musical sound is comprehended in eights or octaves," wrote Baxter, "so John has comprehended the significance of all our Savior's miracles in these eight."^[3]

But now at the end of his book, John admits that these eight miracles are only a sampling of our Lord's miraculous works. In fact, the very last sentence of the Gospel of John says: And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written

one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen. (John 21:25, NKJV).

Jesus came as a Miracle-Worker. He came with supernatural power. But exactly who was He? What was the secret of His identity? Who did He claim to be? John goes on to say: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.... Notice those three names or titles for our Lord Jesus.

First, He is Jesus. His very name is significant. Now, from one perspective, there was nothing unusual about the name Jesus. It was a common designation in the biblical world, and many Jewish parents gave their boys this name, up until the second century. In some cultures, it's still a popular name. The Bible records four other men named Jesus. This name therefore speaks of His humanity, His ordinariness.

But it also speaks of His extraordinariness. Jesus is the New Testament version of the Old Testament name Joshua, and it comes from two shorter Hebrew words—the name Jehovah coupled with the verb to save. Literally, “Jehovah Saves” or “Jehovah Delivers.”

That explains the angel's message to Joseph: “You shall call His name Jesus—Jehovah Saves—for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). This name embodies His mission and conveys His purpose—to seek and to save those who are lost, to seek and to save people like you and me.

The whole teaching of the Bible is this: The God who created us is very powerful and very pure, but all of us have stumbled and brought shame and disgrace upon ourselves. We are all sinners, and sinners cannot inhabit God's presence in eternity. So God Himself became a man—Jesus Christ—born through the womb of a virgin, and He Himself was pure and perfect. When He died on the cross, He was bearing the penalty and punishment for our sins so that in Him we might have forgiveness. He took our sins upon Himself and He clothes us in His righteousness so that we can have eternal life, not on the basis of our own merits, but on the basis of His righteousness, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave. Romans 4:25 says: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Second, He is the Christ. These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.... This is the English translation of the Greek work Christos, which was the Greek term for the Hebrew word Messiah, which literally meant Anointed One. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Old Testament writers and prophets predicted that a Messiah was going to be sent into the world, anointed by God, to provide the human race with hope and heaven and forgiveness and everlasting life. In predicting the coming of Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words approximately seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem: “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor....” (Isaiah 61:1). He was predicting the coming of the Anointed One, the Christ. John wrote His Gospel that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Third, He is the Son of God. These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

This is a classic title for Jesus, but many people underestimate its meaning because we don't hear those three words—Son of God—as they were understood in Bible times. We take them literally, but among the Hebrews it was an idiomatic phrase. They often thought of father and son as relating, not to lineage, but to characteristics. To say “son of...” was to mean “possessing the characteristics of.”

For example, Genesis 4 describes two brothers, Jabal and Jubal. Jabal became the “father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock;” and Jubal became the “father of all those who play the flute.” In other words, Jabal was the first rancher, and Jubal was the first musician.

The builders of the Tower of Babel were called “sons of men” because they were exhibiting the worst of human behavior. Ministerial students in the Old Testament were called “sons of the prophets.” In the Gospels, Jesus referred to James and John as “sons of thunder” because of their volatile temper.

When our Lord is called Himself the “Son of Man,” He was stressing His humanity. He possessed the characteristics of a human being. In other words, He was a man. When He called Himself the “Son of God,” He was emphasizing His deity, His god-ness. He wasn't saying that He was less than God or a product or prodigy of God. He was claiming to be God Himself!

It was a message His Jewish audience couldn't miss. The Gospel of John makes this clear, and it's one of the great themes of John's Gospel. We see this plainly in John 5:18: Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the

Sabbath, but also said that God was His father, making Himself equal with God.

Making Himself equal with God! Possessing all the characteristics of God! Being God! That's the significance of the phrase "Son of God." It was nothing less than a claim to divinity. The Son of God, simply put, is God the Son.

Jesus is God! O! could I now
But compass earth and sea,
To teach and tell the single truth,
How happy should I be!
O! had I but an angel's voice,
I would proclaim so loud,
Jesus, the good, the beautiful,
Is everlasting God.
(Frederick W. Faber, 1862)

Several years ago, just as I was beginning to nudge my way into published writing, an article of mine appeared in a Christian magazine, and shortly afterward I received a call from a literary agent in New York City. He was with one of the big firms. He told me that he had read my article and felt that I had great promise as a writer and that his agency would like to represent me. He flew down to Nashville to meet with me, and he told me that he could market my manuscripts to the big publishing houses in New York City. There's just one problem, he said. "You have too much about 'Jesus' in your writings. To appeal to a broader audience, you need to talk less about Jesus and more about positive thinking and religion and attitude and spirituality and any other words you want to use; just less about Jesus and less about the Bible."

Well, I had no interest in doing that. If I did that, I would no longer have a reason to write. I wouldn't have any message. It's all about Jesus. He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is God Himself who became a man and who died on the cross for the sins of the world. He is the Resurrected Savior who rose from the dead to give us eternal life.

Jesus only, Jesus ever,
Jesus all in all we sing,
Savior, Sanctifier, and Healer,
Glorious Lord and coming King!
(A. B. Simpson, 1890)

The most basic fact of Christianity—the deepest core of our message—is: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life." Our salvation is centered in Jesus.

Our Salvation is Conveyed through Scripture

Notice the second part of the purpose statement at the end of John's Gospel. Our salvation is conveyed through Scripture. And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God....

These things are written.... In the great wisdom of God, He encapsulated everything He wanted us to know within the covers of a book that we can carry with us throughout our entire lives. As I was preparing this message, I took a break and sat out on our back porch. Looking up into the sky I was surprised to see skywriters at work. I had read about skywriting, but had never seen it before. There were evidently five airplanes involved, although they were so high in the sky as to be invisible to the naked eye. They were in perfect formation, and they were each emitting white smoke in measured sequences so that letters were formed. Scrolled across the sky was an advertisement for a vacuum machine.

It reminded me of a question I once asked myself. Why did not God write His message in the sky? Why did He not write it in human letters in the stars? Of course, the answer was obvious. In ten minutes the vacuum cleaner advertisement, dramatic as it was, had disappeared, blown away with the winds of heaven, the white smoke merging with the clouds and dissipating into the atmosphere as though it had never been there to begin with. But a literal, physical book—one that can be held in our hands and opened on our desk—is a solid and permanent communication, one that can be copied and studied and read and memorized and translated and taken with us to the far corners of the globe, and then passed on to the next generation.

How wise God was to give us the Holy Bible! I've had a New Testament or a Bible since I was old enough to read, and before I was

old enough to read, others read it to me.

J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "The Bible may seem very small against the imposing shelves of many a large library; yet with this one volume in our hand we may stand within the largest library on earth and truthfully say that all the tens of thousands of books therein collected cannot teach us more about the fundamental realities of the universe and of human life than we learn in these Scriptures."^[4]

The Bible says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16), and it conveys the message of eternal life. John's Gospel is particularly important in that regard, for it has the distinct purpose of telling us that our salvation, which is centered in Christ and communicated in Scripture is claimed by faith, and by faith alone; and that's the third part of John's purpose statement in John 20:30-31: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Our Salvation is Claimed by Faith

This is John's great theme. In fact, when I was in college I took a course on the Gospel of John and the textbook we used by Dr. Merrill C. Tenney was entitled: John: The Gospel of Belief.

Some time ago I read through the Gospel of John just looking for occurrences of those words "belief" and "believe" and "believing." I couldn't believe how prominent and repetitious these were. Those words occur approximately one hundred times (I found exactly 101 times in which the words belief, believing, believed, or believe pop up in this Gospel (NKJV). I don't have time to trace all 101 occurrences, but by looking at a few of them we can see the preponderance of this theme.

- He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.—John 1:11-12
- And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.—John 3:14-18
- Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.—John 5:24
- Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.—John 6:29
- And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst."—John 6:35
- And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up on the last day.—John 6:40
- Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.—John 6:47
- Therefore I say to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.—John 8:24
- Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?—John 11:25-26

The most important question we can ever ask is this one: What must I do to be saved? And the answer is: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). This is the teaching of Scripture. We can never be saved from sin and death and hell on the basis of our own merits. It isn't going to church. It isn't trying to live a good life. It isn't works of righteousness that we do, but according to His mercy has He saved us. The Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? It means to acknowledge Christ as Lord and to place your life in His hands.

Years ago, my wife and I were traveling in New Mexico, and I had a friend with me. On Sunday morning we went to a little mission church, and the pastor preached the sermon that morning on being saved by faith. At the end of his sermon, he told a story that I had heard several times before. I thought to myself, "That's such an old story that I can't believe he used it. Could he not find a better one?" But that afternoon, the friend who was with us said, "That was the best illustration I've ever heard of being saved by faith. I've never understood that truth so clearly as I do now."

So, with apologies to my preacher friend in New Mexico, let me tell you this well-worn story. In the 1850s there was a French daredevil with the stage name of Blodin who made several visits to Niagara Falls where he would thrill the crowds by performing feats on a high-wire stretched over the falls. One of his favorite stunts was to cross the tightrope pushing a wheelbarrow. On one occasion, he stopped at the edge of the falls to chat with the wide-eyed crowds who had gathered to watch him.

"Do you believe I can walk over the falls on this little rope?" he asked.

A man in the crowd said that yes, he certainly could do that.

"Do you believe I can walk over the falls on this little rope pushing a wheelbarrow?"

"Yes, I do believe that!" replied the man.

"Do you believe I can walk over the falls pushing a wheelbarrow with someone in it?"

"Yes," said the man. "I've seen you do it before."

"Then, kind sir," daredevil, "Would you mind assisting me by getting into the wheelbarrow?"

To which the man answered: "Not on your life!"

True saving faith means getting into the wheelbarrow. It means that we know the content of the Gospel, we believe it with our minds, and we are committing ourselves to it with our hearts and our lives. I believe the best way to do that is through prayer. When I'm with someone who wants to become a Christian, I lead them in offering a simple prayer expressing their faith. We pray something like this: "Dear God, I confess my sins to You and ask for Your forgiveness. I do believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and rose again to give me everlasting life. I here and now give Him my life and ask Him to become my Savior and Lord."

Have you trusted Christ as your Savior and Lord? Salvation is centered in Jesus Christ, conveyed to us in the Scriptures, and claimed by faith alone. Do you believe Are you in the wheelbarrow?

These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

2. Our Assurance 1 John 5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

John ended his Gospel by telling us that he had written it for one reason—that we might have eternal life. When we turn over toward the end of the New Testament, we find He ended his little letter of 1 John by telling us he had written it for one reason—that we might know we have eternal life. This little letter of 1 John tells us how we can be sure and certain and convinced that we have everlasting life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that bothers some Christians is that they cannot recall the exact moment when they asked Jesus Christ to be their Savior. They don't have a definite date or a time or a place. But look at this way: Jesus said, "You must be born again." In other words, being saved is similar to being born. We're being born a second time, this time into God's family. Some people are bothered because they cannot recall the exact details of their being born again. But how much do you remember about being born the first time?

Do you recall one moment or any specific incident of being in your mother's womb? Do you recall the traumatic moment when you first saw the light of day? Do you recall the face of the doctor who delivered you or the nurse who washed you off or the first

moments when you were held in your mother's arms? None of us remember that. What would you think if I went around in a state of depression or despair saying, "I'm not sure I've really been born—I can't recall a thing about it!"?

None of us doubt our birth because we have three pieces of powerful evidence. First, we're breathing right now—we have air in our lungs. That's a pretty convincing piece of evidence for our birth. Second, we own a birth certificate. Third, we bear a family likeness.

The same three indications are true for our spiritual birth. How do we know we've been born again? How can we be so certain that we're in God's family, heirs of His kingdom, possessors of His life?

The Oxygen of the Holy Spirit

First, have the oxygen of the Holy Spirit within us. Look at the last sentence of 1 John, chapter 3: And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

And in the next chapter, 1 John 4:13: By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

And in the next chapter, 1 John 5:6b: And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.

This agrees with what we read elsewhere in Scripture. Look at Romans 8:16 for example: The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (NKJV).

Galatians 4:6 puts it like this: And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" (NKJV).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul visited a city named Thessalonica and won many people there to Christ. Writing to them later, he said: "When we brought you the Good News, it was not just meaningless chatter to you; no, you listened with great interest. What we told you produced a powerful effect upon you, for the Holy Spirit gave you great and full assurance that what we said was true" (1 Thessalonians 1:5, TLB).

How do you know you have the Holy Spirit living within you? Do you have an interest in spiritual things? Are you learning to pray? Are you getting involved in church? Do you long to please God? Do you feel a growing love for Jesus Christ? Do you have inner peace? Is the Word of God meaningful to you? All of these are the result of the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Our Birth Certificate

Second, we know that we've been born again because we have a birth certificate. When we are born, our names are recorded in the county of our birth and we are given a birth certificate. Likewise when we are born again, our names are recorded in the heavenly records (which the book of Revelation calls the Lamb's Book of Life), and the Word of God becomes our personal birth certificate.[5]

Notice how clearly this is stated in 1 John 5:11-12: And this is the testimony (the facts, the record, the reality, the way it is): that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

There's an old song that says: "Jesus loves me, this I know; / for the Bible tells me so." Our assurance of salvation is based on the unchanging Word of God.

In his book, *How to Begin the Christian Life*, George Sweeting suggests that doubting our salvation is like a prisoner who has been pardoned by the Governor. A guard brings him the document, and there it is, signed and sealed. Supposed you ask the man, "Have you been pardoned?" he will say, "Yes."

"Do you feel pardoned?" we ask.

"No, I don't. It's all so sudden."

"But if you don't feel pardoned how do you know you are pardoned?"

"Oh," the man replies, "it tells me so right here." [6]

The Bible does not use vague or nonspecific language regarding our salvation. It doesn't use terms like maybe or might or hopes-

to-be. It says will and shall and is. And if you have given your life to Jesus Christ yet still struggle with doubts about your salvation, memorize 1 John 5:11-12. Let me read them again: And this is the testimony (the facts, the record, the reality, the way it is): that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

3. We Have a Family Likeness

There is a third clear indication that we've been truly born: we bear a family likeness. Yesterday I saw a newborn baby, and when I looked from the baby to the mother I saw exactly the same face, just separated by age.

Likewise, when we are born again, we begin to take on the characteristics and the image of Jesus Christ. We begin to grow in our resemblance and likeness to Him. This is one of the great themes of this little book of 1 John. Let me show you some verses on the subject:

- 1 John 1:6 puts this in negative terms: If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. In other words, if we claim to be Christians but there is no change in our attitudes or behavior, we're mistaken.
- 1 John 2:3: Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. If our lives begin to reflect the holiness and righteousness of Jesus Christ, if there are changes in our attitudes and behavior, if there is spiritual growth taking place—then we know that we know Him.
- 1 John 2:5: Whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.
- 1 John 2:29: If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.
- 1 John 3:14: We know that we have passed from death to life (that is, we know that we are really children of God, that we have really been saved) because we love the brethren. The Bible teaches that God is love and that He so loved the world that He gave His only Son. As we grow in our Christian life, we begin to learn to love even the unlovely and unlovable. That growing love is proof that we've really been saved.

So how can we know we've really been saved? If we have the Holy Spirit within our spirits like oxygen is within our bodies, if we have our names in the birth certificate of the Word of God, and if we're growing in our family likeness, that we can be certain we're saved.

If those things are not present and if there has been no change in our behavior as a result of giving our lives to Christ, then, frankly, we may not have assurance of salvation; and, in fact, we may not be genuinely saved.

The Apostle Paul wrote these somber words in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you now know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?"

There was a time in my life many years ago when I struggled with this issue. As I said, I was raised in a Christian home and in a godly church, and while that did not make me a Christian, yet I can say that I never knew a time when I wasn't trusting Christ. But one night—I suppose I was ten or eleven years old—we had a revival meeting at our church and the evangelist preached so hard that I questioned whether or not I had ever really been saved. After all, I could not remember a time or place when I had clearly and definitely made the decision. That evening, I slipped quietly into the bathroom, locked the door, and knelt down by the bathtub. I prayed something like this: "Dear Lord, I think that I have received Jesus Christ into my life by faith. If I have really done that, I thank you, Lord, for saving me. But if I have not really done that, then tonight, right here by this bathtub, I receive Him into my life as Lord and Savior."

And I can tell you that from that moment, I've never doubted my salvation. Perhaps you need to make a similar decision tonight.

This is the record: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

[1] Bill Bright, *How To Be Sure You are a Christian* (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 5.

2 R. A. Torrey, *How To Succeed in the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, u.d.), p. 23.

3 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book: Volume 5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), pp. 292-

293.

4 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book: Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), p. 131.

5 For portions of this imagery, I am indebted to Willard M. Aldrich in his article entitled "Assurance" in *Bibliotheca Sacra: A quarterly published by Dallas Theological Seminary*. 1996, c1955-1995. Dallas TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

6Adapted from George Sweeting, *How to Begin the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 106.

Sweeting's version is a close rendering to a similar passage in R. A. Torrey's *How To Succeed in the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, u.d.), p.24

John 4:1-39

All of us are disappointed when a celebrity like Miley Cyrus decides to stay in the headlines by increasingly shocking displays of public vulgarity and obscenity. Earlier in her life, Miley had testified to the meaningfulness of her Christian faith. Then she got a start in Disney's television series "Hannah Montana"; then she got a recording contract, and somehow she became one of the richest young people in Hollywood. And now to stay in the headlines or to make more money or for some other reason, she has turned to what amounts to public pornography. One writer in the news spoke of how quickly she went from adorable to deplorable.

There are two very powerful forces in a society like ours: Spirituality and sensuality. When we have true biblical spirituality, it channels our sensual urges and passions. It keeps them within healthy boundaries. It brings true joy and wholesomeness to life. But when spirituality is abandoned, all we have left is sensuality, and a society can drown in that very quickly.

The newspapers were reporting these antics by Miley Cyrus at the same time I was studying the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John in preparation for today's sermon. The circumstances of the two women are obviously different, but they have two or three things in common. Both women have at least a passing knowledge of religion or of faith; yet both came to be identified by immoral or unseemly behavior; and the Lord loves them both. It made me realize how relevant this chapter is to our society, especially to the role of women in our world.

So without further introduction, I'd like to take you to John 4, and today's message will be a very simple Bible study of the story of the Samaritan woman.

Let's begin with John 4:1: Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that He was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples. So He left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

Jesus was in control of His own timetable, and He didn't want to provoke a crisis with the authorities in Jerusalem or Rome until the time of His crucifixion, so when the pressure began building down in Judea, He left for the more remote and safer regions of Galilee.

John 4:4: Now He had to go through Samaria.

Samaria was a difficult region, both geographically and politically. There are some jagged mountains in this area, along with some isolated towns and villages. In the Old Testament days of David and Solomon, Israel was a united nation, both north and south. But after the death of Solomon, the nation divided into two parts, and the Northern region—Samaria—turned to idolatry. Then the Assyrian Empire conquered this area and deported the inhabitants. Outsiders came and intermingled with the survivors and with the stragglers, and so in this particular region there was a group of people of mixed blood. They were not really Jewish in either their lineage or their religion, although in terms of religion they did believe in the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah or the Pentateuch, the books written by Moses.

But the Jews disdained them. There was racism. There was prejudice.

There were differences in religion. And the Samaritans were a rather despised minority. Later in this Gospel, in John 8, when Jewish officials became furious with Jesus Christ, they resorted to name-calling and personal insults. They told Him: "You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed!" (John 8:48). That was the worst thing they could think of calling Him.

But God loved the Samaritans. Jesus had a burden for these mountain towns and villages. He was willing to give His life for the men and women and children in this rugged region. So John 4:4 says: Now Jesus had to go through Samaria. So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

The modern name of the town is Nablus. It's only about thirty miles north of Jerusalem; yet though I've been to Israel many times I've only been to this city once, to visit the very place mentioned in John 4—Jacob's Well. It's not a particularly tourist-friendly place for tour groups. If I were traveling by myself in Israel, I'd go there in a heartbeat. The Palestinians are wonderful people, hospitable

people, and I think it would be a safe and worthwhile visit. There's a lot to see there. But on a tour, I've found it's hard to persuade the Jewish tour guides and the bus drivers to go through this area. But Jacob's well is still there, just where it was 2000 years ago when Jesus visited; and just where it was nearly 4000 years ago when Jacob had it dug.

John 4:6: Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey...

Here we see the humanity of Christ. The Gospel of John emphasizes the deity of Christ—that He was God, but it doesn't neglect His humanness. This event probably occurred in late spring or early summer—after the Passover—and the group of travelers had probably started out at daybreak. They'd been hiking up into these rugged hills along the ancient roads for many hours. Jesus felt worn out. All of us know what it's like to be tired, to be worn out. But somehow it helps us to know that Jesus understands our fatigue. If you're usually tired today, He knows all about it. He's been there. He understands.

...tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.

Now, I want to suggest a little reading between the lines. Why would a woman come by herself at the hottest time of the day to draw water? From other passages in the Bible, we get the idea that women came in groups to draw water from the village well, and they probably came in the morning or in the evening, when the temperatures were milder. It may be this woman was a scandal to that town. She was known as a promiscuous woman. The others perhaps shunned her, excluded her. If you have ever felt singled out or alone or excluded in some way, perhaps you can relate to her.

So here you have a despised group of people—the Samaritans—and this woman was disdained even within this group. She was something of an outcast among the outcasts. It's no accident that John 3 and John 4 are placed side by side in the Bible, for John is demonstrating the universal appeal of Christ. On one page, Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. And on the next page, He is equally at home talking to a promiscuous, vilified Samaritan woman who had come to the well to draw water by herself at the hottest time of the day. And He asked her for something to drink.

John 4:9: The Samaritan woman said to Him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God..."

Notice the phrase: "The gift of God." The word "gift" is used to designate an object or a commodity of value that is given voluntarily without any expectation of payment. It's given to show favor toward someone, as an expression of love. It's something bestowed without any particular effort on the part of the recipient. It isn't earned. The best gifts aren't necessarily the most expensive, as we all know. And yet, as we all know, our retailers and commercial establishments want us to give increasingly expensive gifts. Each October for the last ninety years or so, the retail giant Neiman Marcus has released its Christmas catalog with outrageously expensive gifts. I'm not sure whether it's a publicity stunt or if people actually order some of the things in the catalog. For example, last year, Neiman Marcus offered a chicken coop you could give people for their backyards. A chicken coop! Everyone is getting into raising chickens and eggs. But the Neiman Marcus version was no ordinary chicken coop. It is a little two-story cottage inspired by a palace on the grounds of Versailles; it comes complete with a chandelier; and the purchase price includes a selection of heritage-bred hens. The cost of this chicken coop in last year's catalog was \$100,000, which, as far as I'm concerned, is no chicken feed. It's an example of living in a culture that exploits the idea of gift-giving as a means of keeping our economy afloat.

But there are no gifts like the ones God gives to us. No catalog could describe them. No amount of money could purchase them. The Bible says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:27). Jesus told us that God knows how to give good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11).

The precise phrase Jesus used here, "The gift of God," occurs nine times in the Bible, and most of those occurrences describe God's free gift of eternal life. For example, Romans 6:23 says: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord."

In Ephesians 2:8, the apostle Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God."

No one on earth can describe how important this is to us. In his book, *On Guard*, philosopher William Lane Craig talks about the utter philosophical futility of life if there is no resurrection, no eternal life, and no hope. If there is nothing ahead of us except the grave, then meaning, value, and purpose are ultimately human illusions. Life is objectively meaningless, valueless, and purposeless, despite our subjective beliefs to the contrary.

Craig points out that the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre observed that if there is no hope for our future, whether we live for several hours or several years makes no meaningful difference. Every

individual life is doomed, the entire human race is doomed, the whole edifice and accomplishment of human civilization is doomed, and even the universe itself is doomed. And as everything passes out of existence, it will make no objective difference whether any of us ever existed to begin with.

But the Bible says we do have objective meaning and purpose in life through the new birth and because of eternal life. The Gospel of John uses the phrase “eternal life” over and over. This is the most expensive gift in the history of time, but Christ Himself paid the cost. So can you imagine how meaningful it must have been for Jesus Himself when He sat down by Jacob’s Well to offer this woman of Samaria the greatest gift in history, the gift He had come to provide? Look again at John 4:10:

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.”

Here Jesus is employing another metaphor or figure of speech to describe eternal life, just as He did in the prior chapter. To Nicodemus, He talked about being born again. To the Samaritan Woman, He spoke of drinking living water. In both cases, the listener took Him literally. Nicodemus asked, “Can I enter a second time into my mother’s womb?” The Samaritan woman said in John 4:11:

Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

And now, just as He did with Nicodemus, Jesus interprets His figurative language. John 4:13 says: Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

She was still thinking in literal terms. So Jesus met her where she was and spoke to her about some literal issues in her life—moral issues. John 4:16 says: He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

The Lord was a masterful counselor. Somehow He managed to unmask her charade, rebuke her, and affirm her all at the same time in three short sentences. I believe He knew the Holy Spirit had been working in this woman’s heart, and she was ready to make some changes. She knew something had to change about her life. And so she didn’t take offence at His words. She replied with respect. Look at John 4:19:

Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Some commentators suggest she was trying to change the subject. But I don’t think so. I think she knew she had a spiritual need. She didn’t know whether she needed to turn to the Samaritan religion or to the Jewish religion. She was unhappy with herself, but unsure as to which religious system to trust. When she realized Jesus as a teacher with true spiritual insight, she asked Him for His opinion about the matter.

Jesus said, in essence, “You don’t need to go to Jerusalem or to Samaria. You need to come to Me.” Look at John 4:21: “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe Me.

Then He went on to say: A time is coming when you will worship the Father...

In other words, “A time is coming when you’re life is truly going to turn around. It’s coming quickly and it’s just about here. You’re about to become a worshipper. Pretty soon you are going to learn the joy of worshipping the Father in the Spirit and in truth.

John 4:23 continues: A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

In other words, when you drink the water of eternal life, you will become a worshipper right where are—with the Holy Spirit in your heart and the truth of the Gospel in your soul. That is what the Father desires. Now look at John 4:25:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us."

Here was a woman with a checkered past, with a string of failed marriages, in an immoral relationship, disdained even among the distained. But somehow she had a heart for God. She had thought about these things. She was hungry for the Lord to come and to help her. She was waiting for Messiah to show up; and now in His love and wisdom He had come to her.

John 4:26: Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am He."

That's the way the conversation unfolded. Let me summarize it like this:

- Jesus said, "You need living water."
- She said, "Where can I find it?"
- Jesus replied, "You've got to start with honesty. Go call your husband."
- She said, "I have no husband."
- Jesus said, "Exactly. That's the thing. You've gone through five husbands and your currently living with a man outside of marriage. You need help."
- She said, "You sound like someone who can help me."

So where can I go to get myself straightened out? To Jerusalem? To Samaria? To my religion? To your religion?"

- Jesus said, "You can get straightened out right here. You can become a worshipper of God right here. God is here now, I am here now, and you can become His worshipper right now. You can move from your mess to your Messiah, and you can do it now. I am the Messiah you've always been longing for."

And just at that moment the disciples came back. John 4:27 says: Just then His disciples returned and were surprised to find Him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

I like that phrase: "See a man who told me everything I ever did." Jesus knew everything she had ever done. He knew everything about her and everything about her past. Yet He stopped in her town, met her there by divine appointment, showed her the love of God, told her the truth of God, and offered her the gift of God."

Jesus knows everything you have ever done. Yet He has stopped by this place today, and you are here by divine appointment. He wants to show you the love of God, tell you the truth of God, and offer you the gift of God, which is forgiveness of sin and eternal life. He wants to turn you from wickedness to worship, and from the mess you're in to the Messiah He is.

So the woman told her fellow villagers: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward Him. Meanwhile, His disciples urged Him, "Rabbi, eat something." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

Here in this story you have a woman who is no longer thirsty and a man who is no longer hungry.

Jn 4:33: Then His disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought Him food?"

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work."

That's the same thing that sustains all of us. We just want to do the will of Him who sends us and to finish the work He has assigned us.

And then Jesus spoke very meaningfully of the spiritual harvest He intends to gather. He said in verse 35:

Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until the harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying, "One sows and another reaps" is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.

Now John concludes the story with a summarizing paragraph.

Verse 39 says: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed on Him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to Him, they urged Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. And because of His words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

Now, Jesus spent two days in Samaria, in one town. But even after He left, the Samaritans were on His heart. This little forgotten, disdained region of the world was so deeply imbedded in His heart that He spoke of it in the last sentence that He ever uttered in this

world before He returned to heaven.

He said in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

You go back to those people in Samaria and build on what we began with that woman and in that village of Sychar. And we don't have time to look at it, but in Acts 8 is the story of the revival that swept over Samaria, and the ministry of Philip whom we met in John 1, and the story of how the Gospel swept through this region as Jesus had said it would.

So my message is very simple. Whatever your background, whatever your past, whatever your mistakes, whatever your reputation, Jesus wants to take you from your mess to Your Messiah. He is the Savior of the world, and He says to you just as He said to the Samaritan woman as they sat by the well of Jacob so long ago:

If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water. Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

John 5

The other day I read about a sign on the highway that said: “Caution: Men at Work.” Someone had scrawled under it: “Woman work all the time. Men have to put up signs when they work.”

Well, my message today is: “Caution: God at Work.” The Lord is working all the time. He is working our lives, and we are His construction zones. He's working all things in conformity to His will; He's working all things to our good. He is working in us what is pleasing to Him. He's working in our circumstances, in our world, among the nations, and in human history. Caution: God is at work.

That's the great theme of the chapter we're coming to today in our study of the Fourth Gospel. We're coming to chapter 5, and this chapter is so rich and wonderful—it has so many themes, so many insights—that it seems impossible to squeeze all 47 verses into one sermon, but I'm going to try to do it.

After struggling a great deal as to approaching this chapter, I've decided I want to begin by giving you a synopsis of John 5. I'm going to summarize and paraphrase the contents of this chapter so you can get the entire story in a nutshell, and then I want to pick three sentences from this chapter that will serve as an outline for today's message.

Here's what happens in this chapter:

Jesus came to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. On the Sabbath Day, He visited the Pool of Bethesda, which was a therapeutic pool surrounded by the sick and the disabled. There He saw an invalid and asked the man if he wanted to get better. The man did, so Jesus told him to get up, roll up his mattress, and go on his way. And the man, who had not taken a step in thirty-eight years, suddenly stood up, rolled up his mat, and walked away.

Instead of being glad the man was healed, the Jewish officials were upset that Jesus had performed a miracle on the Sabbath and that He had told the man to carry his mattress on the Sabbath. Jesus answered the criticism by saying, in effect, “Do you think God ever takes a day off? My Father is always working, and I am always working. The two of us are working all the time.”

That's when the Jewish officials realized they had a bigger issue with Jesus than simply His view of the Sabbath Day. They realized that by calling God His Father as He did, He was actually claiming to be God Himself. He was claiming to possess the characteristics of God. They were furious at what they considered His blasphemy.

But Jesus wasn't finished. He went on to preach a great sermon that occupies the entire last half of the chapter. He said, in essence: “Yes, God the Father and God the Son are always working. We are giving life all the time. We are judging sin all the time. We are changing lives all the time. We are planning the resurrection day all the time, a day when all who are in the tombs will hear My voice and be raised. We are always at work, and I'm always at work because I always seek to please My Father.”

But still Jesus was not finished. He went on to say: “If you want proof that I'm who I say I am—that I am God the Son—well, I have several credentials. There are a number of irrefutable evidences you can look at. John the Baptist testified as to my identity. The works that I do testify on My behalf; how else do you explain these miracles? But most of all, God the Father has testified about Me, and He did so in His Old Testament. You have diligently studied the Old Testament, but you've missed its main teaching. It is all about me. Even from those earliest books—the books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, and so forth—the Old Testament—it is all about me. The Old Testament is essentially a book of Messianic prophecy, and it's all about Me. Moses was writing about Me. And yet, look at you. Despite all this evidence, you still do not see it; you still do not believe.”

That is the story and the sermon in John 5. So how do we present all that in a simple outline? I don't know when I've wrestled with a passage like I've wrestled with this one. There's an entire series of sermons here in this chapter, but we only have a few minutes. So the best way I know to capture this chapter in an outline is to pull out three statements of Christ.

"Pick Up Your Mat and Walk"

The first one is: "Pick Up Your Mat and Walk." Let's begin with Jn 5:1: Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.

There's something interesting about this Pool of Bethesda. Some years ago, liberal critics attacked the Gospel of John, claiming it was written long after the time of John, that it was a fabricated document. And one of the points they made had to do with verse 1. They said, in effect, "There is no indication there was ever a place like this in Jerusalem. No archaeological excavation has turned up a pool in downtown Jerusalem that had five covered colonnades. The Gospel of John was written by someone who made up the locations, by someone without first-hand knowledge of the city of Jerusalem. It is not an authentic first-century document."

Then archaeologists discovered the remains of a pool that exactly fits this description. I've been there and seen it many times. It is located adjacent to the beautiful and acoustically-perfect St. Anne's Church. The word Bethesda means "House of Mercy" or "House of Grace." This was considered a therapeutic pool and it became something of an informal primitive hospital. Interestingly, we often associate the word Bethesda with a hospital here in the United States because the well-known military hospital, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, is located in Bethesda, Maryland.

Jn 5:3 says: Here a great number of disabled people used to lie the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.

If you have an older translation, you might have an added verse dealing with the tradition that at certain times the waters were stirred, and the first invalid in the water was healed. This verse is not in our oldest and best manuscripts. It was evidently added later by

a copyist who wanted to explain why so many sick people typically gathered at this pool. There was evidently a legend that an angel would occasionally stir the waters and give them healing power. The first person into the water was healed. At any rate, this had become a therapy pool in downtown Jerusalem, and many sick and disabled people gathered beneath these colonnades.

Jn 5:5 continues: One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, He asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

That was all—just a word of command directed at the man. But he tried it; he obeyed; and a miracle occurred.

At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

This is the third of seven miracles recorded in John's Gospel. But in this case, the important thing seems to be the fact that this miracle marks a real shift in the Gospel of John. In chapters 1-4, Jesus is being introduced to the world and is generally favorably received, despite some misgivings from the Pharisees and Jerusalem officials. But now, because of this miracle, things take a very hostile turn. This is a turning point in the earthly career of Jesus. Look down at Jn 5:16:

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute Him.

"The Father is Always At Work, and I Am Working, Too"

In response, Jesus said something that serves as the second point in our outline. Jn 5:17 says:

In His defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working."

One day this week I took a walk around my house and I suddenly realized I was in a work zone. All around me were creatures hard at work. I saw a squirrel, and he was just working away on some project; I couldn't quite tell what he was doing, but I think he was gathering up provisions for the winter. I heard a tapping noise, and I saw a woodpecker hard at work, just drilling into one of my trees as if his life depended on it. Nearby on a bush a spider was hard at work spinning a web. A honeybee flew by, hard at work, looking for provisions. A little line of ants on the sidewalk was moving along like slaves. Everyone was working (except me, and I felt tired just watching them). There is a work ethic built into the texture of the creation.

This work ethic extends to us. Every single person on earth needs the motivation of meaningful work. One of the reasons the United States of America became the most prosperous nation on earth—at least in earlier days—is because of what sociologists call the Protestant

Work Ethic. It's the biblical view, championed by the Puritans, that work is sacred, that we are made for meaningful activity. God has

work for us to do. The holy life and the sacred life isn't a life of laziness or mere leisure, but of fulfilling work. Even in the Garden of Eden before sin and death occurred, Adam and Eve were placed there to work the ground and tend the garden. According to the book of Revelation, we'll have meaningful work to do in eternity, for His servants will serve Him (Revelation 22:3).

So if some kind of work ethic is woven into the natural world, if it's woven into our personalities, if it is universal and cosmic in nature, where does it come from? What is its source?

It's because God is Himself—in His essential nature—a worker. God is at work. Work is what He does. Jesus said, "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I am at work."

I love the phrases in that statement because they are just as true today as they were when Jesus spoke them. God is always at work. Jesus is always at work. The Holy Spirit is at work. The Lord is at work now in your life, in your circumstances, through your prayers, in the lives of your loved ones. The Lord hasn't gone on strike. He hasn't closed down the shop. He hasn't lost interest. The Father is working; the Son is working; the Spirit is working, just as He was working at Bethesda and in the days of the Gospels.

This is such a powerful theme in the Bible that I want to share some verses with you about it:

- Moses said: "Lord... who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).
- The Psalmist said, "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (Psalm 103:6).
- The writer of Proverbs said, "The Lord works out everything to its proper end" (Proverbs 16:4).
- Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him."
- Ephesians 1:11 says: "(God) works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will."
- The Apostle Paul said: "There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work" (1 Corinthians 12:5-6).
- Ephesians 2 says that we are His workmanship
- Isaiah said, "We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).
- Ephesians 3:20 talks about God's power which is "at work within us."
- Philippians 1 says that God "began a good work" in us and will carry it on to completion (Philippians 1:6).
- Philippians 2 says it is "God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).
- Second Thessalonians talks about the "sanctifying work of the Spirit" within us (2 Thessalonians 2:13).
- The benediction in the book of Hebrews tells us that God will "work in us what is pleasing to Him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever" (Hebrews 13:21).

God is not a passive God. He isn't a God who created the world and then stepped away in disinterest or abandonment. He isn't a God who has forgotten about the things that concern us. We are His workmanship, and He is at work in our world, and in our lives, and in our hearts, and in our circumstances. God is at work in matters relating to your life. He is at work when we can see it visually and overtly; and He is at work even when we cannot discern His hand.

Jesus said, "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I am working. If I took the Sabbath Day off, the entire universe would collapse. The solar system would grind to a halt. Life as we know it would instantly cease. I am always on duty, always on call, always working." And He is! There is never a moment when He isn't working on the construction zone that is my life and yours.

Now, that might encourage you and me, but it infuriated the Jewish leaders. It was like throwing gasoline on a fire, for Jesus was making a theological point that might be lost on us but was not lost on the Jewish officials. In saying, "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working," Jesus was claiming equality with God. In making that statement, the Jewish officials heard something in their vernacular that we don't necessarily pick up in our English translations. Jesus was actually claiming equality with God. So not only was He guilty of breaking the Sabbath in the eyes of these officials, but He was guilty of blaspheming—of claiming to be God.

In the Hebrew language, in the Jewish culture, there was a figure of speech or an expression or euphemism. To say that someone is your father is to claim the character of that person. Or to say you are the son of someone means that you are claiming the characteristics of that person.

Jesus often called Himself the Son of Man. It meant that He possessed all the characteristics of humanity; that He was a man. Likewise He called Himself the Son of God, and that meant He possessed all the attributes of divinity; that He was truly God.

Jn 5:18 says: 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.

Jesus didn't dispute that interpretation. Instead He doubled down on it and gave a sermon about it. The remainder of John 6 is a message that we can call our Lord's "Search the Scripture" sermon. In the first part of the sermon, Jesus identifies some of the works

He and the Father are doing. He says, in essence, “We are working all the time. We are changing lives, we are giving life, we are judging sin, we are receiving worship and honor and glory, and we are preparing for the resurrection.” I don’t have time to annotate these verses, but we should read them because they are some of the most thrilling words about the resurrection ever spoken by our Lord.

Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing,

because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all He does. Yes, and He will show Him every greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom He is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him.

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself. And He has given Him authority to judge because He is the Son of Man.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please Myself but Him who sent Me.

So to review, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and was criticized for it. In response He said, “My Father is always at work, and so am I, for I too am God.” When they reacted angrily to that, Jesus said, “Well, if you’re interested, here is what the Father and Son are doing. We are giving life. We are judging sin. We are receiving worship. We are providing hope. And the day is coming when we will raise the dead.”

“Study the Scriptures”

That brings us to the final paragraphs of the sermon, which I don’t have time to read. But here, again, is the essence: If you want to know that I’m authorized to say these things and to make these claims, let me appeal to those testifying on my behalf. There’s John the Baptist.

Jn 5:33 says: “You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.”

And then there are the miracles, which are witnesses and confirmation. Verse 36 says: “I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent Me.”

And then we have the greatest evidence of all—greater than the evidence of John the Baptist and greater than the testimony of His miracles. We have the irrefutable testimony of Father in His inspired Book. We have Old Testament Messianic prophecy. Look at Jn 5:37: And the Father who sent Me has Himself testified concerning Me.

Where has the Father testified concerning the Son? In the Old Testament Scriptures, previously given hundreds of years in advance.

Jn 5:39: You study the Scriptures...

This refers to the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.

And look at Jn 5:46: If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me.

Many years ago I prepared and preached a series of sermons entitled “Glimpses of Jesus in Genesis.” I followed it up with a series entitled “Glimpses of Jesus in Exodus.” Then I started a series of sermons entitled “Glimpses of Jesus in Leviticus.” My goal was to go through every book of the Old Testament and share each book’s predictive prophecy about Jesus Christ. I confess I gave up. It was too much. I was overwhelmed by the subject of Messianic prophecy. I never even got out of the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. But I can tell you that if the devil ever whispers in my ear that the Bible isn’t true and that Jesus is not the Son of Man and Son of God, I just open my Old Testament and see how completely He is described in advance.

He said, “Search the Scriptures, for they testify of Me. Moses wrote about Me.”

What a Sabbath Day in the life of Christ! He healed a man lame at Bethesda, and when the tide of opinion turned against Him, He made a startling statement: “My Father is always working, and so am I.”

God is always at work. Jesus is always at work. The Holy Spirit is at work. The Lord is working now in your life, in your circumstances, through your prayers, in the lives of your loved ones. The Lord hasn't gone on strike. He hasn't closed down the shop. He hasn't lost interest. He's working all things in conformity to His will; He's working all things to our good. He is working in us what is pleasing to Him. He's working in our circumstances, in our world, among the nations, and in human history.

Caution: God is at work.

John 6

The other day I was talking to a friend of mine who has been quite successful in business. I told him how much I disliked dealing with problems. To my surprise he turned and smiled and said, "I love problems." Startled, I asked him to explain that, because I most definitely do not like problems. "Oh," he said, "problems are things to be solved. Give me a problem, and somewhere there's a solution. And when we find the solution, somehow we'll find we're further along in our progress than we were before the problem occurred."

Well, I happened to know the record of this man's life, and what he said about himself was absolutely true. He was gifted at identifying and solving problems.

I tried to learn a lesson from that conversation, but I admit I still don't like problems very much. They cause me anxiety, and even a small problem can make me to fret about the future. But I know another person who is the best problem-solver in history. He has solved the ultimate problem of humanity, and so it goes without saying He can deal with my daily difficulties and dilemmas. This person knows the solution to every problem before it even occurs, and He always knows in advance just what He is going to do.

That's the theme of today's message. As we've studied through the Gospel of John, I've read and re-read some of the verses in these chapters in a fresh way, as though I'd never seen them before. One verse that has stopped me my tracks and has encouraged me ever since I read it is John 6:6. Let's read this verse and adopt it as the theme of our Bible study today, and then we'll back up and look at the entire context.

He (being Jesus) asked this only to test him (meaning Philip), for He already had in mind what He was going to do.

"Jesus only asked this to test Philip, for He already had in mind what He was going to do." Think of the implications of that phrase. We can truly lift this verse from the page and apply it to all of life. You can apply it to your problem, or to your decision, or to your need, or to your future. We may be faced with something that baffles us, but it's only there to test us, for the Lord already has in mind what He is going to do.

You may not know what to do in any given circumstance. Your friends and advisors may not know what to do. You may be stupefied, mystified, or petrified; you may be baffled and bamboozled. But the Lord Jesus already has in mind what He is going to do.

Perhaps there's a potential that you hope to realize; a problem you want to solve; a person you want to influence. You may not know how to handle it, but He already has in mind what He is going to do.

You may be discouraged or depressed or disheartened. But Jesus is only allowing these things as a test, for He already has in mind what He is going to do.

That's the theme. That's the wonderful truth. Our Lord knows the future as well as He knows the past. He knows the solutions as well as He knows the problems. He knows the answers as well as He knows the questions. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal. He's the God who asks rhetorically: "Is there anything too hard for Me?" He is the God who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we can ask or imagine. He is the one who already has in mind what He is going to do in any given circumstance or situation.

He already has in mind what He is going to do in your future, in your life, in your ministry, in your galaxy of concerns. He already knows right now what He is going to do tomorrow and the day after that. He already has in mind what He is going to do. John 6:6 says, "He asked this only to test him; for He already had in mind what He was going to do."

Now, with that as the theme let's look at the broader chapter, John 6, and let me show you the applications John makes to this.

1. In Meeting Our Needs (Jn 6:1-15)

First, Jesus already has in mind what He is going to do in meeting our needs. Let's begin our study at Jn 6:1:

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberius),

Luke's Gospel tells us this story occurred in a remote area near the town of Bethsaida on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee.

...and a great crowd of people followed Him because they saw the signs He had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with His disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test Him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do.

If you've ever attending a Sunday School class or Vacation Bible School, you know how this story turns out. Andrew brought a boy to Jesus who had packed his lunch—five small barley loaves and two small fish. Jesus had the people sit down in groups, and He took the loaves and fish, thanked God for them, and began breaking them into pieces and giving to His disciples for distribution. Jesus kept breaking and multiplying the bread and the fish and distributing it until all 5000 people were fed, and there were twelve baskets left over—one for each disciple to send home to his family.

The response of the crowd is given in verse 14: After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

Jesus can feed five thousand as easily as He could feed five. Jesus knows how to give us our daily bread, how to meet our needs. The Bible tells us to pray for our daily bread, and it warns us against worrying about our daily provisions. We have all we need from Him, both in meeting our physical and our emotional needs.

The other day one of our dearest members, Jean Dotson, gave me a little book her sister had written. Her sister's name is Betty Kaytis. The book was a series of little stories from her life, including this one.

She said, "My late husband was an incurable romanticist. Every birthday, wedding anniversary, or holiday was an occasion for him to give me a gift, and I received many I could write about. But the one I have chosen was one that, at the time, I really didn't love. My favorite flowers are, and always have been, roses. He gave me red roses, yellow roses, pink roses, coral roses, many different kinds of roses on different occasions. I always enjoyed live flowers, especially roses, but eventually they would wither and die... Then for some unexplained reason, one birthday he gave me a dozen beautiful silk roses. Why, I wondered hadn't he given me live flowers? I tried to act appreciative but resented 'artificial' roses. Anyway I put them in a vase and put them on my dining room table for quite a long time. As time went by, I grew very tired of seeing those artificial roses. So I boxed them up and left them hidden in a closet. He probably never even noticed that I had hidden them away. Then he passed away quite suddenly and unexpectedly. After his death I had forgotten about the red roses he had given me. One day while looking in the closet for something I found them in the box where I had carefully stored them away. I brought out the box and arranged the red silk roses in a vase, thankful that I still had red roses from John that would never wither away and die."¹

The Lord knew in advance what the future held, and He prompted John to buy a dozen artificial roses in advance. It was the Lord's way of meeting a need in her life before the need even arose. The Lord already had in mind what He was going to do. He knows how to meet our needs. That's the lesson in the first paragraph of this chapter. But let's go on to the next paragraph.

2. In Stilling Our Storms (Jn 6:16-20)

We can say, secondly, the Lord already has in mind what He's going to do in stilling our storms. Look at Jn 6:16: When evening came, His disciples got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum.

The other Gospels tell us that everyone was exhausted—Jesus and each of His disciples. So He compelled them to get into a boat and start across the lake while He dismissed the crowds, sent them home, and then hiked up the side of the mountain to be alone and to pray. But from His perch in the mountains, He looked down and saw the disciples in the darkness, struggling to make progress with their boat. A storm had arisen. The waters of the Sea of Galilee can become very rough very quickly. John gives us an abbreviated version of the story, writing:

By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.

This is a real story that describes something that actually happened, but it's also parabolic of where we sometimes find ourselves, in a place where the skies are dark, the winds are contrary, and the waters are rough. You know, the weather really is an accurate metaphor for life itself. Some mornings we wake up and there's not a cloud in the sky. Other days are full of storms. Sometimes those storms come and go, and other times they can be intense and destructive. And there is very little we can do about the weather except respond to it as best we can. And life is just as unpredictable. Some days are almost problem-free. Some days are like vacation days. Other days seem overcast or hard or filled with thunderclouds. Some days are downright destructive. But it was in the middle of the darkest time of the night in the middle of stormy weather that Jesus showed up quite unexpectedly.

Look what happened:

When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were

frightened.

The other Gospel writers explain the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost.

But He said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid."

This is one of the wonderful things about personal Bible study. If you are in a crisis, if you are so overwhelmed you don't think you can go on, you can either give up or you can open your Bible and see what the Lord has to say. And as you read your Bible in a crisis, you might come upon a phrase like verse 20: He said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." And those six words will speak to you as personally and as powerfully as when the Lord Jesus verbally shouted them across the wind and the waters to the disciples in their storm-tossed fishing boat.

3. In Guiding Our Lives (Jn 6:21-27)

And that leads to the third way in which the Lord's omniscience helps us. He already knows what He has in mind in guiding our lives. Look at the next sentence, the mysterious little Jn 6:21: Then they were willing to take Him into the boat and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

I don't know if this is a miracle or not. It's possible the disciples, in their confusion, were closer than they realized to their destination and that Jesus reached them just about the time they washed up on shore. But, no, we get the impression they were somewhere in mid-lake, and when Jesus entered the boat they were transported instantly to their destination by the same miraculous power that had stilled the storm and quieted the waves.

Jesus already had in His mind where He wanted them to be, and when, and how. You and I may be unaware of the future, but the Lord already has in mind where and how He wants to lead us. This week, I went for a hike in the mountains, and I thought of the times when as a young man, nineteen or twenty years old, I had gone hiking in the South Carolina forests, confused about my future, and prayed the prayer, "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Me." Now, looking back over the decades, I can offer another prayer that says, "All the Way My Savior Led Me." I cannot totally abandon my old song, but still need to sing, "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Me," because I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. Whether we are young or old, we need the guidance of the Lord every day of our lives. We need Him to lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. We need Him to get us safely to our destination, to the other shore, at the right time, in the right way, following the right path.

The Lord already has in mind what He is going to do in guiding your life.

4. In Saving Our Souls (Jn 6:28-40)

Finally, the Lord already has in mind how He is going to save our souls and give us eternity. Look at the next paragraph. The next day the crowds caught up to Jesus and His disciples again, and in Jn 6:29, Jesus again addressed the multitudes:

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent."

Notice the phrase "believe in." He did not simply say we are to believe Jesus, but we are to believe in Jesus. This is a phrase that occurs 31 times in the Gospel of John, including three times in this chapter. To believe something means that we give intellectual assent to it. We believe that rope will hold us up. We believe that ladder is sturdy. But to believe in something, implies a sense of personal commitment and confidence. We're willing to grab the rope or climb the ladder.

It isn't enough just to believe Jesus; we must believe in Him. That is, it's not enough just to have intellectual agreement. We must personally trust Him as Savior and Lord.

So Jesus answered...

"The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent."

So they asked Him, "What sign then will You give that we may see it and believe You? What will You do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Perhaps some of these asking the question had not been among the crowds the previous day and had only heard about the feeding of the 5000. Or perhaps they were among the crowds but didn't know how Jesus had provided the food? Or perhaps it was just intransigent unbelief. But Jesus answered forcibly in Jn 6:32:

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who had given You the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

And now we have another of our Lord's wonderful symbols for Himself and for eternal life. With Nicodemus it was being born again. With the Samaritan women, it was living water. Now in chapter 6, Jesus calls Himself the bread of life. This is a theme He will carry all the way to the Upper Room on Passover night when He will break the bread and give it to His disciples and say, "Take and eat, for this is My body."

Here in chapter 6, Jesus said, For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen Me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day. For My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

I’m not sure how many people still read Time Magazine; but last week as I walked through the airport I saw the cover of Time’s cover issue and was so surprised that I later went online and read the cover story. The cover simple consisted of a question written in a familiar font to form this question: “Can Google Solve Death?”

It was an article about an attempt by Google to collect information and research regarding healthcare and age-related illness. The writer said that if all the research regarding cancer, for example, could be tracked down and summarized and synthesized in a way that would expedite a cure for cancer, it would be equivalent to adding three years to the lifespan of every person on earth.

Well, we certainly wish them the best. We’re all grateful for any improvement in fighting disease and increasing life expectancy; we need it. But Time Magazine was overly dramatic with its headline: “Can Google Solve Death?”

First, neither Google nor anyone else on earth can ever “solve death.”

And second, Jesus Christ has already done it.

If you want to find the answer to death, just get on your computer or your smart phone and “Google” the Gospel of John. Even as Jesus spoke these words in John 6, He already had in mind what He was going to do. He already had in mind the death He would die and the resurrection He would accomplish. He already had in mind how He would bring hope and healing for those who turn to Him. He intends to give us eternal life and to raise us up at the last day. He tells us that in the Gospel of John over and over, again and again.

That is the lesson of today’s passage here in the first half of John 6. You may not know what to do in any given circumstance. Your friends and advisors may not know what to do. You may be stupefied, mystified, or petrified; you may be baffled and bamboozled. But the Lord Jesus already has in mind what He is going to do.

He has in mind what He’s going to do in meeting your needs, in stilling your storms, in guiding your life, in saving your soul and giving you eternal life. We must only believe in Jesus, the one sent down as the Bread of heaven.

(Endnotes)

1 Betty Kaytis, Family, Friends, Felines, Folly (self-published memoir).

John 6

I don’t watch many movies; a lot of them are just too intense for me. The previews and trailers are all I need to see. That’s the way I feel about the popular movie that’s out right now called Gravity. It’s about an astronaut stranded in space and facing what appears to be an almost certain and terrifying death. It has remarkable special effects, but the plot is pretty intense.

I think there’s a subliminal reason movies like this are so gripping. They present a dynamic microcosm of our own lives. They give us a set of gripping visual images of the life-and-death nature of our own existence. The whole human race is stranded on a space capsule called planet earth, spinning through the immensity of the universe, and everyone on board is untethered and doomed unless somebody, somehow discovers a way to evade the catastrophe of dying. It’s also amazing how often in the movie the protagonist does survive because of someone else who is willing to perish for their sake. That sacrificial person is often like a Messiah-figure in the movie. It’s almost as if the template of Jesus Christ Himself is somehow imbedded on the plotline of the human soul.

But in any event, the greatest disaster of life is death, and we’re always trying to work around it. There was a story in the newspapers this week about the famed theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. He has now proposed a solution to the problem of

death. He said that the human brain is, in essence, a computer. If we can take the programming and the data from the human brain and copy it onto a computer, perhaps it could go on thinking after the body dies and, in so doing, provide a form of life after death. There are actually research labs working on projects like that.

But for most people, those kinds of discussions are science fiction, and the reality is, as the Bible puts it, it is appointed unto men once to die. The New York Times recently reported on a new trend among baby-boomers, who are now coming closer to their closing years. It was a very long article, but I'll give you the essence of it. Many people are now planning and promoting Death Dinners. These are dinners you plan with your closest family and friends to discuss the subject of death, and in particular to let everyone know your wishes regarding end-of-life issues and your living will, and your last will and testimony, and your desired funeral arrangements, and so forth. The idea is minimizing family conflict if and when you die. Of course, it's important to have those discussions, although I'm not sure I want to do it at dinnertime. But for whatever reason, Death Dinners are now taking place all over the country.

The point is that we live in a world that has never adjusted to the idea of dying, and which truly had no answer to death until Jesus came. But Jesus did come, and the Gospel of John tells us all about it. We're in a series of messages entitled "Then Jesus Came." It's a sermon series through the first twelve chapters of the Gospel of John, and today we're coming to the sermon Jesus preached, which we call "The Bread of Life" sermon, and it occupies the last half of John 6. As we saw last week, in the first half of John 6, Jesus took a boy's lunch of bread and fish, multiplied the elements, broke and distributed the food, and fed a multitude. The very next day, the crowds followed Him to the town of Capernaum and hinted they would like more of this miraculous bread. That's when Jesus preached His "Bread of Life" sermon in the synagogue in Capernaum. Because of archaeological studies, we know exactly where Jesus delivered this great message.

It's one of His few sermons (perhaps the only one) we can pinpoint to the exact spot.

But I want to confess that this has been, to me, the most difficult of our Lord's sermons to figure out. On one hand, it's an exceedingly simple message. Jesus kept saying the same thing again and again. As we read it, you'll instantly recognize the repetition of the ideas. On the other hand, it has seemed disjointed to me as I've studied it in the past.

But this time I realized what was troubling me. Before we look into the sermon itself, I want to show you why it seems disjointed. It's really three sermons put together as one. Or, more accurately, it's one sermon in three parts to three different audiences. In John 6, Jesus spoke to three different groups. He gave the same basic message to all three, in sequence, but there were clearly three audiences. Let me show you this.

Look at Jn 6:25: When they found Him on the other side of the lake, they asked Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?"

The prior verse, Jn 6:24, says He was in the town of Capernaum. And down in Jn 6:59, we're told that He was in the synagogue in Capernaum. Jn 6:24 refers to some of the people from the multitudes that He fed in the first half of the chapter. Jesus fed the multitudes with the loaves and fish, dismissed them, sent them home, then walked across the stormy ocean and joined His disciples in the boat, and arrived in Capernaum. The next day, some of the crowd caught up to Him in the synagogue and wanted to talk about bread to eat, and Jesus spoke to them about the living bread. The first third of His sermon, then, is addressed to these multitudes, and the text goes from Jn 6:25-40.

Now look at Jn 6:41 where another group of people injected themselves into the story: At this the Jews there began to grumble about Him.... This is referring to the Jewish leaders in the synagogue in Capernaum. So Jesus shifted His attention to them, and He talked about the same concept of living bread, but His words were sharper and had a more aggressive tone. This part of the sermon goes from Jn 6:41 to Jn 6:59. What Jesus said to these leaders didn't go over very well and people began leaving. Jesus then turned to His disciples, to His closest followers, and He began talking to them. This part of the sermon goes from verse 60 to the end of the chapter.

So we have one sermon that we call "The Bread of Life Sermon." But it falls into three parts because each section is addressed to a different group of people:

- The Bread of Life Sermon for the Multitudes – Jn 6:25 – 40.
- The Bread of Life Sermon for the Jewish Leaders – Jn 6:41 – 59
- The Bread of Life Sermon for the Disciples – Jn 6:60-71

And here is the theme of the entire message: What if there was a loaf of bread, which, if eaten, would make us immortal so that we never again had to worry for one moment about the prospect of death? What if there was a loaf of bread that could give eternal life? There is just such a loaf of bread. Jesus Himself is the bread that came down from heaven. He is the bread of life. He is the bread, which, if eaten, will give the certain hope of heaven. That's the theme, but notice how it unfolded from group to group that day in the synagogue in Capernaum.

1. What Jesus Says to the Multitudes (Jn 6:25-40)

First, notice what Jesus said to the multitudes. Look at Jn 6:25: When they found Him on the other side of the lake, they asked Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for Me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on Him, God the Father has placed His seal of approval."

Jn 6:28: Then they asked Him, "What must we do to do the work God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent."

This is the simple Gospel. We are people who are dying. Jesus is God Himself who came down from heaven and became a man, giving Himself for us. And by believing on Him we have eternal life. It's the simplest message of the Bible, and yet the multitudes were still confused.

Jn 6:30 says: So they asked Him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe You? What will You do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jn 6:32: Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Jn 6:34: "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Jn 6:35: Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen Me and still you do not believe."

And now Jesus is going to say something of tremendous comfort to all who do receive Him as Savior.

All those the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away."

The older translations say, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out."

This verse has been a comfort to Christians since the day Jesus uttered it. It's the verse that helped John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, find assurance of His salvation. It was the verse that helped Charlotte Elliott, the author of the hymn, "Just As I Am," find assurance of her salvation.

Years ago I read about a man named W. F. Thompson of Dubois, Pennsylvania, who joined the Marines at age seventeen and emerged from boot camp a savage fighter. He seemed to thrive on the violence of war. After his years in the service, he moved to Raleigh, North

Carolina, where he went into business. One Friday a man entered his office and, brandishing a gun, demanded money from the firm's safe. Thompson chased the thief out of the building and down the street. As he turned the corner onto Fayetteville Street, he came upon the gunman, who was poised, waiting for him, revolver in hand. The first bullet hit Thompson in the chest. The next two struck his left shoulder and arm. Thompson clung to life through the weekend, but on Monday the doctors gently urged his wife to call the undertaker. "He has only a few moments left," they said. Friends gathered by his bed, and every breath appeared his last. But W.F. Thompson lingered, unconscious, clinging to life.

At length, he opened his eyes and glanced about the room, trying to remember who and where he was. He spied a Bible open on the bedside table. Its presence angered him. Reaching over with a groan, he closed it and sank back into a stupor. The next time he opened his eyes he saw the New Testament opened as before. He managed to slam it shut before collapsing again. When his eyes jerked open the third time, they involuntarily darted to his bedside table. The Book was open again, waiting to be read.

Summoning his strength, Thompson reached over with grunt, seized it with his good arm, and prepared to hurl it across the room. But as the Bible hovered above his head, its pages opened to John 6, and the words of verse 37 hit him like a hail of bullets: All that the Father gives Me will come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. With trembling hands, he opened the page more carefully and read the verse again, then again and again. "Does this mean me?" he asked aloud.

"Especially you," the Lord whispered to his heart. Not only was W.F. Thompson wonderfully saved that day, but God called him into the ministry of preaching for the rest of his life. This became his chief text. If you worry about the certainty and assurance of your salvation, John 6:37 can be of inestimable help. Jesus Christ didn't come down to this world as the Bread of Life, and suffer and die just so we can have a vague hope of maybe going to heaven. He came to save us and to give us assurance of our salvation. He said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will in no wise cast out."

2. Jesus Speaks to the Religious (V. 40-59)

For some reason this message didn't go over so well with the synagogue leaders, and so they expressed their unhappiness. Look at

verse 41: At this the Jews began to grumble about Him because He said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can He now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

So our Lord shifted gears in His message and started addressing these religious people. Verse 43: "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'Then will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from Him comes to Me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only He has seen the Father. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven."

But now, in verse 51, Jesus changed His metaphor and His words were designed to be shocking. He said: "Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is My flesh, which I gave for the life of the world."

It's one thing to talk about eating bread, but it's very, very different to talk about eating human flesh. This was understandably a shocking turn of phraseology.

Verse 52 says: "Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, 'How can this man give us His flesh to eat?'"

Verse 53: Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in them."

The language Jesus used was so graphic and distasteful that it borders on the cannibalistic. We understand it now from our perspective. We know He was talking about the fact He was going to give His body and His blood on the cross to provide eternal life for the world. In fact, Jesus later symbolized this reality when He instituted the Lord's Supper. When we eat the Communion wafer, we say it represents the body of Christ, broken for us. When we drink the cup of wine, we say it represents the blood of Christ, shed for us. But the plainspoken words of Jesus that day didn't go over very well, and that led to the last part of our Lord's sermon, beginning in verse 60.

3. Jesus Speaks to His Disciples (V. 60-71)

Verse 60: "On hearing it, many of His disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'"

Aware that His disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before!"

Having spoken to the multitudes about the bread of life, and having spoken even more plainly to the religious leaders, now Jesus turned to His own disciples, and the rest of the message was addressed to them. It was spoken partly for the sake of damage control. Jesus said, in effect, "If this offends you, just wait. After I ascend back into heaven you'll understand it better."

Verse 63 continues: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray Him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless the Father has enabled them."

From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

This marks another change in the atmospherics of Christ's ministry.

The popular frenzy of Jesus as a political messiah was now over, and from this point on only His dedicated disciples will follow Him all the way to the end. Even today there are many nominal followers of Jesus Christ, many churchgoers, many people who like some religion around the edges of their lives. But when the moment of challenge or decision comes, they may demonstrate they do not really belong to Christ. They are not truly disciples. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves and to make sure we're really in the faith. In both the English and in the original Greek language, Jesus' words were plaintive: "Will you also go away?"

This gave occasion to one of Simon Peter's great confessions, one of his great declarations: Verse 68 says: "Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'"

Conclusion

I think this sentence is the key to the whole chapter. After I read this sentence—"You have the words of eternal life"—I went back and circled all the words and terms in this chapter in which Jesus deals with the subject of eternal life. Almost every verse brings this up again and again. I'm going to run my eye over this column in my Bible and give you the vocabulary Christ used. I'm going to list the terms He employed in this sermon. I'll not even list the verse reference, but notice how certain words and phrases occur over

and over:

- Eternal life
- Bread from heaven
- Heaven
- Heaven
- Heaven
- Life
- Life
- Never go hungry
- Never be thirsty
- Never drive away
- Heaven
- Raise them up at the last day
- Eternal life
- Raise them up at the last day
- Heaven
- Heaven
- Raise them up at the last day
- Eternal life
- Life
- Eat and not die
- Heaven
- Live forever
- Eternal life
- I will raise them up at the last day
- Heaven
- Live forever

This is the ribbon that runs through the entire message, and it's also the theme that runs through the entire Bible. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This is why Christians have a very different attitude about dying than anyone else. I'll remind you of what it was like by the deathbed of our friend, Norman Richards, a few weeks ago. He said to Jeff Nichols and me, "What time?" Knowing he was dying, he was curious as to when he was going to go. He displayed not the least bit of fear, but his attitude was simply: "Absent from the body; present with the Lord."

In researching the history of Child Evangelism Fellowship, I came across the final days of the founder of CEF, a man named Jesse Overholtzer. He and his wife Ruth were living in California, and because of his failing health they invited a young nurse named Ruth to stay with them. Ruth was attending classes nearby. One night Jesse suffered a seizure, and Ruth was up with him most of the night. But the next morning, she took off for her classes almost as energetically as if she had gotten a good night's sleep.

Ruth Overholtzer looked at her husband and said, "Isn't it wonderful to be young and full of life?"

"Yes," he said, "but it is more wonderful to be old and ready to go to heaven!"

That attitude is completely counter-intuitive to our culture, but it is biblical thinking. It is Jesus-thinking. That's the way the Apostle Paul viewed it. That's the way the apostles viewed it. That's the way the book of Revelation views it. And that's the way Jesus taught in in John, chapter 6, as He said: "I am the bread and I have come down from heaven to give eternal life to the world. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

It was the gravity of our sins that drew the Lord Jesus Christ to earth; and it is the power of His resurrection that provides the biblical assurance of heaven. That's why we can stand and say today with Simon Peter: "Lord, where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 7

A couple of things have been bothering me recently. The first thing that bothers me is in the Christian world, in our Christian family. I've had more and more people coming to me asking about areas of temptation they face. All of us face temptations, and we all face

strange temptations. But increasing numbers of people are telling me of temptations that alarm them, that deeply bother them, that are beyond what they expected to face. They feel tempted by strange things and in strange ways. They say, “I’m terribly upset and ashamed at the category of temptation I feel.” My response is: “Welcome to the human race. We are fallen people, and we are increasingly damaged. Our very genetic makeup is increasingly damaged. You’d be amazed at how many people are tempted just like you are. You’re not strange; you’re just human. But we must remember this – temptation is not sin. Just because you have a desire in some area doesn’t mean you have to give in to it. You have resources deep in the Holy Spirit that can give you victory. Just beneath the surface are endless reserves of grace.”

The second thing that bothers me is in the unsaved world. People are absolutely giving up on spiritual hope. I wrote an article a week or so ago for the Huffington Post based on our sermons for the past two weeks. It was on the Gospel of John and John’s emphasis on the subject of eternal life. I said that without the biblical doctrine of eternal life we are left with nothing but despair and ultimate meaninglessness and absurdity. I was amazed at the response.

One person said: “I gained peace when I gave up belief in god and an afterlife. I’ll simply return to the nothingness I was before I was born. Is that so bad?”

Another said: “I don’t need belief in a god or savior to be OK with temporary existence.”

In other words, these people have adjusted to the illusion of despair and have completely given up on any kind of ultimate hope. They’re willing just to live for the here and now, like passengers on the Titanic who can toast the iceberg and dance till the ship goes down. They’ve resigned themselves to being a flame that flickers for a moment and then is forever extinguished. What do you do with a society like that? How do you raise your children in a culture like that? How do you spread the Gospel in a world that has given up—that no longer even hopes for hope?

Well, there again we have resources deep in the Holy Spirit that can give us victory. Just beneath the surface are endless reserves of grace. I’d like to give you an analogy, and it’s from the nation of Kenya.

Kenya was in the news recently, as we all remember, because of last month’s terrorist attack on the shopping mall in Nairobi by Islamic extremists, which left seventy-two people dead. But until that attack, the news from Kenya was exciting—almost unbelievably good. This good news was crowded out by the bad news, but the good news is still amazingly good. According to the New York Times and other news outlets, scientists in drought-ravaged Kenya have just found several massive underground aquifers – natural underground reservoirs of clean accessible water. These aquifers have been located a thousand feet beneath the surface of the earth and are so massive they can potentially meet all the water needs of Kenya for the next seventy years. The largest of these newly-found aquifers is 62 miles long and 41 miles wide. It is estimated to contain 200 billion cubic meters of fresh water—which is 900 percent more than Kenya’s current water reserves. Scientists are going to tap into this water using technology developed by oil companies for getting oil out of the ground, and as they do so it’s likely the terrible, prolonged drought in East Africa will end.

That’s what we need to realize in the spiritual realm. Underneath the surface of our lives are infinite aquifers, underground reservoirs of endless grace. The Bible frequently uses “water” and “springs” and “wells” and “fountains” to describe the spiritual resources we have beneath the surface of our lives.

- The Psalmist said: “All my springs (or fountains) are in You” (Psalm 87:7).
- Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”
- Isaiah 35:6 says that God will give us streams in the desert.
- Isaiah 55 says: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.”
- The very word “prophet” in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew language, literally means someone who is a fountainhead of truth, one who bubbles up with the message like a spring. According to Smith’s Bible Dictionary: “The ordinary Hebrew word for prophet is nabi, derived from a verb signifying “to bubble forth” like a fountain; hence the word means one who announces or pours forth the declarations of God.
- Jesus used this idea with the Samaritan woman, as we saw in our study of John 4:14: “Indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
- This is the final symbol or figure of speech used in the Bible. In the last paragraph of Scripture, in Revelation 22:17, we have the Bible’s last invitation: “Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.”

Exposition of John 7

I’ve spent a lot of time on this introduction, but it lays the foundation for what I want to say as we turn to John, chapter 7. We’re facing the internal drought of temptation in our soul and the external drought of godliness in our society. But we have underground resources of divine grace, and in John 7, I can show you three of them.

Let’s turn to John 7, beginning with Jn 7:1: After this...

After what? We spent the last two Sundays looking at the previous chapter—John 6, and our Lord’s sermon about the Bread of Life,

which took place during the Passover season. John 6:4 says that the Passover season was near. So John 6 tells us about Jesus feeding the multitude, and the next day about His sermon in the synagogue in Capernaum. Two days in the life of Jesus. Now, the apostle John skips about six or seven months. He is very selective in what he wants to tell us, and the next story takes place here in Jn 7 at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. So between Jn 6 and Jn 7 there is a gap of about half a year.

After this Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him. But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to Him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that Your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since You are doing these things, show Yourself to the world." For even His own brothers did not believe in Him.

They were being sarcastic. James and Jude and the other siblings of our Lord were mystified at why their oldest brother had left His carpenter's trade and His livelihood to become a religious celebrity. But look at our Lord's response in Jn 7:6: My time is not yet here; for you any time will do.

This week I gave a little talk on purpose in life and time management, and as I studied this verse it came alive to me. Here is what Jesus was saying: "I have a divine purpose to my life. I have a mission. I have a schedule. I have an agenda. The Father ordains every moment as He wants me to spend it. But as men who don't believe in Me, you have no divine purpose. You have no mission. You have no higher schedule or agenda to your life. So it doesn't matter very much how you spend your time; it's all wasted anyway. You can do anything you want with your time since you're not serving the Lord. But I belong to the Father, and He sets My agenda."

This is true for us. As Christians, we should be masters of time management, using every moment in work or in rest for the kingdom. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). The Bible tells us to number our days. The Bible tells us to redeem the time because the days are evil. We have a divine purpose to our lives when we belong to Christ.

The unsaved person has no such purpose, no such agenda. It doesn't matter very much how they spend their time. They can do whatever they want. For them, any time will do.

Jesus continued in Jn 7:8: The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify that its works are evil. You go to the festival. I am not going up, because My time has not yet fully come.

We can accurately translate verse 8 to say, "I am not yet going up." Jn 7:9 continues: After He said this, He stayed in Galilee.

Now, the Feast of Tabernacles was an annual celebration that took place about this time of year—in September or October—in which the whole nation of Israel went camping out. Everyone made little tents or booths for themselves. They took their children and they camped out on top of their houses or out in the countryside or in the public squares. It was a re-enactment of the Wilderness Wanderings of the Old Testament, and the purpose was to commemorate how God had provided for the Jewish people during their forty years in the wilderness, and it was an occasion to teach their children the lessons that came from the experience. According to the historian Josephus, this was the most popular holiday on the Jewish calendar. And, at the moment of His own choosing, Jesus did go up to Jerusalem to the festival.

Jn 7:14 says: Not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jews there were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having been taught?"

In other words, Jesus had never been to rabbinical school. Jesus answered: My teaching is not My own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but He who seeks the glory of the one who sent Him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.

This is a very important principle for people who are in fulltime Christian ministry. If we are seeking self-gratification, our ministry is invalidated. If we are seeking Savior-glorification, our ministry is true.

In Jn 7:19, Jesus continues: Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill Me?

"You are demon-possessed," the crowd answered. "Who is trying to kill you?"

Jesus said to them, "I did one miracle..."

He's probably referring to His healing of the lame man at Bethesda in John 5, because that's what had triggered the hostility against Him. And the next several verses describe the anger and arguments that arose between the crowds and the Lord Jesus Christ. But now let's go down to Jn 7:37: On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

Now, let me give you another bit of historical trivia. According to many sources, the Feast of Tabernacles included a water-pouring

ceremony that attracted thousands of worshippers. The High Priest of Israel would march in procession from the temple to the Pool of Siloam down in the City of David and fill a water picture with water from the pool. Then with great ceremony he would carry it back up the hill, back up to the temple, where it would be poured out as trumpets blew their notes and while the people shouted. It represented the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah that when the Messiah came, an earthquake would rock the city of Jerusalem and unleash a massive underground river that would turn the Negev Desert into a paradise.

Jesus said: "You don't have to wait until then to discover an underground river. You don't have to wait until the Millennium to find streams of living water. I have come to give them to you now.

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

And John adds in Jn 7:39: By this He meant the Spirit whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

So here is the teaching of Christ. We are drought-stricken people. We have the drought of inner temptations and we have the drought of a hope-starved society. But when we come to Jesus Christ, we tap into a deep underground, unseen reservoir of grace and power the living waters of the Holy Spirit. And when we are yielded to Christ and filled with the Spirit, we have all the resources we need to flourish, to be fruitful, even as Psalm 1 says about those who meditate day and night on God's Word: That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

Providence Spring

Several weeks ago TDF member Mike Jones and I were in Georgia, and we wanted to visit the site of the Civil War POW camp at Andersonville. This was the site of the largest POW camp ever built on American soil. In 1863, Confederate officials were worried about keeping their prisoners of war so close to the border between North and South. They didn't want the prisoners repatriated. So they decided to build a new POW camp down in Andersonville. But all they built were the walls of a high stockade enclosing twenty-six acres of land. They never built any shelters for the men. There were no barracks or bunkhouses. They didn't build any accommodations. They just had walls fifteen feet high so no one could escape. Everyone was out in the open, except for whatever shelter the prisoners could rig up.

To make sure no one escaped, the guards built a deadline inside the walls of the stockade, an inner perimeter nineteen feet wide. It was like a picture frame, and any prisoner who entered the deadline would be immediately shot by guards, no questions asked. The guards were stationed on top of the walls in what was called "pigeon roosts" at thirty-yard intervals.

Well, the plan was for 10,000 Union soldiers to be imprisoned at Andersonville. But more and more POWs kept arriving by train, and soon the camp held more than 33,000.

There was barely enough food for the men, and often what little food arrived was spoiled or rotten. Malnutrition was epidemic in the camp. But that wasn't the biggest problem. The most urgent issue was the lack of drinkable water. There was a small creek that ran through the middle of the camp. It was dubbed Stockade Creek. It didn't amount to very much water, but this creek became the only source of water. It was used for drinking, for bathing, for laundry; and it was prison camp's only latrine. Just imagine—33,000 men imprisoned out the open in a big field with only one creek and everyone using for a latrine.

It emitted a terrible odor and became the breeding ground for disease. Prisoners began dying at the rate of 100 per day, and 95-percent of all the deaths were related to dysentery contracted from the water. Some men went insane from dehydration and illness and deliberately walked into the deadline where they were shot.

Well, there was a young prisoner of war, a private from Iowa, named William Tannahill. He was a Christian, and he decided to do something novel. He decided to gather a few other Christian POWs and conduct a prayer meeting for water. On August 9, 1863, William Tannahill, Josiah Young, and several other prisoners went to the place they called the Tabernacle. It was a hole in the ground caused by the roots of an overturned tree. These men began praying earnestly for water.

Within one hour they heard the sound of thunder in the distance. They kept praying, and the storm came nearer. Soon the sky opened and the rain fell in massive torrents. Prisoners hurriedly set out pots and pans and cups and hats—anything to catch the precious raindrops. Stockade Creek began to flood, and the floodwaters swept away all the diseased and stagnant water that had bred the disease.

But of course, a rainstorm would provide only a very temporary help. But then something happened that represents one of the most remarkable answers to prayer in American history. Suddenly a tremendous clap of thunder shook the earth, and a lightning bolt burst from the sky and struck the ground in a spot between the deadline and the wall of the stockade.

The lightning was so precise and powerful that it opened up an underground spring. One of the other prisoners, John L. Maile from Michigan, described it as “a spring of purest crystal water shot up into the air in a column and falling in a fan like spray went babbling down the grade. Looking across the deadline we beheld with wondering eyes and grateful hearts the fountain spring.”

The Confederate guards allowed the prisoners to build a wooden trough to carry the water to the prisoners, and that spring provided enough fresh water for every prisoner for the duration of the war. The men called it Providence Spring, and it was such a notable answer to prayer that many prisoners came to the Lord and found the living water of life, and one of them, a man named John B. Hayes from Decatur County, Tennessee, was so impressed that he gave his life to the ministry of preaching and labored for the Lord for the next fifty years.

In 1901, some of the former POWs collected money and put a stone monument there marking the miracle. That’s the marker Mike Jones and I went to see. It says: “The prisoner’s cry of thirst rang up to heaven, God heard and with His thunder, cleft the earth and poured out His sweetest waters here.¹

When we come to Jesus Christ and fully give ourselves—in serious, full surrender to Him—the lightning bolt of God’s power and grace strikes our hearts, unleashing an underground stream of living water. And it flows from our lives, not only giving us spiritual hydration and life, but flowing from us into this desert world and bringing life and hope to others.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

¹Adapted from Barry Loudermilk, *And Then They Prayed: Moments in American History Impacted By Prayer* (2011), the chapter entitled “Providence Spring.”

John 8:1-30

It’s amazing how quickly we can get our lives into a mess. Just ask Phil Spector, the famous record producer and songwriter. He was so successful so quickly that he became a millionaire by age 21 and a multimillionaire by 25. He produced Ike and Tina Turner. He worked with John Lennon and the Beatles, producing their “Let It Be” album. During his heydays in the 1960s, he produced more than 25 hits on the Top 40 charts. His 1965 classic, “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” is listed as the song with the most airplay in the United States in the twentieth century. In 1998, Spector purchased the jaw-dropping hilltop Pyrenees Castle in Alhambra, California, about a half-hour from Hollywood’s Sunset Strip. But Spector’s superstar lifestyle was detrimental to the soul, leaving him disillusioned and reclusive. After a car wreck, his behavior became bizarre. He started wearing odd-looking wigs; then he started brandishing guns and frightening his girlfriends. On February 3, 2003, actress Lana Clarkson was shot in his mansion. Spector was charged with the murder and convicted; and today Phil Spector is reduced to living in a cell in a California State Prison. He recently told an interviewer, “People tell me they idolize me, want to be like me, but I tell them, ‘Trust me, you don’t want my life.’ Because it hasn’t been a very pleasant life. I’ve been a very tortured soul. I have not been at peace with myself. I have not been happy.”¹

The best way to keep from messing up lives is to build a biblical, spiritual life on the inside. We have to build a biblical, spiritual life on the inside. That’s something that Phil Spector never thought about, and so everything he amassed and accumulated worked against him. One of the best formulas in the Bible for building a biblical, spiritual life is laid out for us in the first half of John, chapter 8, and I want to give you three propositions.

1. If Jesus Forgives Us, We Must Leave our Lives of Sin (John 8:1-11)

Here is the first one: If Jesus forgives us, we must leave our life of sin. This is the emphasis of John 8:1-11, but before I read it I want to say just one note regarding this passage. If you have a newer translation, these verses may be in italics, or they may be relegated to the margin of your Bible. You may see a little note telling you that this story is not in our oldest Greek or Latin manuscripts. That is true. I could devote the entire half-hour to discussing and explaining that, but I’m not going to do it. For our purposes today, let’s just read this story like we would read any other passage of Scripture, and we’ll leave the textual questions to the classroom. The narrative continues into chapter 8 from chapter 7, which we studied last week. Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, and the atmospherics around His ministry there was tense. But finally the festival ended, and most people went home. Jesus, however, remained in town for a few days, and that’s where chapter 8 begins. Look at John 8:1:

Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn He appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around Him, and He sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.

Since this event occurred at dawn, we assume this woman had been seized during the night. Why the authorities had not taken the man into custody isn't clear. It was the woman who had been dragged before Jesus.

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Him.

Here is the trap. Jesus presumably had two options. He could say, "Yes, according to the Law of Moses, she should be stoned." At that point, His critics would have accused Him of inciting the Jews to do something forbidden by the Romans. The occupying Roman government would not let the local Jewish government execute anyone. The Romans reserved that right for themselves. So if Jesus said, "Stone her," He would be rebelling against the Roman government. But if He said, "No, let her go," he would be violating the Jewish Law, and His ministry would be invalidated by Israel. But Jesus didn't say anything at all. Instead He did something very unusual.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger.

This is the only time Jesus is described as writing something. We know He was literate, educated in the synagogue schools. He could read and write. He was educated. But what was He writing? He was probably writing out the same thing God Himself wrote 1400 years earlier with the finger of the Almighty, on tablets of stone: The Ten Commandments. That's very possibly what He was writing. One after another, He wrote the Ten Commandments, knowing everyone standing in the circle around Him had broken those commandments.

When they kept on questioning Him, He straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

As He finished the list, perhaps every person present was convicted of sin, each one unwilling to throw the first stone.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

When Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you," He was extending forgiveness to her. She had violated the law of God, but her sins would be nailed with Christ to the cross. A little later in this passage, Jesus will allude to the moment when He would be lifted up on the cross; and in the cross we have forgiveness of sins. The other day Katrina hired a man who came and power-washed our house. When I got home I couldn't believe the difference. I was ashamed at how we had let the mold and filth build up on our siding. The message of the Bible is that God can "power wash" our souls, our lives, our spirits with His blood. He forgives us and does not condemn us. John 3 says, "For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through Him might be saved"—might be power-washed.

But notice, Jesus also said to her: "Go now and leave your life of sin." He was saying: "I have forgiven you. As a result, you've got to stop sleeping with your boyfriend; or you've got to stop cheating with that man; or you've got to leave your life of prostitution—whatever the situation was. Jesus intended her to leave the habits of immorality. He says the same thing to you. If you've been sleeping with someone with whom you aren't married, Jesus can forgive you. He can power wash your soul. But you've got to make an immediate decision: Go now and leave your life of sin.

That's our first proposition: If Jesus Forgives Us We Must Leave our Lives of Sin.

2. If We Do Not Receive His Forgiveness, We Will Die in Our Sins (John 8:12-24)

The second proposition is: If we do not receive His forgiveness, we will die in our sins. Look at the next paragraph, beginning with John 8:12:

When Jesus spoke again to the people, He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The Pharisees challenged Him, "Here You are, appearing as Your own witness; Your testimony is not valid."

Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on My own behalf, My testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for Myself; My other witness is the Father who sent Me."

Then they asked Him, "Where is Your Father?"

“You do not know Me or My Father,” Jesus replied. “If you knew Me, you would know My Father also.” He spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put in. Yet no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.

Once more Jesus said to them, “I am going away, and you will look for Me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come.”

This made the Jews ask, “Will He kill Himself? Is that why He says, ‘Where I go, you cannot come?’”

But He continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I have told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am He, you will indeed die in your sins.”

Jesus twice uses a frightening phrase, warning those who do not believe in Him or receive His forgiveness that they will die in their sins. It's terrible easy for us to dismiss everything the Bible has to say about sin, judgment, hell, and condemnation. But Jesus talked a great deal about those things. The spiritual decisions we make now determine our eternal destiny, and we never know if we're going to live another day. It's so foolish and dangerous to procrastinate. But how terrible to die in our sins.

3. If We Do Receive His Forgiveness,
We Will Seek to Please Our Savior
(John 8:25-30)

But there is a third proposition in these verses. If we do receive His forgiveness, we will live for our Savior.

John 8:27: They did not understand that He was telling them about His Father. So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught Me. The one who sent Me is with Me; He has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases Him.” Even as He spoke, many believed in Him.

The phrase I want you to notice is our Lord's testimony: I always do what pleases Him. When we realize what it means to be forgiven by the Lord Jesus, and the cost He paid to make it possible, than the focus of our lives changes. We began to want to be like the Lord Jesus, who always does what pleases the Father. This is a recurring theme in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians 5:9, we read: “So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” In other words, while we're alive on earth our goal is to please the Lord; when we get to heaven, we'll have the same goal. Nothing changes in this regard between heaven and earth.

Ephesians 5 says, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” (Remember what Jesus said in John 8: “I am the light of the world”? And now Paul says he lights us up). Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”

So in 2 Corinthians Paul told us that our primary goal in life and in death is to please the Lord, and in Ephesians 5 we're told to find out what pleases Him. Where do we find that out? In the Bible. In the Scriptures He has given us. It's an interesting study to look up what the Bible specifically says about pleasing God. We can pursue a lengthy study of this today, but I can mention a few passages for you to consider.

- This is a truth that starts in childhood. Colossians 3:20 says, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”
- First Timothy 2:1-3 says God is pleased when we pray for our leaders and live quiet lives of godliness: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior.”
- Hebrews 11 tells us God is pleased when we trust Him in life's trials and troubles: “Before he was taken, (Enoch) was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him” (Heb 11:5-6).
- It pleases God when we love one another. The apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:21: “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him. And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded.”
- And, bringing us back to our opening story about the woman caught in adultery, it pleases God when we live lives free from immorality. First Thessalonians 4 says: “We instructed you how to live in order to please God... It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.”

I had breakfast this week with my friend Stan Buckley of Mississippi, who heads up a tremendous benevolent and evangelistic ministry in the nation of Haiti. He has housing developments, medical clinics, a church, a school, and an entire enterprise going that's making a real difference in that earthquake-devastated nation. He told me that he was flying from Port-au-Prince to Miami the

other day and he sat across the aisle from a very dignified woman who asked him about his work. This woman had been part of a very political family, one that had been forced to flee many years ago. Now she lives part-time in Haiti and part time in Miami, and she, too, was trying to run a benevolent organization. When Stan told her how many doctors and dentists he had coming and going, she was amazed. "How do you manage to pay that many professionals?"

"I don't pay them," said Stan. "They pay me. They take time off and pay their way and volunteer their services. And we also have a lot of engineers, mechanics, and teachers. We have hundreds coming"

"How much do you pay them?" said the woman in amazement. "I cannot get three people to come and help us."

Stan said, "You're looking for people in the wrong places. You have to go to the churches. You have to go to Christians. This is what Christians do. We stayed in Haiti after the media left. When you're on a plane flying into Port-au-Prince, you're on a plane that is three-fourths filled with Christians. They are coming to live out their faith."

Stan told me, "It gave me a wonderful opportunity to witness for the Lord." Why do we as Christians have a drive to help others? Because somehow we know it pleases the Lord. That's what Phil Spector was missing from his life. He thought he could please himself by pleasing himself, and he never understood that we don't really learn to please ourselves until we receive God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ, leave our lives of sin, and begin a life devoted to pleasing the Lord.

Conclusion

Do we have anyone here who identifies with the woman brought before Jesus, defeated, sinful, embarrassed, humiliated, filled with shame? Anyone here feel like you've lost that lovin' feeling from the Lord?

A few weeks ago, our ministerial staff planned our annual retreat, and we went up to Roan Mountain to my family home up there, and one day I went hiking up the mountain behind our house. Now, the mountain is full of springs, and my father's hobby was to locate, keep and clean these springs. I remember as a boy going with him to tend the springs. He would find a spring—sometimes just a marshy spot on the side of the mountain—and he would dynamite out the spring, and then build a simple cistern around it with a sort of faucet or aperture, to which he connected black plastic pipe. He unspooled miles of black plastic pipe crisscrossing the mountain to the reservoir above the house. And that was our water supply. When I'm hiking on the mountain, I almost always find strands of his black plastic pipe. Well, last month when we were there for our staff retreat, I went hiking to the top of the mountain, and I thought I'd take a shortcut coming down the mountain and I got myself into a laurel thicket that was so thick I could hardly make my way through it. It covered about an acre, and I got so tangled up in that laurel I wondered if I could get out of it. I was crawling on my stomach and climbing over branches like a child in a jungle gym. One of my basic rules in life is never let the laurel stop you, so I kept going. But then I spied a tree that had fallen over the whole thicket, and it made a bridge. I thought to myself, if I can just get on that log I can tightrope over the entire thicket. So I did so; and of course, I was halfway across the log, which was wet and moss-covered and slippery, and my feet flew out from under me, and I fell backward about five feet and hit on my back in the one spot where no laurel broke my fall. I hit the ground with a thud, and it stunned me a little. My first thought was that no one would ever find me in the middle of that thicket, and my cell phone wasn't working. But I felt my bones and realized I wasn't hurt, just stunned, and I pulled myself up to my feet and looked around trying to get my bearings. I was disoriented. And then I looked down and there right by my feet was one of my dad's black plastic pipes, one he had laid many years ago, one that I could follow down the mountain, one that would lead to the reservoir just above our house. And I followed the pipe home.

Maybe you've had a terrible fall. Maybe you've made a mistake. Maybe you've fallen into a sin. It's hanging over your head like an anvil. But the Lord Jesus Christ was lifted up and crucified to provide all the forgiveness you need. And if you've had a terrible fall, and if you pick yourself up, you'll find the Heavenly Father has a pipeline of grace running right by your footsteps. And if you'll follow His grace, He will lead you home.

'Mick Brown, *Tearing Down the Wall of Sound: The Rise and Fall of Phil Spector* (NY: Random House, 2007), 389.

John 8:31-58

I've often wondered what I would do if I had to preach in a room this size or larger without a sound system. Until about a hundred years ago, all preachers and vocalists operated without any amplification, and some of the great preachers spoke to thousands of people. If these speakers were inside, they knew how to build the right acoustics into the architecture. If they were outside, they knew how to position themselves so the sound was carried by the wind. They knew how to project their voices. Jesus preached to thousands and was apparently heard by all, and without a microphone.

Well, all the techniques of delivery changed in 1910. I was surprised to learn the man who invented amplification was a Mormon. His name was Nathaniel Baldwin, of Utah, and he was frustrated because he couldn't hear the sermons in the Great Salt Lake Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. So he invented a device to amplify sound. He couldn't get anyone interested in investing in it or manufacturing it until the United States Navy heard about the headphones he invented. They realized they needed these headphones for their radio operators during World War I.

So Baldwin started his own factory producing headphones, which were used during both World War I and World War II. He made a fortune, but then he lost it all by investing in various enterprises connected with the Mormon polygamy movement. He went bankrupt; and even worse, somehow Baldwin managed to get himself convicted of mail fraud and went to prison.

Anyway, we can thank a Mormon named Nathaniel Baldwin not only for our sound systems but also for the headphones and earbuds that are today so ubiquitous. I was recently in a city riding on a subway, and almost everyone was wearing headphones and earbuds, and they were all listening to different music. I could tell by the way they were singing along or moving to the various rhythms they were listening to. I couldn't hear a sound, but everyone was listening to music or words being privately piped into their brains.

I read about one young person who said: "My headphones are like my own personal, 'Do Not Disturb' sign."

We can put on our headphones and be in our own personal world. I do that sometimes myself.

Well, the Lord Jesus Christ said in John 8 that we're all listening to someone. Someone is whispering in our ear. Someone is playing music in our brains. We're all wearing an invisible set of headphones and someone is communicating with us all the time.

Think about it. Imagine that everyone in this room, everyone you meet, everyone at school or work is sporting an invisible set of headphones. The Bible says our ears hear a word behind us, saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it." But everything depends on who is on the other end. Who is talking to you?

According to Jesus, it's either God or it's the devil. We're either children of God, listening to His voice and to the voice of His Son; or we're children of the devil, and it's his voice whispering in our ear.

I want to read this passage to you. It's the last part of John 8, and it is not an easy passage to outline or diagram because it's really an argument between Jesus and some of the Jews who had previously expressed some interest in Him and even faith in Him, but were now numbering themselves among His critics. How do you outline or diagram an argument? If I prepare and teach a lesson, I can usually outline that; but if I get into an argument with you – I never want to do that – how would I outline an argument?

The best we can do with a passage like this is to pick up the main points or themes of what Jesus says during the course of His dialogue. And the thing that spoke to me was His emphasis on who is whispering to us in our headsets.

Exposition

Notice how often Jesus talks about listening to His Word; and notice how often He warns us about listening to the devil's language. Let's begin our reading in John 8:31:

Jn 8:31: To the Jews who had believed in Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples."

The word Jesus used here is *meno*. If you *meno* to my teachings, you will be my disciples indeed. The word really means to abide somewhere, to settle down and live somewhere. In Matthew 10, Jesus talked about going to a particular town and settling down there for awhile. This is the word He used. When the Gospels say that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and remained on Him, abided with Him, this is the word that was used. These Jews had apparently shown some superficial interest in Jesus, perhaps they had politely listened to Him, perhaps they had been intrigued with Him. But Jesus said, "You must move into My words like you are moving into a house. If you abide in My word, then you are my disciples indeed."

One of the distinguishing aspects of a sincere Christian is our desire to abide in God's Word. We want to read it. We want to believe it. We want to memorize it. We want to meditate on it. We want to study it. We want to understand it better. We want to obey it. We want to share it with others.

The other day I wrote the introduction for a book coming out about the sixty-six books of the Bible, and I want to read you something I wrote because sometimes when I write something down I can state it with more precision than when I extemporize it in a sermon. Here's the paragraph that says what I want to say today:

The Bible contains everything we need to know for time and eternity. It's the wisdom of God distilled for human consumption. It's the mind of Christ between two covers; knowledge that enlightens, advice that counsels, food that feeds, milk that nourishes, honey that

sweetens, gold that enriches, a sword that defends, a hammer that molds us, and a lamp that guides us. Every word of the Bible was penned by a person like you or me, yet each word was breathed out by God, as holy men of old spoke as the Spirit moved them. The resulting Book is unique, inspired, infallible, inerrant, never-failing, ever-reviving, as old as antiquity, as relevant as tomorrow's headlines, and forever established in heaven. So why don't we read it more? A recent survey reported that sixty-six percent of the population agrees the Bible contains everything we need to know for a meaningful life. But according to another poll, only nineteen percent read the Bible daily.

One of the proofs of discipleship is reading God's Word daily. It's the habit of living in God's Word, abiding in the Scripture. You say, "How do you do that?"

Let me make two suggestions.

- First, read the Bible in large chunks. Dr. Woodrow Kroll suggests that we learn to read the Bible in one-book increments. He said that he used to fly back and forth across the Atlantic often, and he made it his project to read through an entire book of the Bible during the flight. Of course, there are several books of the Bible you could read on a flight to Atlanta or Memphis. Dr. Kroll said that when we watch a movie, we typically do that in one setting. We don't divide it into one minute or five minute settings. We sit down and watch the whole thing, even if it's two hours long." Well, nearly forty books of the Bible can be read in an hour or less, and 26 books of the Bible can be read in fifteen minutes or less. And when you read a whole book in one sitting, you get a bird's eye view of its contents and context.

- Second, read the Bible in small chunks. When I have my morning Bible reading time, sometimes I may read a chapter or a paragraph or just a verse or a word. I start reading where I left off the day before, and I jot down the passage and look for some word that nourishes my soul. So if you want to begin today, perhaps you might choose the book of Romans or the Gospel of John or the book of Proverbs, and start reading through it in an unhurried manner, looking for a verse to memorize, a promise to claim, a prayer to echo, a truth to receive, or a command to obey.

What happens as we abide in God's Word? Well, Jesus went on to say in verse 31: If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Free from what? Well, read on. Jesus is going to tell us.

Jn 8:33 says: They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can You say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Free from what? Free from the slavery of sin. All sin is addictive. Let me say that again: All sin is addictive. It doesn't just have to be drinking and drugging. It can be gossiping and negative thinking and complaining. Every bad action is a bad habit in the making. Every sin in part of the addictive self-destructive habits that destroy our families and us. And these are the things that destroy our lives. This is what Jesus frees us from. He takes us from being a slave to sin and makes us a son of God.

But now Jesus is going to say something very blunt. He's going to tell them that they have on the wrong earphones, they are listening to the wrong voice, that they have no room for His Word because they are listening to another voice whispering in their ear—they are listening to the devil himself.

Jn 8:37 says: I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill Me, because you have no room for My word.

Notice that phrase: "You have no room for My word."

I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father."

Jn 8:39: "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God Himself."

Jn 8:42: Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on My own; God sent Me. Why is My language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.

You are listening to the devil's headset. He is whispering in your ear, and you want to carry out His desires.

Jesus left no doubt as to the existence of a personal devil. As far as we can tell from Scripture, Lucifer was the chief of the angels, but he became proud and sin was found in him. He rebelled against God, and he lost his place in heaven. Revelation 12 indicates he led a third of the angels of heaven in his rebellion. Lucifer we now call Satan or the devil, and his fallen angelic followers are demons. And they are real, active, all around us, and dangerous in the world.

And notice how Jesus described the devil in Jn 8:44: He was a murderer from the beginning...

In what way was the devil a murderer from the beginning? Some commentators point back to the story of Cain and Abel, for the devil prompted Cain to kill his own brother, committing the first murder in history. But I'm so sure that's what Jesus had in mind. What happened before Cain and Abel? What happened to their parents, Adam and Eve. God created them, placed them in the Garden of Eden, and warned them against sinning. God said, "If you disobey, sin will come into your life, and it will kill you. It will rob you of eternity. The soul that sins, it shall die." But Satan came and lied to Eve and to Adam; and lured them into disobedience. And as soon as they disobeyed, the whole human was murdered, in embryonic form. Adam died. Eve died. Cain died. Abel died. Every human being has died, and everyone on earth today will die unless the Lord comes soon. Satan murdered the entire human race. All the wars. All the diseases. All the acts of violence. He brought death and destruction into the world. He was a murderer from the beginning.

He was a murderer from the beginning... not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for He is a liar and the father of lies.

He is lying into the headsets of millions and millions of people right now. How else do you explain all these random acts of violence that jolts our society? Someone will go into a school or church or office building and start shooting. Their only goal is to murder people? In some sense, Satan whispers that into their ears. In some sense, they come under his control.

This is what John 13:2 says about Judas: The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.

This is what Acts 5:3 says about Ananias: Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?"

In 2 Corinthians 2:11, the apostle Paul tells us we should be quick to forgive one another, or else the devil will get a foothold in our hearts and outwit us.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says that the god of this age (meaning the devil) has blinded the heart and minds of people, so they can't see the glorious light of the Gospel.

Ephesians 6:11 tells us to take our stand against the devil's schemes.

And James 4:7 says: "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." In other words, pull off his headphones and stop listening to him.

Instead we should be listening carefully to what the Lord says. Let's continue in John 8 with the next verse: Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe Me! Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says.

If we belong to God, we hear what He says. We are listening to His voice.

The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

The Jews answered Him, "Aren't we right in saying that You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?"

Jn 8:49: "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor My Father and you dishonor Me. I am not seeking glory for Myself; but there is one who seeks it, and He is the judge. Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys My Word will not see death."

Notice that sentence. Earlier Jesus said that if we would abide in His Word, we would be His disciples indeed, and we would know the truth, and the truth will set us free. Now He added another promise: Whoever obeys His Word will not see death.

What does it mean that we'll not see death? I think it means we will run right past it. One moment we're here; the next moment we're there. We'll not really see death. We don't recognize it the way the world does. We have our headsets on. We're listening to music from another realm.

At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that You are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet You say what whoever obeys Your word will never taste death. Are You greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do You think You are?"

Jn 8:54: Jesus replied, "If I glorify Myself, My glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies Me. Though you do not know Him, I know Him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and obey His Word. Your Father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad!"

Jn 8:57: "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to Him, "and You have seen Abraham!"

Jn 8:58: "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this they picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus hid Himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Conclusion

Here Jesus plainly said He predated Abraham, that He pre-existed, that He is eternal. And if we abide in His Word, we are His disciples indeed. This week I read about an American military chaplain named James E. Agnew, who was in Desert Storm. He was responsible for the spiritual needs of the Division Chemical Platoon. He traveled with the soldiers who were sent in first, because of Saddam Hussein's threats to use chemical weapons against the Americans. All the men were nervous, because they knew what these chemical weapons could do to the human body. They were well aware of the risks. Chaplain Agnew wanted to pray with his men before they crossed the Kuwait border, but when he approached them he noticed they had already gathered into a circle around the platoon leader. He thought to himself, "This is great; I'll have a captive audience of the entire platoon already waiting for me."

"As I got closer, I noticed they had Bibles in their hands and were about to have their daily devotional as a platoon. They were thrilled to see me and asked if I would read the Ninety-First Psalm and pray for them. Apparently they had started the morning formation by reading the Ninety-First Psalm and with prayer ever since they arrived in Saudi. As the alert to move out had been given that day, the soldiers felt that the Lord had sent me at just the right time to speak peace to their hearts and encourage their faith just before they embarked on the most dangerous journey they had ever faced."

"As I began to read Psalm 91, I sensed the strong presence of the Lord among us. The anxious looks on the troopers' faces gave way to a calm, peaceful platoon prepared to complete its mission with an unwavering faith that God was with them and that the promises of Psalm 91 were personally for them."

"At three o'clock the next morning those men crossed the border into Kuwait. The wind whistled across the desert in such vicious force, it could sandblast the hide off a man's face. I was concerned that the weather was not cooperating; however, suddenly the wind changed direction. I realized that if Hussein tried to use chemical weapons now, the wind would blow it right back on him and his troops!"

"God was certainly with us. The Chemical Platoon accomplished its mission without a single casualty."¹

Somehow the men of this platoon felt the words of Psalm 91 had been written just for them. That's what it means to wear heaven's headphones. I believe in a God who speaks and in a Savior who communicates. And I believe in the words of Jesus: If you abide in My words you are my disciples indeed; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

¹Peggy Joyce Ruth, Psalm 91: God's Shield of Protection (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House), 119-120.

John 9

One of the most famous musicians of the nineteenth century was a self-taught Norwegian violinist named Ole Bull (1810-1880). He was a composer and artist of amazing skill who toured Europe and America with enormous success. During his lifetime, he was the world's most renowned violinist. But not everyone knew him. One day while traveling in the forests of Europe, he became lost and in the dark of night stumbled upon a log hut, the home of a hermit. The old man took him in, fed and warmed him; and after supper they sat in front of a blazing fireplace and the old hermit picked some crude tunes on his screechy, battered violin. "Do you think I could play on that?" asked Ole Bull.

"I don't think so," replied the hermit. "It took me years to learn."

Ole Bull replied, "Let me try." Taking the old marred violin, he drew the bow across the strings and suddenly the hermit's hut was filled with music so beautiful the hermit sobbed like a child. The old man knew that he had met the master.

Well we're in a series of sermons about people in John's Gospel who met the Master. The title of this series comes from an old hymn that says:

One sat alone beside the highway begging;
His eyes were blind, the light he could not see.
He clutched his rags and shivered in the shadows,
Then Jesus came, and bade the darkness flee.

Well, there were several blind men whom Jesus healed in the Gospels, but by far the longest account is the story recorded in the passage we're coming to this morning. I want to read this story direct from Scripture, but let's do it section by section, because the story unfolds in a way that teaches us some impressive lessons.

Jesus Explains the Unexplainable (John 9:1-5) The first lesson is that Jesus can explain the unexplainable. Look at verse 1: As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The disciples harbored a typical Jewish assumption that all specific suffering is the result of specific sin. This kind of thinking was as old as the book of Job. Do you remember the contents of the book of Job? Job was a man who encountered a series of disasters. We're told they were caused by the devil. Satan was trying to tear down Job's righteousness. But when Job's friends came and saw his various catastrophes and afflictions, they said, "You have sinned, and God is punishing you." His friends assumed his problems were God's punishment for some specific sin or sins he had secretly committed. A lot of times we think this way too. We think this way about ourselves. We say, "My problem or sickness or disaster is because of what I've done. God is punishing me."

That kind of thinking can destroy your spirit. In this case, imagine the cruelty of the disciples' question. Your son was born blind because of your sin. Or you are blind because of some sin you committed in the womb or because of some sin God knew you were going to commit later in your life.

The Bible does tell us in a general sense that all suffering is the result of sin; but it does not teach that specific suffering is necessarily the result of specific sin. Look at how our Lord answered in verse 3: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

This is how Jesus explains the unexplainable. We don't always know why we're facing some category of suffering or stress or sorrow; but we know it can become an arena in which the works of God can be displayed in our lives. We have to think of everything that happens to us in redemptive terms. How can God be glorified in this situation in my life? I make this point in *The Red Sea Rules*. When the Israelites were trapped by the Red Sea in Exodus 14, they instinctively asked, "How did we get into this mess and how can we get out." But the Lord said, "I intend to gain glory for Myself through your circumstances." Whenever we find ourselves in a tight spot or an uncomfortable place in life, we instinctively ask, "What did I do wrong? How did I get into this mess? How can I get out?" But our perspective changes when we learn to ask: "How can God be glorified in this situation? How can the works of God be displayed in me?"

We have to learn to think differently.

If you visit Enterprise, Alabama, and you go down to the town square, you'll see the most unusual public statute in the United States. It's a pedestal on which a woman is standing in a flowing robe and with her arms stretched above her head. High in the air, she's holding a giant boll weevil. Now, the boll weevil was the deadliest enemy to cotton, and through the years it simply devastated the economy of southern Alabama. It ruined the lives of hundreds of farmers, and kept many families imprisoned in poverty. And yet the inscription connected to the monument reads: In profound appreciation of the Boll Weevil and what it has done...." The statute is said to be the world's only monument to an agricultural pest.

Well, there's more to the story. After the boll weevil kept devastating the cotton crops, the wise citizens of Enterprise and Coffee County, Alabama, turned to peanuts. They converted their fields to the growing of peanuts, and they discovered that the climate and soil and conditions were ideally suited for peanuts, and this area became the peanut-growing capital of the world. The people became more prosperous than they had ever been. And the city fathers in the early 1900s decided to establish this statute as a tribute to how something disastrous could be a catalyst of good, and how adversity can be used for advantage.

That's biblical thinking. The disciples saw boll weevils, but Jesus saw peanuts. The disciples saw sin and shame, but Jesus saw grace and glory. The disciples pitied that man because of his past; Jesus looked at him and dreamed of his future. The disciples didn't know how to explain his blindness, but Jesus explained that his blindness would occasion the work of God in his life. And look at what happened.

Jesus Turns Mud Into Miracles (Jn 9:6-7)

The next thing we know, Jesus is turning mud into miracles. Look at verse 6: After saying this, He spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," He told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the

man went and washed, and came home seeing.

I don't know why Jesus used spit and mud to heal this man, but it shows the infinite variety of creative ways in which the Lord resolves difficulties in our lives. Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud with His saliva, and bathed the man's eyelids with the strange ointment. He sent the man to the Pool of Sent, or Siloam, and as the man washed the mud from his eyes, his blindness fell away and the first thing he saw was the reflection of his own face in the waters of that tranquil pool.

The great lesson is: Where we see mud, Jesus sees miracles. We're prone to look at all of life as the disciples looked at that blind man or as they looked at the dirt beneath their feet, but where they saw a problem Jesus saw an answer; and where they saw mud Jesus saw a miracle.

Because of the power and promises of the Bible, we can learn to think that way too; and we can help our children learn these lessons. In his book about Philippians 4:8, motivational speaker Tommy Newberry tells about the time his eight-year-old son, Ty, broke his right arm. It was devastating to the boy, because it was right after his first football practice, and Ty had been ecstatic about football. He came home after practice and excitedly showed his dad in slow motion how he had learned to tackle. Unfortunately he lost his balance, fell backward, and broke his arm and was out for the season before the season even began. He is bitterly disappointed.

Tommy sat down his son and did what good parents ought to do. He helped his son learn how to adjust his thinking.

"Ty, don't you think there are lots of things you can still do, even with your broken right arm?" he asked.

"No, not the really good things," said Ty.

After talking about it some more, Tommy suggested Ty write down twenty-one things he could still do with just one arm."

"Dad, I'm in a cast," said Ty. "I can't write."

"Oh, that's right. Then you talk, and I'll write for you."

Ty started slowly, but he began thinking of things while his dad wrote down the list. When they got to twenty-one, Ty said, "Keep writing, Dad. I want to do some more." They finally stopped after listing thirty-five things Ty could do with a broken arm. The boy wanted to show the list to his mother, but Tommy had one more lesson to teach.

"Ty," he said, "do you think we could have made just as long a list of the things you can't do with a broken arm?"

"Yes," said the boy, "but why in the world would we want to do that?"¹

Sometimes we have a fall, we have a bad break, we suffer a disappointment, but we have a heavenly father who shows us how to think differently and helps us to see a miracle where others see mud. He shows us how all things can work for the good of those who are in love with Him. He explains the unexplainable and turns mud into miracles.

Jesus Converts Darkness to Discipleship (Jn 9:8-34)

The next thing to notice is the progression of this man's testimony. He had evidently never heard of Jesus. He wasn't one of those who knew about our Lord and had sought him out. Jesus went up to this man after the disciples had asked a theological question about his condition. So let's read this passage and notice the progress of His understanding.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

Jn 9:10: "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.

Jn 9:11: He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

"Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said.

Jn 9:13: They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

Jn 9:16: Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided.

Jn 9:17: Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about Him? It was your eyes He opened."

The man answered, "He is a prophet."

Jn 9:18: They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

Jn 9:20: "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

Jn 9:24: A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

Jn 9:25: He replied, "Whether He is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

That's one of the most powerful testimonies in the Bible. It's inspired our great hymn that says, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

Jn 9:26: Then they asked him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?"

Jn 9:27: He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become His disciples, too?"

This man was clever and quick-witted. He knew how to spar with these religious officials, and he got the best of them.

Jn 9:28: Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where He comes from."

Jn 9:30: The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where He comes from, yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does His will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing."

Here was a man known as a blind beggar lecturing and getting the best of the clergymen.

Jn 9:34: To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

In other words, they excommunicated him from the synagogue.

Jesus Turns Weakness Into Worship (Jn 9:35-38) That's when Jesus found him again; and now, for the first time, the formerly blind man looks upon the face of the one who healed him. You know, this man was in a situation very much like ours. He was blind; and Jesus healed him. But he had not yet actually seen the face of Christ, not until this very moment. Those of us who know the Lord Jesus have been saved, we once were blind but now we see; we are His witnesses, but we have not yet physically seen His face. But now Jesus comes to the man, and finds him.

Verse 35: Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when He found him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is He, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me, so that I may believe in Him."

Jn 9:37: Jesus said, "You have now seen Him; in fact, He is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped Him.

This man found assurance of his faith and became a worshipper, and suddenly one of the most wretched of men in Jerusalem was one of the most worshipful followers of Christ in the city. That's what the Lord does.

Last week, I spoke at a banquet for a rescue mission in Wichita. A man named Steve Strand shared his testimony. Steve grew up in Tucson, and when he was about ten years old the Vietnam War was at its most intense; the older boys in his community were being drafted. Whenever one of them would leave, they'd have a going away party, and out would come the kegs of beer. The adults would tell the children to cup their hands and catch beer from the tap, and that's how Steve started getting drunk at age ten. "Every time someone got drafted, we got drunk," he said. Then some of his buddies caught him and held him down and forced him to smoke marijuana. And he was hooked on alcohol and weed in elementary and middle school. High school, he said, was just a grocery store of drugs for him. When he was sixteen, his parents threw him out of the house, and a girlfriend got him hooked on heroin. He was in and out of jails, and had more DUIs than anyone you've ever met. Then his dad called him to tell him his mother had died of lung cancer. When Steve asked how that could happen, his dad said, "God needed her." At that moment, Steve developed an intense hatred of God. His life was one long story of spiraling downward. Finally his stepdaughter and son-in-law took him to the Union

Mission in Wichita and dropped him off. He enrolled in the New Beginnings program, and he said, "I came to love the God I had hated." He has grown in the Lord, and at this banquet before a total of 800 people he gave his testimony and told them how he had once been lost but now was saved, was blind but now could see. When he finished his testimony, the crowd gave him a standing ovation.

I was supposed to speak after him, but what could I say? The Lord brought to my mind the old poem about the violin and I quoted it. And every so often, I like to quote it again to you. It reminds me of the blind man of John 9, and it reminds me of all those whom Jesus saves, and it reminds me of you and me.

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"
'A dollar, a dollar"— then, "Two? Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three —" But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand? And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,
And going, and gone," said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand
What changed its worth." Swift came the reply:
"The touch of a master's hand."

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine;
A game — and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.
—Myra Brooks Welch

(Endnotes)

1 Tommy Newberry, *The 4:8 Principle* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 8-10.

John 10:1-18

Thanksgiving is the most positive of all our holidays, because it fosters an attitude of counting our blessings and thanking God for all He has done. My favorite thanksgiving hymn is a German hymn by Martin Rinkart, who wrote it during the Thirty Years War. He was caught inside a walled city, surrounded by the enemy, wasted by disease, and as the only surviving pastor he was conducting as many as fifty funerals each day. He wrote “Now Thank We All Our God” to remind his people to make every day a day of thanksgiving, even when conditions are dire.

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mother’s arms has blessed us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Well, today, as we prepare to celebrate another thanksgiving, we’re coming to a passage that contains one of the most positive verses Jesus ever spoke, when He told us that He had come to give us life, and to give it more abundantly. And in my message today, I want to spur us to thanksgiving because of the abundance of life we have in Christ. Let’s read our Scripture together, and then I want to make four simple points about it. Let’s begin in John 10:1:

Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what He was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know me—just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father—and I lay down My life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from My Father.”

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to Him?” But other said, These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Introduction

Not long ago, a fellow named Sergey Sudev, a journalism student in Moldova, was working as a radio station disc jockey in his hometown of Komrat. Startling news came over the wire—a wealthy man had died in Germany, leaving his entire vast estate to his Moldovan nephew—Sergey Sudev.

Sergey looked at the report in disbelief and thought someone was playing a trick on him. But presently agents of the uncle’s estate confirmed the report. Though Sergey had met his uncle only twice—the last time a decade prior—he had evidently impressed the man, who named Sergey his heir without telling him. The student was suddenly one of the richest men on earth. His inherited fortune was larger than the annual budget for his entire country of Moldova and included controlling interest in a German bank, lots of cash, and real estate in Germany, Italy, and France.

Maybe you’re thinking to yourself: “I wish something like that would happen to me.” Well, the whole message of Jesus Christ is—that is exactly what has happened to you and me. Someone died in another land, someone who knew us better than we knew Him, someone who loved us. And because of His death, we’ve become heirs to a fortune of abundance. Because He laid down His life, we have His abundant life to enjoy every day. In Christ, we’ve inherited a fortune beyond anything this world can imagine. What kind of Person would provide such a fortune for us? That’s what we can learn in this passage in John 10, as Jesus describes Himself in

four ways.

1. Jesus is the Gate and the Gatekeeper (John 10:1-9) First, Jesus is the gate and the gatekeeper. Last week we studied John 9, which is the story of the healing of man born blind. The chapter ends with Jesus in an argumentative discussion with the Pharisees. That argument spills over into chapter 10 and provides the context for the teaching here. Jesus uses a rather complicated analogy here, but I can sum it up in three verses.

- John 10:1 says: Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.
- John 10:3 says: The gatekeeper opens the gate.
- John 10:7 says: Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
- John 10:9 repeats: I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved.

In His analogy, Jesus is comparing Himself to both a gatekeeper and to a gate. You may be thinking, how can Jesus claim to be the gate and the gatekeeper? One is an object and the other is a person. But this isn't a parable. The Gospel of John doesn't record any of our Lord's parables, but John does pick up on the analogies the Lord uses. A parable tells a story to teach one primary lesson, but an analogy is a series of metaphors. Here in John 10, we have a series of metaphors, as Jesus uses several symbols to describe different aspects of His mission. So it presents no problem if Jesus speaks of Himself as both the gate and the gatekeeper.

In studying this passage, I've often read that in biblical times the shepherd would gather his flock into the stone corral, which was a round sheep pen or fold, usually out in the open. And he himself or the gatekeeper would then roll out a sleeping bag at the entrance and literally become the gate. If some of the sheep tried to escape or if predators tried to sneak into the pen, they would literally have to go across the gatekeeper's horizontal body. The gatekeeper was literally the gate. Jesus is both our gatekeeper and our gate. He is the only way into heaven. He is the only entrance into the fold. He's brings us unto His sheep pen and there He protects us. There He keeps us secure.

This is similar to what Jesus is going to later say in John 14: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

The Bible says there is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved. Only Jesus Christ is the God of Eternity who came to earth as a sinless man and who died on the cross, shed His blood, rose again, and offers eternal life. He is the gatekeeper and He is the gate. When we enter through Him we find life, and we find it more abundantly. And that brings us to our second discovery about Christ.

2. Jesus is the Giver of Abundant Life (John 10:10)

Not only is Jesus the gate and the gatekeeper, He is the giver of abundant life. In coming to verse 10, we're coming to one of our favorite verses in the Bible. The NIV translates this: to the full. I much prefer the older translations that use the wonderful adjective, abundantly. And not just abundantly, but more abundantly.

The Greek word is *perissos* (per-i-sos'), which conveys the idea of more than enough, overflowing, over and above, over the top, super abundant, in measures above what can be recorded or received.

In other words, Jesus said, "I have come to give you a life that is more than enough, a life that is overflowing, a life that is over the top, super-abundant, in measures above what can be received.

Now, let me tell you what this does not mean. It does not mean Jesus was preaching a Prosperity Gospel. There is a false teaching very popular in our day. I've not said much about it, because I think most of us here in this church are good enough Bible students to guard against it. But I was alarmed the other day to read that 50 of the largest 260 churches in the United States are preaching the Prosperity Gospel, and that some parts of the world where the church is growing most quickly, this Gospel of Materialism has taken over the reins of Christianity. Some of the largest global media ministries fixate on growing rich and experiencing continual physical healing.

What is the Prosperity Gospel? Sometimes it's called the Healthand-Wealth Gospel, or the Gospel of Success, the Gospel of Materialism, or the Name-It-And-Claim It Gospel. It asserts God wants all His people to become materially wealthy in this life on earth. We can achieve material and physical prosperity, we're told, if we exercise enough faith, a process typically aided by donating funds to certain Prosperity-based ministries. If you want a beautiful home, expensive car, lavish vacations, and healing-on-demand, simply "name it and claim it."

And if you aren't wealthy enough or if you aren't healed of your illness, it's because you don't have enough faith or perhaps because you've not donated enough money to some particular ministry.

But when I open the New Testament, I see a Savior who had nowhere to lay His head, and yet He experienced the abundant life. I see a group of Christians who suffered persecution and banishment, yet they experienced the abundant life. I see a generation of

saints who all eventually grew sick and ill and old and died. Yet they passed away with a sense of tremendous peace, for they knew how to live abundantly.

The same Jesus who told us He had come to give us the abundant life also told us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Many of the New Testament Christians lived in poverty, but they experienced the abundant life. Many of the early saints battled illness or disease, but they knew what Jesus meant when He said, "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly."

Despite its name, the Prosperity Gospel is really a bankrupt theology. The apostle Paul said, in paraphrase, "I have been rich and I have been poor, and I have learned in whatever state I'm in to be content, for I can do all things through Him who infused me with strength."

A couple of weeks ago I spoke at two events that were very different, one from the other. One, which I mentioned last week, was at the annual banquet of the Wichita Union Rescue Mission, and I was deeply moved by the testimonies and songs of some of the homeless men I met. I toured the mission. I talked with some of the men. I listened to the mission choir. Some of the men had formed a choir, and they sang the song, "The Great I Am." Their voices didn't harmonize very well, and the singing was rough. But their song stayed in my mind for days, and I've never seen a choir have more fun singing. These men had rough lives, but at the Mission they had a safe place to sleep at night and a little cubical in which they could store their possessions. It was a locker, but not like a high school locker. It was just about two-foot square, but it was big enough to hold all their earthly possessions. These men were on the knife edge of poverty, but many of them were making spiritual progress in their lives.

I went from there to the a fabulous resort in the desert to speak at another donor event, but this one was populated by very affluent people. Some of them were multimillionaires and some were reaching billionaire status. I had a little trouble knowing how to make conversation with them. While in the buffet line, I struck up a conversation with a gentleman about our trip home the next day. I said, "My flight leaves at 5 p.m. What time does your plane leave?" He said, "Whenever I tell it to." He wasn't saying that in any kind of boastful way; it was just the truth. I sat across the table from one very nice woman and I thought I'd try talking about cooking. I asked her about her kitchen and she described it, and I said, "I would love to have a kitchen like that. What do you like to cook?"

"Oh," she said. "I don't cook. I have a chef."

"Well," I said, "when the chef has a day off, do you cook then?" "Oh no, the chef leaves my refrigerator packed with food." Well, that pretty much ended the conversation.

As I returned home, I thought about the wide gulf between my two audiences. One was made up of the super poor and the other of the super rich. But here's the thing: Both groups were full of the joy of the Lord Jesus, and when it came to their love of Christ there was no difference. One group was trying to get on their feet, aided by Jesus Christ. The other group had frankly come together to figure out how they could give their money away for the cause of Jesus Christ. They were there to help finance the Lord's work. But the love of Jesus was the same. The love for the Word of God was the same. I preached essentially the same message to both groups, and because of Jesus Christ the two groups—though far apart on the economic spectrum would have been right at home with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The abundant life is the life of abundant purpose, abundant peace, abundant hope, abundant blessing, and abundant inheritance. The book of Ephesians says: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

The book of 2 Peter says: His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His only glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

In a sense, the letters and epistles of the New Testament are simply an explanation and amplification of what Jesus meant when He said, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly."

It's not the so-called Prosperity Gospel, but the Gospel of abundant and eternal life. He is the gate. He is the gatekeeper, and He is the giver of abundant life.

3. Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15)

Now in the next paragraph, Jesus tells us the price He paid to give us the Abundant Life. He became the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He said: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... And then He repeated Himself: I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know Me—just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father—and I lay down My life for the sheep.

Notice how He said this over and over. He was preparing His disciples for His rendezvous with Calvary. He was explaining the sacrificial nature of His mission. But then He said something unusual. He told us that He had come, not just to be a Good Shepherd for the Jews, but to be a Global Savior for the world. Look at verse 16:

4. Jesus is the Global Savior (John 10:16-18)

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from My Father.

Who are these “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen?” Jesus is talking about all the rest of us, all the Gentiles, all the people of the world. He is referencing Global Missions. He is referring to you and me, and to people of every language, tribe, tongue, and ethnicity. A couple of weeks ago, we honored our veterans of the Korean War. We talked about the oppressive totalitarianism of North Korea. But I read a story this week that Christians in South

Korea are sending the Gospel into North Korea by balloon. They find an open field and do it secretly by night, usually between May and October when weather conditions are favorable. They take large helium balloons and attach as many Bibles to them as possible. Then the Christians gather around the balloon and pray loudly and with tears. Then they launch the Gospel into the air, asking God to deliver it to someone who needs Christ somewhere above the Thirty-Eighth Parallel. It would be deadly for them to try to hand-deliver the Gospel, but this is one way they can seek to evangelize the most closed nation on earth. We all need that kind of creativity and drive. How can we launch the Gospel into more hearts, into more nations, day and night? We have to think in those terms because we don't have a provincial Savior, we have a Global Savior.

Conclusion

So when you put all this together you have a Thanksgiving Message, don't you? Jesus is our gate into eternal life. He is the Giver of the abundant life. To provide for us, He became the Good Shepherd who lay down His life for us, and He is our Global Savior who offers hope to all the world. That's why we can sing:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

John 11

“Yes, Lord,” she told Him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” John 11:27.

Introduction

When we preach Christmas sermons from the Gospels, we usually turn to Matthew or Luke, because those are the two Gospels that provide the stories of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus in the stable, the song of the angels over the fields around Bethlehem, and all the other iconic events that occurred when Jesus was born. The Gospel of John doesn't provide any of those details, and yet John's Gospel is full of Christmas. The Gospel of John is the Gospel that records all the statements of Jesus, in which He talked about coming down from above and being sent into the world. If you read through the Gospel of John looking for these phrases, it's remarkable how many there are.

- (He) came from the Father, full of grace and truth— John 1:14
- (He) came from heaven—John 3:13
- Light has come into the world—John 3:19
- I have come in My Father's name—John 5:43
- This is the Prophet who has come into the world— John 6:14
- I have come down from heaven not to do My will but the will of Him who sent me—John 6:38
- I am the bread that came down from heaven—John 6:41
- I came down from heaven—John 6:42
- I am the living bread that came down from heaven John 6:51
- I know where I came from and where I am going— John 8:14
- I came down from God and now am here. I have not come on My own; but He sent Me—John 8:42
- I have come into this world, so that the blind will see John 9:39

- I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full—John 10:10
- I have come into the world as a light—John 12:46
- I did not come to judge the world, but to save it— John 12:47
- Jesus knew...that He had come from God—John 13:3
- I came from the Father and entered the world— John 16:28
- For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world—John 18:37

So when we think of the Christmas story, we can read Matthew 1 and 2, and Luke 1 and 2, but we can also read the entire Gospel of John. And we can think of the words of Martha of Bethany in John 11:27: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” Now, Martha spoke those words in one of the most dramatic chapters of the Bible. John 11 is a climatic point in the Gospel of John. It’s the story of the death and resurrection of a man named Lazarus, and it shows us exactly why Jesus Christ came into that world as Christ, why He was sent to give us victory over death and the grave. Today let’s study this passage, and the story easily divides into three sections.

1. When Jesus Waits (John 11:1-16) First, we see Jesus waiting. Let’s begin with Jn 11:1.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick.

There are two men named Lazarus in the Bible, and both are in the Gospels. In Luke, we have the story of a poor man named Lazarus; and John tells us of a rich man by the same name. Both men died. And both were seen after they died. The poor Lazarus died and was carried by the angels in to heaven; and the wealthy Lazarus was raised to life here in John 11.

He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

Here again, we have references in Luke’s Gospel to this very home. There were three siblings who lived together or at least in close proximity to each other in the village of Bethany, which was more-or-less a suburb of Jerusalem. They appear to have been reasonably well off. As we learn in Luke, Martha excelled in serving others and Mary was more emotional or devotional in her personality. The next verse says:

(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)

John will tell us this story in the next chapter.

So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

What a wonderful way in which to identify Lazarus. Apparently Jesus and Lazarus got along very well. They were dear friends. They loved each other. There was a bond between them. And as Christians, that’s the way we should think about ourselves. When you get sick, you can say, “Lord, the one You love is sick.” When you’re happy, you can say, “Lord, the one You love is happy.” When we have trouble in life, we can say, “Lord, the one You love has lost his job or wrecked his car...” or whatever it is. Whatever happens to us in life, it’s happening to someone Jesus loves. He loves you, and this verse is a definition of you. But when Jesus received this message, He responded cryptically, oddly. Look at Jn 11:4:

When He heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death.”

This sickness will not end in death! But of course, Lazarus died. We don’t know what happened to him, but perhaps he had pneumonia. Perhaps his heart was giving out. Perhaps he was suffering from kidney failure. Perhaps he had cancer. They probably didn’t know exactly what was wrong with him, but as they sat by his bedside they saw he was growing weaker every hour. They saw that his breathing was becoming erratic. They saw that his discomfort was increasing. Perhaps he was in great pain. And then the moment

came when his heart completely stopped, his bodily organs shut down, his brain waves ceased, his lungs lost their force, and those around his bed burst into tears because he was dead.

But go back to those words in Jn 11:4. Jesus did not say, “Lazarus will not die.” He said, “This sickness will not end in death.”

Now, if we wanted to, we could take those seven words—“This sickness will not end in death”—and reproduce them in beautiful calligraphy and have copies made and enclosed in beautiful frames. And we could go through the hospitals and hospices and nursing homes and private bedrooms. We could hang these words over the pillows of every sick and dying child of God. These words, which were originally spoken about Lazarus, have an application as broad as Christianity, and they stretch forward in time until our Lord’s return.

Sooner or later, all of us are going to get sick and die, unless the Lord comes first. None of us knows when we’ll get a bad diagnosis. But these words are just as true for every child of God as they were for Lazarus: “This sickness will not end in death.” It may include

death, but that's not the end of the story. Jesus came on Christmas in order to live a righteous life and die a righteous death, and thus defeat death, hell, and the grave. He came to give us eternal life. He came to give us the promise of an everlasting heaven. And He came to do it for His own glory. Look at the next sentence.

No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

What a remarkable thing! Death is the ugliest reality of them all, the ugliest thing in the world. And yet the grace of God can so reverse the processes and change the reality that even death becomes an occasion for Christ to be glorified.

The next verse reemphasizes our Lord's love for this family of Bethany, and then we have a very interesting turn of a phrase. Look at Jn 11:5:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that Lazarus was sick He stayed where He was two more days...

Because He loved them, Jesus tarried. He waited until Lazarus died. Several years ago, I preached a series of sermons on the subject, "When Jesus Tarried." It was about times when Jesus appeared to show up late. There are four times. The first is with His first coming. The Jews had expected Him in Old Testament days, or shortly thereafter. The Old Testament ended about the year 400 BC, and everything was silent for the next four hundred years. They people waited and waited and waited, and most of them gave up. They said, "Where is His appearing? Why does He tarry?" But then Jesus was born in the fullness of time and on His own divinely-set schedule. The second time was when the disciples were stalled in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in a storm. Jesus could have come to them at 10 pm, or midnight, or 2 am; but He waited until sometime just before dawn, after they were exhausted and drenched

and frightened. He had His reasons for delaying His coming. The third time is here in this story, when Jesus tarried where He was. And the fourth time involves His Second Coming. We're impatient for Christ to return and we want Him to hurry.

The underlying truth is that when it comes to the circumstances of our lives, we have to trust the Lord's sense of timing. The Psalmist said, "My times are in your hands." The Lord doesn't always move at the speed we prefer. Sometimes our prayers are answered more slowly than we'd like. Sometimes our circumstances improve more slowly than we want. Sometimes we have to wait upon the Lord. But God's clock is always perfectly attuned to His will, and He wants us to trust Him with perseverance and patience, even when it appears He's showing up too late.

So when He heard that Lazarus was sick He stayed where He was two more days, and then He said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

After He had said this, He went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

Here is another wonderful phrase that's woven into the text. Lazarus had died, but Jesus didn't think of it in those terms. He said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

Many times the Bible describes a dead Christian as someone who has fallen asleep in Jesus. Now, that doesn't mean that the soul has fallen asleep. The indications in the Bible are that at the moment of death our souls go to heaven to be with Jesus, and that they are fully aware of being in heaven and fellowshiping with others. We learn that from the example of the other Lazarus. But physically our bodies fall asleep, and it's the prerogative of the Lord Jesus to wake us up—to resurrect our bodies. The disciples didn't quite grasp all of this and so they asked Him about it. Look at Jn 11:12:

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but His disciples thought He meant natural sleep. So then He told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

2. When Jesus Weeps (John 11:17-37)

Now we come to the next act in the story—Jesus weeps. Look at verse 17:

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home.

Mary evidently didn't hear that Jesus was nearby. Martha quietly and quickly got up to go to Him, and she expressed the one thought

that had been on her mind, and which had been haunting her.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Notice that word if. It’s like the word why. When we suffer any kind of tragedy, these are often the two words in the vocabulary of suffering. Why did this happen? If only something else had intervened. If only I had done this or that. If only I had not done such and such. These are thoughts that can haunt a person like ghosts floating around in our minds.

If You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her. “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

This is one of our Lord’s great “I am” statements. He didn’t just say that He will bring about the resurrection of the dead. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He embodies it. He personifies it. He internalizes the power of everlasting life. All life comes from Him, is derived from Him. He is life itself. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?

“Yes, Lord,” she replied. “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.”

Our Lord’s profession is that of teaching. He is an educator. He teaches us how to live, what God is like. When Martha said, “The Teacher is here,” no further identification was necessary. After all, Mary had sat at His feet listening to Him.

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met Him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

How interesting that Mary said exactly the same thing Martha had said. The statements were exactly the same: “If You had been here, my brother would not have died.” This thought was tormenting both of them. But even though the words were the same and the questions were duplicates, the two personalities of the women were very different. Martha was all business, and Jesus answered her with great theology. But Mary was more emotional, and Jesus’ response was totally empathic. Verse 33 says:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” He asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept.

As all of us know who grew up in Sunday School, this is the shortest verse in the English Bible. But it conveys such great emotion. It shows us how deeply disturbed and distraught Jesus is when He views the sorrows of this world. He is the sympathizing Savior. He sympathizes with you. Don’t ever think that Jesus doesn’t know what you’re going through, or that He doesn’t care.

Oh, yes, He cares, I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief.
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.

Verse 36 says: Then the Jews said, See how He loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

3. When Jesus Works (John 11:38-44)

And that brings us to the third act in the story. Jesus waits; Jesus weeps; and now Jesus works. Look at Jn 11:38:

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Interestingly, we believe we can still locate the tomb of Lazarus in Bethany. It’s on the southwest slope of the Mount of Olives, about two miles east of Jerusalem. It’s been identified as an authentic site since the 300s, and the burial chamber itself certainly goes back to New Testament days.

“Take away the stone,” He said.

I can’t read this without wondering if Jesus wasn’t thinking of His own death and resurrection. In some ways, this is a preview of what Jesus Himself would experience just a short time later. How that must have been on our Lord’s mind.

Martha, however, always the practical one, had a concern.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me.”

The dead are raised, not just by the power of Jesus, but by the prayer of Jesus.

When He had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Conclusion

The older versions say dramatically: “Lazarus, Come Forth!” And I think that’s a very important phrase to remember. We’re told that when Jesus comes again, when He comes in the air, when He comes to resurrect His people, He will shout out a command.

- The Bible says, “For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a loud command” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
- John 5:28-29 says, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out.”

When He shouts, when we hear His voice, what will He say? Perhaps this passage in John 11 tells us. He will call our names with a loud command: Come forth! And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And so shall we ever be with the Lord.

And this is what Jesus gives us for Christmas. This is what He came to do. This is the great gift He came to bestow.

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

John 12

The New York Times had an interesting article last week about the evolution of Christmas-themed television shows. Back in 1965, “A Charlie Brown Christmas” went on the air for the first time. Most of us have seen this at one time or the other, and there’s an interesting moment when everything gets confused and everyone is upset and Charlie Brown wants to know what Christmas is really all about. Linus stepped to the center of the stage dragging his blanket behind him and recited Bible verses from the Gospel of Luke about the birth of Christmas, then he turned back to Charlie Brown and said, “That’s why Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

But now, said the Times, things have changed. There’s an avalanche of Christmas-themed television programs every year, and all of them in one way or another try to expound on the meaning of Christmas, but few of any of them ever have so much as a reference or allusion to a Bible verse. They avoid the original Christmas story like a plague. The one thing most of these programs have in common, said the newspaper, is “sugary sentiment.” Today’s Christmas stories on television have no reference at all to Christ or to the Gospel or to Bethlehem. They just give us sugary sentiment, with a Christmas tree in the background. But there are a few exceptions to sugary sentiment. Some of the programs are just downright crude. One television special is about Santa oversleeping. He jumps out of bed late, takes off in his sleigh, and throws presents down to earth like bombs amid a deluge of constant profanity.

And of course, Charlie Brown’s Christmas is banned in schools and public places everywhere.

Well, I don’t know what to do about Hollywood and secularism and political correctness. They’ll have to answer for all that themselves. But I can tell you things are different here at our church and in our own hearts and in our own homes. We still believe in the first six letters of the word CHRISTmas, and we know the most important thing we can do during the holidays – simply to love the Lord Jesus, to love Him with all our hearts, to love Him in ways that are both emotional and practical, to love Him who first loved us.

And in my message today I’d like to give you three examples of women who did that during the actual lifetime of Jesus on earth. A lot of people show up in the Gospels, and we’ve met a lot of them in our study through the Gospel of John. But there were three women who were the most important and visible women in our Lord’s earthly life – the three primary women in the Gospels – and all of them shared the same name: Mary.

Mary of Nazareth

The first, of course, was the Mary of Nazareth, the Virgin Mary, one of the most remarkable people in the Bible—the one and only person in biblical or human history chosen by God for such an assignment as she was given. The first time we see the Virgin Mary is in Luke 1:26:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!"

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come to you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Mary spent the rest of her life loving Jesus with the kind of love only possessed by a mother. I've never been a mother, but I've had a mother and nothing compares with a mother's love. Even when I was a grown man, my mother would want to be near me on my birthday. She often found a way of coming down here to Nashville. One day I said something to her along those lines. "Mom, don't worry about coming down here on my birthday. I'll be up there in a couple of weeks." She said something to this effect, "Well, your birthday isn't just a special day in your life; it's a special day in my life, too. I'm the one who gave you birth." And down she came to celebrate our special day.

Do you know what you get if you turn the word "MOM" upside down? It's "WOW."

Mary and Jesus had a mother-son bond that was never broken, and as we glimpse Mary throughout the Gospels, we want to say "Wow!" She had many burdens and sorrows and responsibilities. She misplaced Jesus once when he was twelve years old. She worried about his state of mind during the years of his ministry. She was at the cross when he died. The last time we see Mary in the New Testament, she's in the Upper Room with the disciples in Acts 1, waiting for the Day of Pentecost and the down-pouring of the Holy Spirit. But on every occasion, she was always concerned about Jesus—it was the one concern that characterized her life. And by studying her example, we can learn to love Him more, too. We can't love Him with a mother's love, but we can come just as close to it as we can get.

Mary of Magdala

The second Mary that came into our Lord's life was Mary of Magdala. She is called Magdalene because of her hometown Magdala, on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee. Mary Magdalene is mentioned about a dozen times in the Gospels. She was evidently a successful woman, perhaps a businesswoman, who had a tremendous spiritual need in her life. Somehow she had become demon-possessed. We aren't given any of the details, but perhaps she had done something or exposed herself to some influence, and she had become possessed by demons. Her spiritual affliction was ruining her life. I'm sure the same is true for many people today. Many people are successful in our nation, in business, in politics, in media, in fame, in their careers. But somehow they have come to be under demonic influence in ways I cannot really diagnose. I'm convinced the Bible teaches us that angels and demons have more to do with the business of this world than we know. But Jesus came. And when Jesus comes—when He really comes into a person's life everything changes.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned about a dozen times in the Gospels, but because time is short I'll just show you one passage. Luke 8:1-3 says: After this, Jesus traveled about from one town to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Mary Magdalene became a devoted follower of Christ, and she was as committed as anyone in Christian history. She provided financial support for our Lord's ministry, she and some other well-to-do women. Only heaven will record how much of God's work through history has been supported by entrepreneurial women. And when the Twelve disciples fled from the cross, Mary remained present and accounted for till the bitter end. And she was the first to the tomb. She was willing to face a band of Roman soldiers if that's what it took to care for the Lord's grave. And she was the first to see the risen Christ and the first to take the news to others. At every point and in every way, we see a woman who loved the Lord Jesus Christ with all her heart and mind and soul and strength.

We can learn something about her this Christmas, because we're in a world that has forgotten how to love Jesus, has forgotten even how to wish Him a Happy Birthday.

This is the time of year when we unpack our nativity scenes and as best we can we try to visualize the birth of Jesus as it occurred in the little town of Bethlehem. One of the reasons I love nativity scenes is because I've noticed how they fascinate my grandchildren and children. Even the youngest of them will study the figurines and play with them and pick up the animals and characters and especially the baby Jesus. Somehow those little figurines help us visualize the wonder of God's coming into the world.

As far as we can tell, Saint Francis of Assisi developed the first nativity scene. He wanted the children of his town and everyone else to be able to visualize and experience the birth of Jesus. So he borrowed some live animals and in a cave just outside of town he created a living nativity scene. I once visited this little Italian town of Assisi. It's built of solid stone on the side of a hill in central Italy. The streets are very steep. I wanted to hike up the place where Francis reportedly constructed his famous nativity set, but I didn't have time. But I did purchase a locally made nativity scene and also a locally written biography of the famous medieval saint. In reading the story of Saint Francis I found the secret to his life. His secret was Jesus.

The biography said: "Those who knew Francis told how he was always occupied with Jesus. Jesus he carried in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in all his members. Often he forgot where he was and what he was doing at the thought of Jesus, and with such glowing love was he moved towards Jesus Christ, yea, and with such intimate love did his Beloved replay this, that it seemed to the servant of God himself that he felt his Savior almost continually before his eyes."¹

That could have described Mary Magdalene. Somehow we need use this holiday season to rekindle our love for the Lord Jesus Christ so that it becomes the driving force of our lives.

Mary of Bethany

The third important woman in the life of Jesus was Mary of Bethany. She and her sister and brother lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem, in the nearby town of Bethany. They could walk to downtown Jerusalem in about half an hour, and it appears that when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the feasts and festivals, He stayed in one of their homes. Look at the scene as we read it in Luke 10:38-42: As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

This is a wonderful passage for all of us who are like Martha; and we all need to be diligent like Martha sometimes—often. But we don't want to forget to do what Mary was doing—to sit at our Lord's feet every day, listening to His word. This is how we express our love to Him.

Now let's turn to John's Gospel. Last week we looked at another visit Jesus made to this home in Bethany. The brother, Lazarus, had died and Jesus came to pay a visit. Look at John 11:32: When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

In Luke 10, she is sitting at His feet; and in John 11, she is falling at His feet.

And now, let's turn to our final passage, to John 12, and we see Mary of Bethany one more time in the Bible; and again we see her at the feet of Jesus:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, "Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me." Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus

as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in Him.

The first time we see Mary of Bethany, she was sitting at the feet of Jesus in eager study, listening to His words. The second time we see her, she was falling at His feet in earnest prayer. The last time we see Mary, she is kneeling at His feet in heartfelt worship. We can summarize it all by observing how much she loved Him.

Back in 1974, there was a woman named Laurie Klein who lived in a mobile home in central Oregon, in a rather bleak and remote place. She was a new mother. Her husband was a fulltime student, and the young family was barely getting by. They had no church, no friends nearby, and Laurie didn't have an independent means of transportation. She became depressed. "It was a hopeless time, a very depressed time," she said. "I felt the poverty of my own life keenly at that point, both emotionally and physically."

One morning she tried to have her quiet time, but she was too depressed to function. She said to herself, in effect, "I'll just sing a song and let that be my offering to the Lord." And on the spot she made some words and a little tune. Well, those words and that little tune became one of the most famous early praise songs of contemporary music. It said:

I love You, Lord,
And I lift my voice,
To worship You,
O my soul, rejoice!

That woman reminds me of Mary of Bethany, and of all those who love and worship Jesus Christ because of who He is and what He means to us.

Conclusion

I think people who love the Lord Jesus display two qualities. The first is a sort of biblical, spiritual, sanctified obsession. I don't mean obsession in the negative sense of the word, but in its positive sense. We have a sense of passion and preoccupation with the Lord and with His Word and with prayer and our relationship with Him. The other quality is a biblical, spiritual, sanctified obedience. If we love Him as we should, our greatest desire is to please and honor Him, and to obey Him. He said, "If you love Me, keep My commands" (John 14:15).

Is it possible there is some area of your life right now that is not under the control and Lordship of Jesus Christ? If you truly love Him, you'll figure out how to correct that situation and live for Him in every part and parcel of life.

Perhaps you're saying: "I love the Lord, but I want to love Him more. How can I learn to do that?"

When we were children most of us got into trouble for shining the beam of a strong flashlight into someone's eyes. If you go into a dark room and shine a strong beam of light directly in another person's eyes you can temporarily blind them. But if you go into a dark room and shine that same strong beam of light into a mirror, you can blind yourself. The mirror will reflect it back into your own eyes. The mirror doesn't have the ability within itself to generate light. But it can reflect light.

We're like a mirror. In ourselves we cannot generate any love; our fallen hearts are incapable of it. But when we see the love God has for us, especially as demonstrated in the Lord Jesus Christ, we can reflect it right back to Him. That's why the Bible says: "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And so the best way to grow to love the Lord Jesus more is to ponder how much He loves us. Christmas is a perfect time to do that, to think about the love that came bundled up with that Baby, and to love Him back; to emulate the examples of Mary of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany. Those women are no longer still alive here on this earth, but we are. And we can love Him as they loved Him; we can experience His love just as they did.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown!

(Endnotes)

1Nesta De Robeck, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (Assisi: Casa Editrice Francescana, 2000), 42.

John 12:12-26

I don't know about you, but this year I'm having a hard time finding that illusive Christmas spirit everyone talks about. Katrina and I did have a little candle light supper the other night, with Christmas music in the background; that's as close as we've come to the traditional Christmas spirit. One of the reasons I have trouble with it is I end up celebrating Christmas three times every year. The first is when I write the Christmas story for our Christmas Eve service, which I try to do in the summer or early fall. Once I get an idea and do some research and frame out the plot, then I have to hole up for about a week with Christmas music playing until I trick

myself into the Christmas spirit to write the story. Then a little later I have to do the same thing all over again to write the December materials for a particular magazine I help compile. So by the time the real Christmas season actually gets here I'm beginning to feel a little like Scrooge or the Grinch. We all feel that way sometimes because of the confusion and chaos that descends around us in December.

But when it comes to the biblical truths represented by Christmas and the Christian attitudes that make up the true Christmas spirit, we're pretty excited about those. I've never gotten tired of those, have you? And in our series of studies through John's Gospel, we're coming to a passage that gives us several different attitudes that make up the true spirit of the Lord Jesus. Today I'm going to try to get you into a true biblical spirit of Christmas by looking at the attitudes we can develop from John's Gospel, John 12.

Background

To review our studies in John so far: The first half of John's Gospel covers three years, and the last half of the book covers one week. As we continue our study in chapter 12, we're now at the beginning of that final week. And the specific story we're going to study this morning is what happened on the opening Sunday of Passion Week—the day we commonly call Palm Sunday and the event we sometimes call the Triumphal Entry.

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, many people heard the news and it created a rising tide of interest and tension. As we pick up the story in John 12, we come to verse 9: Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in Him.

Anticipation: We're Living Between the Donkey and the Horse

John 12:12-15

That brings us to our passage for today, and here is where I

want to begin. The first attitude we should have this season is the attitude of anticipation because we are living between the donkey and the horse. If someone asks you about the period of history we're experiencing, just tell them we are living between the donkey and the horse.

Let's begin reading with John 12:12: The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

We call this the triumphal entry, but that title might not reflect the real spirit of the occasion. In biblical times when a returning hero (such as a victorious military general) came back to Rome or some other city, he would typically get the equivalent of a ticker tape parade. And this general or emperor would ride in a golden chariot or perhaps atop a warhorse. In some Persian capitals, they might even come riding on a camel. But no great conquering hero would ever parade through the streets riding on a donkey. Yet this is exactly what the prophets predicted of the Messiah in the Old Testament, specifically the prophet Zechariah. In Zechariah 9:9, we're told: "Rejoice, greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

That prophecy tells us the Messiah will come to Jerusalem. He will enter the city. He will be righteous. He will be victorious. Yet He will be humble and lowly, riding on a young donkey. The donkey is a lower brand or model than a horse or a chariot. It's like comparing a Ferrari with a Ford. It marked the fact that Jesus Christ was coming in humility to suffer and die for His people. He was coming not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. You've heard about first class travel, and business class, and tourist class. When Jesus came the first time, he came donkey class.

John recorded all this for us here in his Gospel. But later he wrote another book—the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. In Revelation 19, he described the Lord's return at the moment of the second coming of Christ. Look at Revelation 19:11:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice He judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on Him that no one knows but He Himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and His name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following Him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of His mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

This is the true Triumphal Entry of Jesus Christ. This is the representation of His Second Coming. In the unfolding of the book of

Revelation, this is what will happen at the end of the Great Tribulation when the antichrist will be on the verge of total worldwide victory. But at that moment, Jesus will return, riding on a white horse, as it were, and followed by the armies of heaven. The symbol of a white horse may be purely figurative, or it might be literal with additional symbolic value. But I have no doubt that the apostle John knew exactly what he was doing when he described our Lord's first triumphal entry in terms of a lowly donkey and His second coming in terms of a white horse.

Jesus came the first time to die for us, to serve us, in humility, riding on a donkey as a token of His lowliness. But when He comes again, it will be in power and glory and triumph and victory.

Right now in this period of history, we're living between the donkey and the horse. He has come the first time and we're awaiting His return. This should give us a tremendous sense of anticipation. I can tell you that Christmas to me would be virtuously meaningless without the promise of our Lord's return and of heaven and of eternity. The reality of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the ultimate solution to our two greatest problems. Speaking broadly we can say that the entire human race and every member of the human race faces two terrible problems.

First, we have the headlines of history. The reality of our Lord's return is the ultimate solution to our headlines. Our world is in the worst shape it has ever been in. We have problems on a global scale that are unimaginable—terror and persecution and hunger and war and poverty and evil. We have the fear of a coming economic collapse and the proliferation of godlessness and all the rest of it. We're living in the days of Noah. We're living in the days of Lot. We're living in perilous times. Our only hope is the Second Coming of Christ. There is no other hope for the world. We need to train ourselves to look at the headlines through the prism of the Second Coming.

Second, we have to contend not only with public headlines but also with personal heartaches. The reality of our Lord's return is the ultimate solution to our heartaches. Our lives on earth are a pilgrimage of dangers, toils, snares, and fears. We go from heartache to heartache. Psalm 90 says, "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away." But we can view every heartache through the prism of the Second Coming and have peace and security.

Because I believe the Bible wants us to fully appreciate the first and second coming of Christ. I believe the Bible wants us to think a great deal about our Lord's return. We need to train our minds to think of his return. We need to memorize passages about his return. We need to pray for his swift appearing. Just as a few prophetically-inclined souls were awaiting his first coming, so may God give us a few prophetically-inclined souls were awaiting his return. The spirit of Christmas gives us a sense of anticipation.

Fascination: We're Living Between Observation and Realization

John 12:16

The second attitude is a sense of fascination. Look at the next verse—John 12:16: At first His disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about Him and that these things had been done to Him.

The apostle John is explaining here his reference to Zechariah 9:9, to the Old Testament prediction of our Lord's entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey. On the actual day of the first Palm Sunday as all these events were unfolding, the twelve disciples didn't put everything together. They didn't necessarily realize Jesus was fulfilling that verse from Zechariah. They were overwhelmed by the sudden chaos and confusion of the moment, and they could hardly make sense of it. But later, after His crucifixion and resurrection, they understood things more clearly. They observed everything as it happened, but they only realized its meaning later as they studied their Bibles.

Some people don't study their Bibles because they feel overwhelmed by the immensity of this book. They say, "I can never understand the Bible. It's too big. It's too deep." But I would tell you—read it anyway. Read the Gospel of John. Read the book of Acts. Read the letters of Paul. Read the epistles of Peter. Read the book of Revelation. One of the greatest joys of our lives is to be caught up in the fascination of Bible study. You will never understand the Word of God less than you do today. Every time you open this book, you'll learn just a little more. You will observe another word or sentence or verse or chapter or event. While we're waiting Christ to return, we need to be pouring our minds into this Book with increasing fascination. If you need a New Year's Resolution, determine you're going to read from the Bible every single day, starting today where you left off yesterday. Develop a fascination for God's Word.

The passing of time helps us better understand the Bible, but it also helps us understand the events of life. When all this confusion and commotion was occurring, the disciples couldn't put it together in their own minds. They couldn't make sense of it. Only later did they understand. That was true, not only of the events of the Triumphal Entry, but of everything that happened that week. A couple of chapters later, on the very eve of His crucifixion, He told them, "What is happening you do not understand now, but you will

understand it later” (See John 13:7).

Sometimes things happen to us and we can't get any answers. We don't understand. We're caught in the trauma of the thing. But with the passing of time—it might be in eternity—we'll understand perfectly. The apostle Paul said, “We will know fully, even as we are fully known” (See 1 Corinthians 13:12). And I contend there is a certain fascination to watching how God providentially unfolds the events of our lives.

Here with the disciples and with us, there was the attitude of anticipation, living between the donkey and the horse. And a sense of fascination, living between observation and realization.

Evangelization: We're Living Between Jesus and the Crowds

John 12:17-26

Finally, that that leads to the third attitude that comprises a healthy Christmas spirit—an attitude of evangelization, for we are living between Jesus and the crowds. We are those in the middle, the ambassadors, the heralds, the communicators, the conveyers of Good News of Christ's coming. As we anticipate the return of Christ and study His Word, we increasingly know our great task on this planet is to share the Good News of Christ with the world. Look at verse 17: Now the crowd that was with Him when He called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that He had performed this sign, went out to meet Him. So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him.”

It's interesting to study how often John speaks of the “world.” The apostle John had certain favorite words he used over and over. “World” was one of them.

- He was in the world, and the world was made by Him—John 1:10
- Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—John 1:29
- For God so loved the world—John 3:16
- Light has come into the world—John 3:19
- This man really is the Savior of the world—John 4:42
- This is the prophet who was to come into the world—John 6:14
- I am the light of the world—John 9:5

And so forth. According to John, the whole world was going after Christ, including some Greeks. Look at the next sentence:

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me, and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me.”

In other words, we are on mission. We're to go wherever Christ goes, and He is going to all the world. There was an interesting story recently in Baptist Press about a missionary in Southeast Asia. For security reasons, the newspaper didn't give the exact names or locations of the story, but here is what happened. A missionary woman, traveling throughout lakeside villages in a country in Southeast Asia, was surprised to find a collection of nativity sets in a local open-air market. They were handmade of pottery. Since this was in a staunchly Buddhist area with no knowledge of Christianity anywhere, this missionary was curious as to where the nativity sets had come from and who had made them. She learned a family in a nearby village was making them.

The missionary arranged to visit this village and meet this family, who, she learned, had begun making the nativity sets after meeting a French tourist who suggested it would be good for business. Now, this pottery-making family had no idea what the nativity sets meant. They had no knowledge of the Christmas story. They didn't know who the baby was or the meaning of any of the characters. They just started making the figures for business reasons, based on the tourist's description.

This missionary had the joy of taking the various characters of the nativity set in her hands, one at a time, and telling the family the story of the Lord Jesus Christ. “They were making figures representing the story we are trying to tell.”

She has also begun visiting this village several times a year, and both the family and the village is responding. “I have asked God to give me this village,” the missionary told the newspaper. “I feel God has a plan here.”¹

Well, the Lord has a plan for each of us. People can see Jesus in the look we have in our eyes, the expression we carry on our face,

the invitations we extend with outstretched hands, and the words we speak as we take every opportunity of sharing a world for Christ. During this Christmas season, we're surrounded by a culture that knows something about nativity sets, hears a bit of the Gospel in Christmas carols. They give each other gifts in keeping with the tradition of the wise men. But they don't know Jesus.

The real Christmas Spirit is the Holy Spirit who makes Christ real in our hearts and minds and lives and homes. And they will see Christ in our attitude of anticipation as we live between the donkey and the horse. And in our sense of fascination as we live between observation and realization. And in our spirit of evangelism, as we live between Jesus and the crowds. And that's the best way I know to catch the Christmas spirit this season, and to keep it all year long.

(Endnotes)

1 "Nativity Set Maker in Asia Begins Learning the Real Story" by Evelyn Adamson in Baptist Press, November 1, 2013

John 12:41

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. John 12:41

Introduction

This year an atheist group paid to put up one of those electronic billboards in Times Square. It flashes a question to the pedestrians below: "Who Needs Christ During Christmas?" And then the atheists' answer flashes up: "Nobody."

Well, the atheists are half right. They are at least asking the right question. The question is the correct one to ask, but their answer is wrong. We are interested in who needs Christ during Christmas. And the correct answer is: "Everyone." Perhaps the atheists who put up the sign have never carefully investigated the evidence for the historical reality of the person of Jesus Christ and the remarkable way in which his coming fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. I've been reading a book about the way Jesus Christ shows up in the pages of the Old Testament, about all the prophecies and anticipations regarding his coming. It's written by a man named David Murray, and I like the title: *Jesus on Every Page*. Jesus is on every page of the New Testament, but he is also on every page of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is as packed with information about Christ as a bushel basket can be packed with apples.

- In John 5, Jesus told his critics to search the Old Testament, because they testify about Him. He claimed the Old Testament Scriptures as His prime witnesses.
- In Luke 24, after his resurrection, Jesus went for a walk with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He convinced them of His mission on the basis of Old Testament predictions. Luke says that beginning with Moses and in all the historical and poetical and prophetic books of the Old Testament, Jesus told them what was written therein about Himself.

When we read about skeptics and critics today, we should remember the people of his own day were skeptical too. As he entered Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion Week, many people were saying what the atheists in New York are saying: "Who needs Christ? Nobody." But the apostle John pointed out that everyone needs Christ, and that the evidence for the person of Christ is as clear and open and accessible as opening the book of Isaiah, which was written seven hundred years before the birth of our Lord. Isaiah saw His glory and spoke about Him.

I've long wanted to preach a series of sermon on the predictions about Christ found in the chapters of the prophet Isaiah. I've always been intimidated by the prospects, because the material is so massive. Isaiah is so Christ-centered that it has been called the Fifth Gospel. I can't prepare and preach an entire series on this subject today, but we can at least sample the material.

Scripture Reading

Let's look at the setting for this passage in John's Gospel. As we've worked our way through the Fourth Gospel, we are now in Passion Week. Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is described in the first part of the chapter. Many of the Jerusalemites have welcomed Him with exuberance, but another faction of the population want to destroy Him. Today we're coming to the paragraph that begins with John 12:37:

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet...

And now John is going to quote from the most poignant passage in the entire Old Testament about the coming Jewish Messiah—Isaiah 53.

"Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere...

And now John quotes from Isaiah 6.

He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.”

And then we have our text for today, Jn 12:41:

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about Him.

Here is what this passage says, in essence. Many of the people during Passion Week were critical of Christ, but that’s just what Isaiah said would happen as it relates to the coming of the Messiah. Many would not believe in Him. Many would have hardened hearts. Yet if only they carefully studied the writings of Isaiah, they would recognize Him, for Isaiah saw our Lord’s glory and spoke of Jesus.

John probably had two things in mind when he said Isaiah had seen Christ’s glory in advance. First, he was perhaps thinking of the great vision Isaiah had in Isaiah chapter 6, in which he saw the glory of the Lord high and lifted up. But he also had in mind the various predictions made throughout Isaiah about the coming Messiah. Here is New Testament confirmation from the pen of the apostle John that all those many Messianic passages in the book of Isaiah, written seven hundred years before our Lord’s birth, were in fact truly all about him—Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Savior of the World.

Well, it would take us weeks to study all the Messianic predictions in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, but today I’d like to show you a few of them that relate to his first coming.

1. His Virgin Birth – Isaiah 7:14

First, turn with me to Isaiah 7:14. We don’t have time to study this verse in its fuller context, but it is quoted in Matthew’s Gospel as being a prediction about the virgin birth of Christ. Isaiah wrote: Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel.

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is predicted in the Old Testament, declared in the New Testament, and is absolutely critical to our correct understand of the person of Christ. The virgin birth is important for three reasons.

First, it tells us His birth was a miracle. It was a miracle that bypassed the seed of man. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and the power of the Most High came upon her.

Second, it accounts for the dual nature of Christ. Somehow in the marvel and mystery of God, this allowed Jesus to have a twofold nature—to be both fully human and fully divine, to be both God and man.

Third, the virgin birth allowed Him to be born without the sinful nature that descends from Adam and infects every human being. By being virgin-born, Jesus was a miracle, He was both God and man, and in His humanity He was sinless. All of this was necessary for salvation to come to the human race.

2. His Galilean Upbringing – Isaiah 9:1

Second, Isaiah told us this virgin-born Messiah would grow up in Galilee, which was the area of the apostate northern kingdom of Israel which had become a hybrid area in terms of ethnicity and spirituality. This was a disdained area among the Jews; yet Isaiah said this would be the launching place of the coming Messiah, who would come like a light shining onto the world. Look at Isaiah 9:1:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light had dawned...

And look down at verse 6:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

3. His Spirit-Anointed Personality – Isaiah 11:1-5

And then we’re told that this virgin-born descendant of David who will come from Galilee will be anointed with the Holy Spirit and display a remarkable personality. Look at Isaiah 11:

A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse...

Jesse was the father of David, and this is referring to the Old Testament dynasty of King David, which had been defeated during the Babylonian invasion. It was like a tree being cut down. But from the roots will come a branch that will be the Messiah.

A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and He will delight in the fear of the Lord.

4. His Swallowing Up Death on a Mountain – Isaiah 25:6-9

And then we're told this remarkable person—born of a virgin, coming from the family line of David, hailing from Galilee, anointed by the Holy Spirit—would do something upon a particular mountain that will somehow destroy the shroud of death that is haunting the human race. Many Bible readers may have heard the passages we've already looked at, but I want to show you a passage that isn't as familiar. And yet, it is one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. Look at Isaiah 25:6:

On this mountain...

Prophetically this is referring to Mount Calvary.

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich foods for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.

In other words, on this mountain God is going to do something to meet the needs of all the world, and with great abundance and richness. What He is going to do on that mountain will involve bread and wine.

On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; He will swallow up death forever.

All the world is living under the shroud of death. A white sheet is one day going to cover the face of every human being, for it is appointed unto men once to die. How many times have we seen on television the act of pulling a sheet over a person's face, indicating their death? But one day, as predicted by Isaiah, a Messiah will do something on a hill that will meet the needs of every person on earth, it will involve wine, or blood; and it will destroy the shroud that covers the human race. He will swallow up death forever.

Verse 8: He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove His people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."

Jesus, born of a virgin, sinless, descending from David, hailing from Galilee, anointed by the Spirit, has a rendezvous on a mountain, and on that mountain He will destroy the final enemy of humanity. He will overcome death itself. He would swallow up death.

5. His Flint-like Determination to Prevail Through Suffering – Isaiah 50:6-7

Now, pressing deeper into the writings of Isaiah, we're told that the Messiah would accomplish this tremendous redemption by His flint-like determination to prevail through personal suffering, even the suffering of being scourged and beaten and spat upon. Look at Isaiah 50:6:

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.

6. His Cross and Resurrection – Isaiah 52:13–53:12

All this is expounded in the most heartrending description we have of Calvary within the pages of the Old Testament—Isaiah 52 and 53. For time's sake, let's look at the passage starting with Isaiah 53:1:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire Him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised and we held Him in low esteem.

Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.

By oppression and judgment He was taken away. Yet who of His generation protested? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of My people He was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer... And here is the prediction about the resurrection:

And though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see His offspring and prolong His days and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear his sins.

And here is His exaltation:

Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.

I don't have time to list all the details in this passage about the passion, suffering, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. But you can see them for yourself, imbedded right here in the words, in a passage that is so remarkably prophetic that only someone who is spiritually and intellectually blind can fail to see Jesus in every word.

7. His Transforming Impact – Isaiah 61:1-3

And let's end with one final passage—the transforming impact Jesus has had upon the world. Look at Isaiah 61, which is a passage Jesus quoted and applied to Himself in the Gospels:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and to provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

That's talking about you and me—those who have been redeemed to display his splendor. These are only a few of the passages about the coming Messiah, given to us in the book of Isaiah. These are only a few passages about his first coming. Isaiah is full of information about his second coming too, but today we've focused on his first coming. And just in the passages we've studied, we've learned:

- He would be born of a virgin.
- He would be named Immanuel.
- He would be God with us.
- He would come from the line of David.
- He would hail from Galilee.
- He would be a light to the Gentiles.
- He would be born a child, a son, whose name would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- He would be anointed by the Holy Spirit.
- He would possess remarkable traits of character and personality.
- He would have a rendezvous with destiny on a mountain.
- On this mountain He would meet the needs of humanity.
- He would serve bread and wine.
- He would remove the shroud that enfolds all people.
- He would swallow up death forever.
- In the process his back would be beaten, he would be abused and spat upon.
- He would set his face like a flint in the face of overwhelming suffering.

- He would be rejected.
- He would be despised.
- He would be stricken by God.
- He would be pierced for our transgressions.
- He would bear the iniquity of our sins.
- He would be led like a lamb to the slaughter.
- He would bear his suffering in silence.
- He would be murdered like an animal.
- He would be executed with criminals.
- He would be buried in a rich man's tomb.
- He would rise again and see the light of life.
- He would justify many.
- He would be exalted on high.
- His message of salvation would be proclaimed to the broken hearted, to the prisoners, to those who mourn.
- He would give the oil of joy instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of despair.
- And his followers would be like fruitful trees, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor.

No wonder the Bible asks this question: How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? From the mysterious regions of eternity past, God loved you, He thought of you, and He devised a way for you to have eternal life. His glorious plan of salvation centered around the mission of Jesus Christ, who gave His life for our sins. This is God's Christmas gift to you.

If I were going to give you a gift today, you could either receive it or you could decline it. You have that option. Today the Lord wants to give you the gift of eternal life. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. I want to urge you to receive it now, today, at this very moment.

This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring Hi laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary

John 13 – Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled

Today we're beginning a new series of sermons entitled "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled," and that sentence, which was spoken by our Lord in John 14:1, presupposes the likelihood that our hearts are often troubled. As I prepared today's sermon, I got distracted with old newspaper headlines. So I want to begin with three unusual stories from newspapers of yesteryear.

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Well, over the next several weeks I want to tell you about a night when all of the worry, anxiety, and grief of the ages settled into one particular room in concentrated form. It happened on a Passover night in Jerusalem. Jesus had selected a secret Upper Room to meet with his disciples for a final time on the eve of his crucifixion. The room was presumably lighted by candles or torches, and the air was thick with tension and foreboding. His betrayer was present and even the devil showed up. Yet in the midst of the fear and strain, Jesus spoke six words we've never forgotten: "Let not your hearts be troubled."

This is the Upper Room Discourse of Jesus, and it runs from John 13 to John 17—the most personal and poignant of our Lord's teachings. Here He will tell us how to keep from worrying ourselves to death. This is the passage I want us to study for the next few weeks. The key point I want to stress this morning is: Don't be troubled in your hearts, for Jesus loves you. We have a Savior who loves us, who serves us, and as we see the full extent of His love we learn how perfect love casts out fear.

Let's begin today with John 13, and this is the story about our Lord bathing the disciples' feet in the Upper Room. This is a very famous story, and it's a very simple one. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in the Upper Room. Yet the significance of the event is not so simple; it is very complex and very wonderful. There are layers of meaning to it. So today I want to show you why I think Jesus did this, and why it matters to us.

1. An Expression of His Love (John 13:1)

First, when Jesus bathed the feet of his followers, it was an expression of His love. The passage begins with these words: It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Now, feet-bathing is a strange ritual to us, but in Bible times it was commonplace. We read about it all the way back in the book of Genesis. In biblical times, most people traveled on foot, and they didn't have orthopedic shoes. They wore simple sandals up and down the dusty roads, and then they arrived at someone's house their feet were tired and maybe swollen and dusty. And so if you were visiting someone they would have basins of cool water and they would bath your feet. If it was a wealthy home, this was the job of servants. If you've ever walked all day in a theme park until your feet were tired and swollen and then sat on the edge of the swimming pool and dangled them in the water, you know how good that feels. When someone visits us today, perhaps we'll shake their hands or give them a hug and find them a cup of coffee or a soda and maybe a cookie. In those days the host would bathe your feet, and it was very refreshing to the weary traveler. It was part of the culture and was exceedingly normal for them.

In the Upper Room, Jesus did this for His disciples. There were no servants present, and none of the disciples thought of this. And so Jesus, who sees every need and misses no opportunities to serve, did it Himself. It was His way of expressing His love for them. The Lord Jesus has a thousand ways of expressing His love for you and me every day. He does things for us. He meets our needs. He refreshes us. He noticed what we need before the need even

arises. His blessings to us are simply an outflow of His love, which He lavishes upon us. If we were as aware of this as we should be, we'd go through the entire day every day whispering, "Thank you, Lord; thank you, Lord; thank you, Lord." God thinks about us all the time. He stores up good things for us. He plans wonderful things for us. The Lord washes our feet every day in a thousand ways. In a thousand ways He refreshes us and serves us and cares for us daily. It's because He loves us so much.

2. An Exhibition of His Mission (John 13:2-5)

But there is more to this action than meets the eye. When Jesus bathed the disciples' feet it was also an exhibition of His mission. Notice how carefully John describes this, beginning with verse 2: The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God; so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.

He had come from God, had come down from heaven, had come to the earth, and was now about to leave the earth and return to heaven. So He got up from the table and bathed the disciples' feet in an action that was symbolic of His entire mission. In an epic sense, Jesus had risen from the heavenly throne and now He was returning to the heavenly throne. And this action of bathing the disciples' feet was symbolic of His entire mission.

I don't know exactly what our Lord was wearing or how many layers of clothing He had on. This was early spring and it was cool in Jerusalem. But to some extent, Jesus rose from His place at the head of the table, stripped off His outer garments, wrapped himself in a towel like a servant, washed the disciples feet, and then rose from His knees, laid aside the towel, took up His own clothing and

put His robe back on, and resumed His place at the head of the table.

I'm virtually certain John the apostle, in looking back on this scene and writing about it, understood its symbolic meaning. It was an exhibition of our Lord's total ministry. The Lord Jesus Christ was the everlasting God, the Son who rose from His place at the head of the universe, who descended in humility, who laid aside the prerogatives of His deity like a man laying aside His clothing, became a servant to cleanse His people. He came to provide cleansing. And having done so, He rose from His humility, re-clothed himself with glory, and resumed His place on the heavenly throne.

This is how Jesus showed us the full extent of His love. For God demonstrated His love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. And His bathing of the disciples' feet was an exhibition of His entire mission in symbolic form.

3. An Emblem of His Forgiveness (John 13:6-11)

As such, this also becomes an emblem of His forgiveness, and that becomes very clear in the passage, thanks to Simon Peter. Peter was very uncomfortable when Jesus came to him to wash his feet, and at first he refused.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, "Lord, are You going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "You shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "'not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!'"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For He knew who was going to betray Him, and that was why He said not everyone was clean.

Through John's commentary we know this wasn't just about washing feet. Jesus laid aside His glory, came to this earth as a servant, and did so to provide total cleansing. And the word used here – "clean" – is frequently used in the Bible to describe complete forgiveness of sin. We see it over and over again in the book of Leviticus, which talks about being cleansed from our guilt and stain and sin. King David said in Psalm 51, "Cleanse me... and I shall be whiter than snow." The prophet Zechariah talked about a fountain that would be opened for the cleansing of sin (Zechariah 13:1).

When we come to the Lord Jesus Christ and sincerely trust him to forgive all our sins, we are cleansed and we never need to be bathed in that way again, for when He forgives our sins they are forgiven past, present, future, and always. But along the way in our daily walk we get the dust of the world on us, we stumble, we stub our toes, we get in the mud and mire; and the Lord washes our feet. He not only provides total and eternal forgiveness; but He provides the daily maintenance necessary for us to have a cleansed daily walk with him.

As a Christian, I never worry about whether my sins are forgiven, for I know they already and forever will be. Let's suppose a forgiven and dedicated believer—let's call him Chris Christian—is on his way home from church during the middle of the summer. As he drives down the road he sees a woman out for her daily run and she's dressed immodestly and he begins to lust after her. Let's say his mind is overtaken with lust and he runs through a red light. He sees a car heading straight toward him and in alarm he shouts out a cuss word and is flung into eternity to face God. His last actions on earth were lusting and cursing. Will those things bar him from heaven? No. When he received Christ as Savior he received total and eternal forgiveness. The blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin past, present, and future.

But now let's suppose Chris Christian swerved out of the way and somehow avoided being killed. He pulled into his driveway shaken by the event, and what should he do before even getting out of the car? He should bow his head and have a talk with the Lord and confess his lustful thoughts and his cursing tongue. He doesn't want those sins to hinder his spiritual progress or to damage his fellowship with the Lord.

So Jesus told Peter, "You are clean. You are cleansed. You don't need a bath. You have already been bathed. But you need to wash the dust off your feet because it's hard to walk very far in this dirty world without stumbling or getting dirt on your feet.

- This is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
- This is why the Bible tells us in 1 John 1 and 2: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness... My little children, I am writing this so that you do not sin; but if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

He bathes us at Calvary, and He washes our feet day-by-day by grace. That was the living experience of everyone in that room that night with one glaring exception—Judas, who had never truly given his heart to the Lord Jesus. And that leads us to the fourth

lesson.

4. An Example for His Followers (John 13:12-17)

When Jesus bathed the disciples' feet, it was an expression of His love, an exhibition of his mission, an emblem of His forgiveness, and finally it was an example for His followers. Look at verse 12:

When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" He asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

All four of the Gospel writers tell us various things that happened that evening in the Upper Room, and from the other Gospels we learn that the disciples had been arguing with each other. They were fussing among themselves. They were jealous of each other, and they had been arguing for some time, ever since the time of the Transfiguration. An argument had broken out following the Transfiguration, and the disciples had been nursing bruised feelings ever since. This was our Lord's final attempt prior to the crucifixion to bring unity to his splintered band of disciples. He was trying to help them realize they simply need to serve each other and to stop worrying about which was the greatest or the most gifted or the most fortunate. He was wanting them to learn to serve one another.

Last fall when we were preparing to honor our Korean War veterans, I came across the story of an event that occurred in the White House, as President Obama awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun of the United States Army. Father Kapaun was called a shepherd in combat boots. He was born in Kansas, survived the Depression, joined the Army, and served in World War II as a chaplain. In Korea, he was in the middle of some of the worst of the fighting, racing between foxholes, running into no-man's land to drag the wounded to safety. When his commanders ordered an evacuation, he chose to stay so he could tend to the wounded and comfort the dying. As the enemy swarmed over them it looked as if all the Americans would be killed, but Father Kapaun spotted a wounded Chinese officer and pleaded with him. The shooting stopped and they negotiated a safe surrender.

As Father Kapaun was being led away, he saw a wounded American. He was unable to walk. He was laying in a ditch and an enemy soldier was about to shoot him. Father Kapaun marched over, pushed the enemy soldier aside, picked up the wounded soldier, and started carrying him. He carried that wounded soldier for miles as the Communists forced them on a death march. When the chaplain grew too tired to carry the man, he helped him hop on one leg. When other soldiers wanted to stop or straggle along, the chaplain encouraged them to keep going. In the camps where the men were in danger of freezing, Father Kapaun offered his own clothes. When they were in danger of starving, he somehow managed to sneak past the guards to return with rice and potatoes. When the men were ravaged by dysentery, Father Kapaun washed their clothes and cleansed their wounds.

The guards ridiculed him for his devotion to Christ. They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours, yet at night he would slip into the huts and lead the prisoners in their prayers and say to them, one after another, "God bless you." One of the men later said that his very presence could in just a moment turn a mud hut into a cathedral.

But the horrific conditions took their toll, and Father Kapaun grew ill with a blood clot in his leg, and dysentery, and pneumonia. The Communist guards sent him to a death house – a hellhole with no food or water – to die. "I'm going to where I've always wanted to go," he told his men. "And when I get up there, I'll say a prayer for all of you." And then he blessed the guards too and said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Two days later he died. But just last year in the East Room of the White House, the President of the United States told his story and honored his memory and presented his family with the Medal of Honor. And among the guests that day in the White House, sitting in the crowd, was a man named Herb Miller, who was the very soldier Father Kapaun had saved in that ditch so many years before and carried all those miles and cared for and rescued.⁴

In this Army Chaplain we have an example of a man who knew what John 13 was all about. And that's what Jesus calls us to be. We're to be John 13 followers, for no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Conclusion

Let me end with a final thought. There was only one person in the Upper Room that evening who missed having his feet washed. This man's feet remained dirty and unbathed and unrefreshed. It wasn't

Judas. Even Judas felt the gentle hands of Jesus pouring water over his feet, for that night our Lord even bathed the feet of the man who was about to betray Him. No, it wasn't Judas. It was Jesus Himself. Though he bathed the feet of the others, as far as we know no one did the same for him. No one returned the favor. He was denied even this last simple refreshing creature comfort on the eve

of His crucifixion. But today we can rectify the record, for we are bathing our Lord's feet whenever we serve the least of His brothers and sisters.

So when Jesus bathed the disciples' feet, it was an expression of His love, an exhibition of His mission, an emblem of His forgiveness, and an example for His followers. It was a lesson twenty-four feet long. And because He loves us this tenderly and personally, we never need to worry ourselves to death. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Jesus. Loves. You.

(Endnotes)

1The (Ottawa) Evening Citizen, September 26, 1913, page 1.

2The New York Times, September 23, 1888

3The (Toronto) Daily Mail and Empire, December 28, 1900, page 1.

4This story is based on the White House Medal of Honor presentation described at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/04/11/president-obama-awards-medal-honor-father-emil-kapaun-0>.

John 13:2-7

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So Jesus told Peter, "You are clean. You are cleansed. You don't need a bath. You have already been bathed. But you need to wash the dust off your feet because it's hard to walk very far in this dirty world without stumbling or getting dirt on your feet.

- This is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
- This is why the Bible tells us in 1 John 1 and 2: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness... My little children, I am writing this so that you do not sin; but if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

He bathes us at Calvary, and He washes our feet day-by-day by grace. That was the living experience of everyone in that room that night with one glaring exception—Judas, who had never truly given his heart to the Lord Jesus. And that leads us to the fourth lesson.

4. An Example for His Followers (John 13:12-17)

When Jesus bathed the disciples' feet, it was an expression of His love, an exhibition of his mission, an emblem of His forgiveness, and finally it was an example for His followers. Look at verse 12:

When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" He asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

All four of the Gospel writers tell us various things that happened that evening in the Upper Room, and from the other Gospels we learn that the disciples had been arguing with each other. They were fussing among themselves. They were jealous of each other,

and they had been arguing for some time, ever since the time of the Transfiguration. An argument had broken out following the Transfiguration, and the disciples had been nursing bruised feelings ever since. This was our Lord's final attempt prior to the crucifixion to bring unity to his splintered band of disciples. He was trying to help them realize they simply need to serve each other and to stop worrying about which was the greatest or the most gifted or the most fortunate. He was wanting them to learn to serve one another.

Last fall when we were preparing to honor our Korean War veterans, I came across the story of an event that occurred in the White House, as President Obama awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun of the United States Army. Father Kapaun was called a shepherd in combat boots. He was born in Kansas, survived the Depression, joined the Army, and served in World War II as a chaplain. In Korea, he was in the middle of some of the worst of the fighting, racing between foxholes, running into no-man's land to drag the wounded to safety. When his commanders ordered an evacuation, he chose to stay so he could tend to the wounded and comfort the dying. As the enemy swarmed over them it looked as if all the Americans would be killed, but Father Kapaun spotted a wounded Chinese officer and pleaded with him. The shooting stopped and they negotiated a safe surrender.

As Father Kapaun was being led away, he saw a wounded American. He was unable to walk. He was laying in a ditch and an enemy soldier was about to shoot him. Father Kapaun marched over, pushed the enemy soldier aside, picked up the wounded soldier, and started carrying him. He carried that wounded soldier for miles as the Communists forced them on a death march. When the chaplain grew too tired to carry the man, he helped him hop on one leg. When other soldiers wanted to stop or straggle along, the chaplain encouraged them to keep going. In the camps where the men were in danger of freezing, Father Kapaun offered his own clothes. When they were in danger of starving, he somehow managed to sneak past the guards to return with rice and potatoes. When the men were ravaged by dysentery, Father Kapaun washed their clothes and cleansed their wounds.

The guards ridiculed him for his devotion to Christ. They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours, yet at night he would slip into the huts and lead the prisoners in their prayers and say to them, one after another, "God bless you." One of the men later said that his very presence could in just a moment turn a mud hut into a cathedral.

But the horrific conditions took their toll, and Father Kapaun grew ill with a blood clot in his leg, and dysentery, and pneumonia. The Communist guards sent him to a death house – a hellhole with no food or water – to die. "I'm going to where I've always wanted to go," he told his men. "And when I get up there, I'll say a prayer for all of you." And then he blessed the guards too and said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Two days later he died. But just last year in the East Room of the White House, the President of the United States told his story and honored his memory and presented his family with the Medal of Honor. And among the guests that day in the White House, sitting in the crowd, was a man named Herb Miller, who was the very soldier Father Kapaun had saved in that ditch so many years before and carried all those miles and cared for and rescued.⁴

In this Army Chaplain we have an example of a man who knew what John 13 was all about. And that's what Jesus calls us to be. We're to be John 13 followers, for no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Conclusion

Let me end with a final thought. There was only one person in the Upper Room that evening who missed having his feet washed. This man's feet remained dirty and unbathed and unrefreshed. It wasn't Judas. Even Judas felt the gentle hands of Jesus pouring water over his feet, for that night our Lord even bathed the feet of the man who was about to betray Him. No, it wasn't Judas. It was Jesus Himself. Though he bathed the feet of the others, as far as we know no one did the same for him. No one returned the favor. He was denied even this last simple refreshing creature comfort on the eve of His crucifixion. But today we can rectify the record, for we are bathing our Lord's feet whenever we serve the least of His brothers and sisters.

So when Jesus bathed the disciples' feet, it was an expression of His love, an exhibition of His mission, an emblem of His forgiveness, and an example for His followers. It was a lesson twenty-four feet long. And because He loves us this tenderly and personally, we never need to worry ourselves to death. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Jesus. Loves. You.

(Endnotes)

¹The (Ottawa) Evening Citizen, September 26, 1913, page 1.

²The New York Times, September 23, 1888

³The (Toronto) Daily Mail and Empire, December 28, 1900, page 1.

⁴This story is based on the White House Medal of Honor presentation described at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/04/11/>

John 13:33-14:6 Don't Be Troubled: Jesus is Preparing Us a Place

Today we're continuing our series of studies into the Upper Room Discourse of Jesus in John 13 and 14, and I've been eager to teach from these passages because here we find some of the most comforting words in all the Bible. The word "comfort" has become a popular word in our culture. Every other magazine has an article about "comfort foods" or about activities to get us out of our "comfort zone." When we travel first class, we say we're "traveling in comfort." There's a chain of hotels that goes under the name "Comfort Inn" and a kind of mattress called "Select Comfort." When people travel along the highways they stop at "comfort stations," and for those who imbibe, when they get to the end of their trip they may have a glass of "Southern Comfort."

But the whole idea of comfort has a much deeper meaning to us than simply the idea of being comfortable. The key term in the word "comfort" is the syllable "fort" — "com-fort." The word "fort" has to do with being fortified and strengthened. The true idea behind the word "comfort" is that of being strengthened in times of grief and loss and sadness. We suffer all kinds of losses in life. It can hurt us very deeply when a pet dies or when a precious object is destroyed. It can hurt us when a divorce takes place or a disagreement separates us from family members or friends. It's painful when someone whom we love moves away or when we have a loved one who passes away. At the hardest moments of life when we are grieving various losses, we need someone to come along and fortify us and strengthen us.

Usually we need comfort after we've suffered a loss; but in the Upper Room Discourse Jesus was providing comfort in advance and not only for His disciples but for us. In John 13 – 17, Jesus was serving as Comforter-in-Chief, and these are some of the most powerfully comforting words in the Bible. We can never go to them too often; we can never overuse them or wear them out.

The theme of the Upper Room Discourse is the art of having an untroubled heart. Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled." We may live in troubled times and we may have many troubles in our lives. Our hearts may be troubled at times, but we shouldn't let them stay that way. We should counteract the troubles we feel in our hearts with the truths we read in these chapters.

So far, we've looked at two of our Lord's emphases:

- Don't be troubled—Jesus loves you.
- Don't be troubled—Jesus has vanquished the enemy.

Now today our topic is: Don't be troubled—Jesus is preparing us a place.

Scripture Reading

That brings us to our Scripture reading in John 13:33-14:6: "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for Me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."

Simon Peter asked Him, "Lord, where are You going?"

Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You."

Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for Me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times!

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where You are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you really know Me you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."

1. It's Exciting to Leave for Points Beyond

I want to show you something I had never seen before. In this Upper Room Discourse, Jesus had an almost childlike excitement about leaving this planet and going back to heaven. His mission was almost done. This was the last night of his earthly life. He had put in His time. He had served His tour of duty. He had finished the work. He was about to return to the Father's house, to Paradise,

to the Throne. And the thing foremost on His mind was getting out of here, getting out of this world, going to heaven and returning to His Father. He was so excited about it the subject is mentioned twenty-seven times in these chapters. I'm going to read you all twenty-seven statements because we can learn a lot by noticing our Lord's frame of mind and the excitement that was seizing His heart. I've put these passages in a list for you.

John 13 begins by establishing this at the very beginning:

- 1: Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father.
- 3: He had come from God and was returning to God...

Then as we read John 13, we see Jesus say in verses:

- 32: God will glorify the Son in Himself, and will glorify Him at once.
- 33: My children, I will be with you only a little longer...
- 33: Where I am going you cannot come.
- 36: Where I am going you cannot follow now.

This continues right into Jn 14, with verses:

- 2: I am going to prepare a place for you.
- 3: I go ...
- 4: I am going...
- 12: I am going to the Father...
- 19: Before long, the world will not see Me anymore...
- 27: I leave...
- 28: I am going away...
- 28: I am going to the Father...

In Jn 15, Jesus focuses on the concept of abiding in Him, but as soon as He explains what He means by this, he goes right back to this idea that has so seized His attention. We read in chapter 16—verse:

- 5: I am going to Him who sent Me...
- 7: It is for your good I am going away...
- 7: I go away...
- 10: I am going to the Father, where you can see Me no longer...
- 16: In a little while you will see Me no more...
- 17: In a little while you will see Me no more...
- 17: I am going to the Father.
- 19: In a little while you will see Me no more...
- 28: I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father...

Then the passage closes with our Lord's High Priestly Prayer in Jn 17, where He prays in verse:

- 4: I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.
- 11: I will remain in the world no longer...
- 11: I am coming to You. Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name.
- 13: I am coming to You now....

Twenty-seven times in the Upper Room Discourse there are references to our Lord's imminent departure. I am going... I am going... I am going... I am leaving.... Jesus was greatly excited that His work was done and He was heading Home. Within hours, He would look over at the thief on the cross and say, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." The thing uppermost on our Lord's mind was the excitement of returning Home.

2. It's Sad to Be Left Behind

But there are two sides to a goodbye. There is the goodbye of the person who is leaving; and there's the goodbye of the person who is staying and who is left behind. I think as a rule, goodbyes are hardest on those who are staying behind. Suppose you have a child going off to college. For 16 or 17 or 18 years, that child has lived with you, shared your home, been under your blessing and protection. You've had an unbroken family circle, and you can hardly imagine daily life without that child. But now they are leaving, and to make matters worse, they are probably very excited about leaving. For them, it's a great adventure, but for you—well, you're the one left behind in an empty nest. You're going to have a hard adjustment.

Or suppose your spouse is going off to serve in the military. Suppose your brother or sister is leaving for missionary service

overseas. Suppose your father or mother is going on to heaven. Usually when we have goodbyes in our lives, one person is leaving and the other is staying, and it's often hardest on the ones who are left behind.

His disciples were the ones being left behind. He wasn't taking them with Him, at least not yet. They couldn't comprehend what He was telling them, but He was trying to provide comfort to them as they were facing a painful separation in which they would be the ones left behind. So He was eager to share His plan with them. He was eager to comfort them.

3. It's Comforting to Know the Plan

So what did He say to them? How did He comfort them? Well, first, He wanted them to learn to lean on each other, to depend on each other, and to love one another; but He had trouble getting them to see what He was talking about.

Let's go back to John 13:33: "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for Me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."

But the part about loving one another was totally lost on them. They were too preoccupied by the Lord's telling them He was leaving. They didn't understand that.

Jn 13:36 says: Simon Peter asked Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You."

Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for Me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times!

That must have brought the conversation to a complete standstill. I can imagine there was complete shock and incredulity as those words echoed through the room and faded away. But that's when Jesus must have smiled gently and said one of the greatest things He ever said:

A. The Peace Jesus Provides

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me."

The writers of The New American Commentary said that the Greek words here have the effect of meaning: "Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by the situation. Do not let your hearts be overcome with turmoil." Instead: Trust in the Father and trust in Me.

I don't want to be simplistic, but in the final analysis that is just about all the answer we need to all the distresses of life. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." The Bible says,

"Whenever I am afraid I will trust in you." The Bible says, "I will trust in you and not be afraid." Sometimes we almost feel guilty if we aren't worrying about a particular situation, for we feel we should worry about it; but, in fact, we should feel guilty if we are worried about something. The Lord wants to give us untroubled hearts.

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take Him at His Word,
Just to rest upon His promise,
Just to know 'thus saith the Lord.'

B. The Place Jesus Prepares

And one of the specific ways in which we should trust in the Lord and believe in God and in His Son relates to the future and to think of the place Jesus is preparing. Look at Jn 14:2-3: My Father's house has many rooms...

I memorized this passage in the third or fourth grade, but here's what I had never seen until studying for this message. Jesus was tremendously excited about going to heaven, so excited that it comes up twenty-seven times in the Upper Room. But in these two verses, He tells us that we should be just as excited about it as He is, because He is going to prepare a place for us and will come again for us.

The excitement we feel about heaven is fueled by the personal excitement Jesus Himself felt about His own departure there as He met with His disciples in the Upper Room. When we anticipate heaven, we're simply experiencing the same feelings Jesus had on this night in John's Gospel.

Now, what does it mean when it says: "My Father's House has many rooms"? The old translations say, "In My Father's house are many mansions." The Greek word simply means "dwelling space." Jesus might have been thinking of Psalm 23, in which the Psalmist said, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The House of the Lord was a title for heaven. Well, a house has rooms in it; and so the newer commentators translate "dwelling

places” as “rooms” because it corresponds to the idea of a house the Father’s House.

But this doesn’t mean we’ll all be in one-room studio apartments in heaven. My wife and I visited the Ikea Store in Atlanta last year. We didn’t buy much, but I can see why some people really enjoy shopping there. We spent several hours and managed to get out of the place without spending much money. We bought a set of sheets. But what most intrigued me was how they designed their prototypes of small studio apartments. They took a space that might have measured 500 square feet or 750 square feet and created a wonderful home there, with bed and desk and kitchen and everything. I realized that for one or two people, you could get by with a small studio apartment if it’s well designed. I thought to myself, “I could live very nicely by myself in this cozy little home where everything is arranged in almost a miniature way. A studio apartment is a wonderful way to live if it’s well designed.

But I don’t know if I want to spend all of eternity in a 750-squarefoot studio apartment. If I just have a room in a high rise, I think I’d enjoy it for the first few thousand years, but I might get cabin fever eventually.

“In My Father’s house are many rooms!” Well, what Jesus was saying was this: In My Father’s House, in Heaven, there are a lot of places to live. There are many dwelling places. And I don’t think the word “mansions” is completely out of order. It’s going to be heaven, after all. According to Revelation 21 – 22, we’re going to be living in a new universe, with a new stellar system, new planets, a new earth, probably much larger than this one; and in a huge capital city. If you want to know what John meant when he quoted those words, “My Father’s House,” just turn over to Revelation 21 and 22, in which this same writer, John, devoted the last two chapters of the Bible giving us an expanded view of what was discussed here.

So here is the spirit of what Jesus was saying: “I am going. I am leaving. I’m returning to the Father. You have no idea how excited I am to get out of here, having completed My mission. You’re not going with me right now, but when I get back to heaven I’m going to get everything ready for you and then I’ll come back for you so you can be where I am. And it’s going to be wonderful, because there are a lot of places to live in My Father’s heaven.”

Jesus goes on to say: If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.

In what way is Jesus preparing heaven for us? I’m not sure, but I know that whenever I invite people over to my house, I have to make preparations. In some way, preparations are being made for our arrival in heaven. Certainly in the hours immediately ahead, through His death and resurrection, Jesus was preparing the way for us to go to heaven. But after His ascension, perhaps there are still preparations to be made for our arrival. And that leads to the promise of the Second Coming—I will come again and receive you unto Myself that were I am there you may be also.

C. The Path Jesus Prescribes

He was telling them the most wonderful thing He had ever said to them. But these disciples were understandably still preoccupied by our Lord’s ominous words about His departure, and they were frustrated because they weren’t making sense of any of it. Thomas the realist who looked at things with a tinge of skepticism, spoke next. Jn 14:5-6 says: Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we don’t know where You are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

- Jesus is the way—so we worship Him.
- Jesus is the truth—so we trust Him.
- Jesus is the life—so we love Him.

There is no other way to be reconciled to God, forgiven of sins, and given eternal life except through Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “There is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved.” That’s why it’s so important, when you hear the Gospel, to respond to it quickly and completely.

Conclusion

Recently I heard a man say that he used to be a little afraid, a little apprehensive, when he got on airplanes. He said that he had to travel a great deal, and he was on and off planes all the time. He sometimes felt a little concern getting into one of those thin cylinders and hurtling through the air five miles above the ground. But then someone said to him, “You know, you are immortal until your work on earth is done.” He took those words to heart and wrote them on the flyleaf of his Bible, and has scarcely worried since then. And he said to us in his message, “I’m here on earth as long as the Lord has work for me to do; and the moment He’s done with me here, it’s goodbye earth. I’m outta here. I’m gone.”

I thought of his words as I studied this passage from John 14, because that seems to be the way Christ felt, too. His attitude was: “The hour has come; the work is done; my mission is accomplished; it’s goodbye earth. I’m out of here. I’m heading home.”

May God all give us that attitude. May we say with the hymnist:

But until then my heart will go on singing,
Until then with joy I'll carry on,
Until the day my eyes behold the city,
Until the day God calls me home.

John 13:33-14:6

Today we're continuing our series into the portion of Scripture called the Upper Room Discourse. We're studying the words Jesus spoke in the Upper Room on the eve of His crucifixion, as recorded in John 13 through 17. This is a very enriching passage, and the underlying theme is: "Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled." Jesus wants us to have untroubled hearts. We may live in a troubled world and we may have troubles in our lives; but he wants us to enjoy the untroubled heart. And in this extended passage, which runs from John 13 to 17, the Lord cycles through a number of very personal and important themes.

Last week we looked one of them, his expression of His love for us, and our message was: "Don't be troubled: Jesus loves you."

Satan in the Upper Room

Today we're coming to a theme that is quite different. It involves the devil. The devil paid a visit to the Upper Room that evening, and there are several distinct references to Satan in John 13 through 17. As I studied this passage and noticed it, I was surprised at how aware Jesus was of the devil's involvement in the events of that dramatic evening. In fact, the entire passage begins with a reference to the devil. Let's go back to John 13:1 and I'll show you.

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

Judas was the money keeper for the apostolic band, and he had been pilfering money from the common purse. He had gotten upset at Mary of Bethany when she had poured her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus in a prior chapter, for Judas would rather have converted that perfume to cash. Jesus had rebuked him for his avarice, and Judas had resented the rebuke. Through all of this the devil was prompting him. The devil very often uses greed and resentment to prompt us to do his will. When we begin liking money too much, or when we get angry with someone and that anger simmers and smolders in our hearts, we're making ourselves vulnerable to the promptings of the devil.

Well, the passage in John 13 goes on to describe how our Lord proceeded to bathe the disciples' feet, as we saw last week; and then Jesus turned his attention squarely toward Judas in the passage we're coming to today. Look at verse 18:

I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: "He who has shared my bread has turned against me." I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts Me; and whoever accepts Me accepts the One who sent Me."

After He had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray Me."

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them He meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to Him. Simon Peter motioned to His disciples and said, "Ask Him which one He means."

Leaning back against Jesus, he asked Him, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, He gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

Now up to that moment, I think there might have been hope for Judas. But when he reached out and took the bread Jesus was offering, it was his way of making the final break from our Savior. Isn't it interesting that after Judas left, Jesus again broke bread and passed it out to His disciples and it became a symbol of His broken body and of their salvation. When Judas accepted the bread from Jesus, it was a sign of his rebellion. When the disciples accepted bread from Jesus, it was a sign of their redemption.

And John says that Satan entered him. This is one of the most vivid verses about Satan in the Bible. There are quite a few passages in the Bible about demon possession, but this is something beyond demon possession. This is devil possession. Satan entered into him. I think this is very unusual and very evil.

I'm going to give you a theory, but it's only a theory. I don't know if it's correct. But it seems to me that three living things in the Bible are said to be devil-possessed—one at the beginning of history; one in the middle of history; and the other at the end of history.

There are many cases of demon possession, but there are three times when it seems the devil himself entered someone and possessed them. The first was the serpent in Genesis 3. Satan entered that creature to tempt Adam and Eve. The second was Judas, here in the middle of the Bible. And the third will be the antichrist at the end of the age. But again, I'm not sure about that. Maybe Satan has entered many people throughout history just as he entered Judas on that crucial night. In any case, it warns us of the devil's pervasive influence and threat.

Verse 27 says: So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

It was night both literally and spiritually. And as soon as Judas left the room, the atmosphere changed. It's really as though much of the tension left, and the tone of the conversation changed. But the subject of the devil was still on our Lord's mind. Look at John 14:30: I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over Me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

And in John 16:11: The prince of the world now stands condemned.

And in John 17:15, Jesus prayed for His followers, saying, My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. So all the way through the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus is aware of the presence and involvement of His archenemy.

Now, here's the point of my message today. If the devil could invade the Upper Room, the most sacred spot in the Gospels, he can come

uninvited into our lives and churches and homes today. If Jesus was concerned about Satan's schemes on the eve of His crucifixion, we should be mindful of him today. And against this backdrop I'd like to give you this morning a summary of the Bible's teaching on this subject. The Bible says that we should not be ignorant of the devil's schemes or let him outwit us (2 Corinthians 2:10-11).

I don't know if you've heard about the strange story coming from Oklahoma City, but there's a satanic group that has designed a seven-foot-tall statue of the devil they want to place at the Oklahoma Capitol Building, right next to a monument of the Ten Commandments. The design shows Satan as a goat-headed figure with horns, sitting on a throne decorated with pentagrams, and with a smiling child on either side of him, a boy on one side and a girl on the other. The statute will be designed so children can climb up in the devil's lap. A spokesperson for the satanic group said the children can sit in the devil's lap "for inspiration and contemplation."

It sounds like this is nothing but a silly political attack on the Ten Commandments, but it does bring up an interesting point. Is there a devil, and does he go after children, and is he showing up increasingly in places of power and influence in our American culture?

The more we study the Bible, the more we're convinced the answer to those questions is yes. In the Gospels, the person of Satan is considered just as real as any other character we read about—just as literal and just as real as Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman, Mary, Martha, or any of the Twelve Disciples.

Satan in the Bible

Let's begin our biblical survey in Genesis 1:31, the first chapter of the Bible and the Bible that describes the process of God's creation of the universe. Verse 31 says: God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

At the beginning of creation and at the beginning of time, everything was good. Everything was very good, which would indicate that evil was not present at the very beginning. But now look at Genesis 3: Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say...?"

This is the first time we see the devil in the Bible. He wasn't present in Genesis 1:31, but he was there in Genesis 3:1. So something catastrophic must have happened between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 3 that unleashed evil into the world and introduced the persona of the devil. What was it?

Well, the book of Genesis doesn't tell us, but we have clues in the book of Isaiah, chapter 14. Look at this passage, beginning with verse 12:

How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High. But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the earth.

This passage seems to be describing someone who is more than simply a mere man, and many Bible commentators think it sounds a great deal like what might have happened between Genesis 1 and 3.

We have a very similar passage in Ezekiel 28, which is directed at the King of Tyre but seems to be describing someone beyond, someone with supernatural and diabolical qualities. Look at Ezekiel 28:13:

You were in Eden, the garden of God... You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you.

There was a great angel, a guardian cherub, who was great and glorious and blameless. But look at that phrase in verse 15: ...till wickedness was found in you.

So far as I can tell, this is the only verse in the entire Bible that tells us the origin of evil. This is as close as we can come to determining where sin and evil began. It started by spontaneous combustion, by spontaneous generation within the heart of Lucifer.

And evidently he led a rebellion among the angels in heaven against God.

Revelation 12:4 says that the devil was like an enormous red dragon who appeared in heaven and swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.

Jude 1:6 says: The angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these He has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains...

We read in 2 Peter 2:4: God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment.

So much of this is mystery. So much of this is hidden from our sight, and we're only given a few glimpses in the Bible, a few hints. We'll understand more about it in eternity. But the Lord knows that we need some information now, and so He has given us some critical clues in His Word. And to summarize, it would seem that when God created the universe He created it with perfection and beauty. He created heaven and earth. He created the angels. But one of them—a high-ranking beautiful angel—grew jealous of the glory and majesty that belongs to God alone. A spirit of sin and rebellion burst into existence in his heart. He spread his rebellion to his fellow angels and perhaps a third of them joined him. And when he lost his position of authority in heaven, he began seeking to destroy the creation of God by introducing sin and suffering into the human race and into this world.

And from that point on, the Bible views the devil as a real character in the Biblical story, just as real as any other person.

In the book of Job, the devil brought all kinds of suffering and misery into Job's life to try to destroy his faith and his influence.

In the book of 1 Chronicles 21, verse 1, the devil tempted and prompted King David to conduct an unlawful census of his population.

In the book of Zechariah, chapter 3, the devil made accusations against the high priest of Israel and tried to ruin his self-image and his influence and his standing before God.

In Matthew 4, the devil appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Temptation and tried to lure Him into sin just as he had lured Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis.

In John 8:44, Jesus told His critics: You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

In 1 Corinthians 7:5, the apostle Paul said that a husband and a wife should have frequent times of intimacy together "so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

In 2 Corinthians 2:10-11, the Bible warns us that if we don't forgive those who offend us and if we allow the offense to linger in our hearts, Satan will outwit us. He can cause a lot of damage when he finds someone who holds on to bitter feelings.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, referring to the devil, the apostle Paul said, The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul warned that those who follow false teachings are being deceived by the devil, just as Eve was deceived by him in Genesis 3.

In the same book and chapter 12, Paul said that his disease, his illness, which he called a thorn in the flesh, was "a messenger of

Satan.”

In Ephesians 2:2, he called Satan, “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

In Ephesians 4, the Bible again says that when we remain angry too long and our anger turns into bitterness or resentment, we’re giving the devil a foothold in our hearts.

In Ephesians 6, we’re told to take our stand against the schemes of the devil; and the book of James tells us to resist the devil and he will flee from us.

But I want to end this brief biblical survey by showing you a few important verses about the devil near the end of the Bible.

1 John 5:19 says: We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. That’s a profound, sweeping, blanket statement—the whole world is under the control of the evil one. Does that mean the media? The governments? The realms of commerce and manufacturing and finance? Christians are children of God, but all the rest of the world is under the control of the evil one.

But now back up to 1 John 3:8: The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. Here again is a verse that ends with a sweeping statement. The reason God left the throne, became a man, and died on the cross was to destroy the devil’s work.

And that reminds us of Hebrews 2:14-15: He shared in (our) humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil, and free (us).

The greatest passage in the Bible about the devil is Revelation 20, when he is judged and condemned. The Bible says: And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

And just as the devil isn’t found in the first two chapters of the Bible, he is not found in the last two chapters of the Bible. He is not in eternity. He is a temporary problem.

Satan in Our Lives

What I’m taking away from all this is an increased awareness that there is an invisible person of evil in this world, whom the Bible calls the devil or Satan. He is as real as any other character or hero or villain in the Bible. The whole world is under his control, and the greatest object of his life was to derail the mission of Christ and to disrupt the lives of godly people. The Bible tells us to resist him, for Jesus came to destroy him and to destroy his work.

How do we resist Him?

First, we have to be under the covering of the blood of Jesus Christ. There is power in the blood. I have a friend named Elmer Towns, who has been a leader in the field of Christian Education for many years. He recently wrote a book on the subject of prayer, and he told of being in Haiti on New Year’s Eve of 1977. He was in an area infamous for its emphasis on witchcraft, demon-possession, and spirit worship. He said, “I had gone to bed early that evening, sleeping on the back screened porch of missionaries Wallace and Eleanor Turnbull’s home. At midnight I was awakened by the blaring of ships’ horns in the harbor, as well as the chiming of steeple bells.... Suddenly I felt a lurking evil presence on the back porch with me. I didn’t see anything, I didn’t wrestle with anything, nor did I physically touch anything. It was a frightening internal sense. ‘Evil is here,’ I said to myself, then shuddered in fear. I know there are three things that repel evil: (1) the name of Jesus, (2) the blood of Jesus, and (3) the Cross. So I began to sing songs about the blood of Jesus, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus....” He went on and sang, “There is a fountain filled with blood...” and his mind went back to the cross where Jesus died, and he began singing, “When I survey the wondrous cross.”

As Dr. Towns worshipped and prayed and contemplated the cross of Jesus Christ, the sense of evil receded, and he was able to go back to sleep.

The devil has no way to penetrate the protective barrier of the blood of Jesus Christ around our lives.

Second, have nothing to do with anything related to the occult. Never check your horoscope, not even in fun. Never play with Ouija boards. Never visit a fortuneteller. Stay away from everything having to do with Satanism and the occult.

Third, keep a careful watch over those areas of life in which Satan can gain a foothold. We’re already seen how a sex-starved marriage can give the devil a foothold, how an attitude of resentment can give him a handhold in life. How important to keep these areas of life healthy and clean so that no satanic infection can grow.

Fourth, sing and worship and come to church and keep your focus on Jesus. Fill your life and your home with Christian music. The

devil can't stand the songs of Zion. My friend, Cliff Barrows, told me about a time when his father, who was a Gideon, was visiting Rangoon. At the time the area was under an oppressive government, and Gideon Bibles had been removed from the hotel rooms. While there, Mr. Barrows attended a meeting of the local Gideons who were trying to get Bibles back into the hotels. During the meeting two men were singing hymns in one end of the room, and the singing was disruptive. Mr. Barrows had trouble following the discussions because the two hymn-singers were going at it a few yards away. Finally he asked, "Why are those men singing while we're trying to have this meeting?" The local Gideon replied, "Because this room is bugged, and the singing confuses the enemy who is trying to listen to us." Glancing over to me, Cliff said, "There's a spiritual lesson in that. When we sing, it confuses the enemy and allows the Lord's work to proceed."

And finally, most of all, make sure you have given your life to Jesus Christ, for He came to destroy the devil's work. He can destroy the devil's work in your life. He can give you liberating power and protection.

The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
One little word will fell him.

And that word is "Jesus." So let not your hearts be troubled. Jesus loves you. And Jesus has vanquished the enemy.

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John 14:1-21 Upper Room

If you've ever seen a rerun of the old television show "You Bet Your Life," you know about Groucho Marx, the famous comedian of yesteryear with the bushy moustache and cigars and quick-witted responses. Well, I'd like to begin today's sermon with a quote from Groucho. "Politics," he said, "is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies."

Most of us would agree that's often true in politics; but to be honest, it's more often a rule for the way people live every day. We go looking for trouble; we find it everywhere; we diagnose it incorrectly; and we apply the wrong remedies. I can show you one life after another where this has been true.

Here at The Donelson Fellowship, we base all our ministries on the proposition that the Bible is the only book in the world that tells us what we really should do when we find trouble, and how to diagnose our problems correctly, and how to apply the best remedies.

And one of the most encouraging passages we can read whenever we do encounter trouble is the Upper Room Discourse of Jesus Christ in John 14, because the theme is summed up in the opening words of the chapter: "Let not your hearts be troubled."

We may live in a troubled world, and we may encounter troubles in life. But it is possible to live as Jesus instructed in John 14:1, when He said: "Let not your hearts be troubled."

The entire Upper Room Discourse runs from John 13 to John 17 – it's the longest recorded sermon of Jesus, and the most personal and poignant. It was spoken immediately prior to His arrest, so it represents the last hours He spent with the disciples before His crucifixion. It's filled with comfort. When you read the Upper Room Discourse, it's as if you were there. It's very personal. Somehow we can place ourselves in that room, put ourselves in the picture. It sounds as if Jesus were simply speaking to you and me. Well, we've been working our way through this Discourse for the last several weeks and here is a review of what we've discovered.

We may have many troubles in life, but we should be able to maintain an untroubled heart because: (1) Jesus loves us (John 13:1-17); (2) Jesus has thrown Satan out of the room (John 13:18-30); (3) Jesus is going to prepare a place for us (John 13:31 – 14:7). Now today we're going to press on with the fourth emphasis: (4) We can sustain untroubled hearts because we have three very special Friends. We have three Advocates.

Bible Reading and Exposition

Let's begin our study about where we left off last Sunday, in John 14:5:

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you really know Me, you will know My Father as well. From

now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered, “Don’t you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you I do not speak on My own authority. Rather it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work. Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it.

If you love Me, keep My commands. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see Me anymore, but you will see Me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in My Father, and you are in Me, and I am in you. Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love them and show Myself to them.”

Here’s the amazing thing about this passage. The disciples were very troubled, very anxious, very worried, very apprehensive. And so what did Jesus say to them? What did He give them? He gave them theology. He taught them doctrine. He dispensed some serious Bible study. He didn’t give them platitudes or optimistic proverbs or positive sayings; He didn’t give them counseling or sympathetic pats on the back. He gave them doctrine and theology.

Sometimes people say, “I don’t want to hear theology. I don’t want sermons with a lot of doctrine. I want feel-good sermons with lots of stories and practical application.” Well, it’s true that we do always need practical application; but in the darkest moments of the disciples’ lives Jesus gave them truth. He gave them theology and doctrine and depth. He was so deep they didn’t understand it all at the moment. They couldn’t take it all in that evening. But He gave it to them anyway.

Great distress requires great doctrine. Great trauma requires great truth. The great miseries of life require the great mysteries of God. When the world slams us down, we need the portions of Scripture that say: “Thus saith the Lord!”

And so Jesus gave the disciples a lesson in theology, specifically here in this passage the theology having to do with the deepest and most mysterious doctrine in the Christian life—the doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the underpinning of this passage. In fact, this is our Lord’s primary teaching on the subject of the Trinity. Think of how remarkable this is! It’s our Lord’s last hours with His disciples; everyone is confused; they are very afraid. And so He begins to explain the deepest and most mysterious aspect of universal Truth—the doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is our greatest, deepest, most mysterious, and most distinctive point of teaching. It is THE central truth in the universe. And this paragraph in John 14 represents our Lord’s main teaching on the subject. So here in the middle of the Upper Room Discourse, we have our Lord’s foremost teaching on the foremost Truth in the Universe—the doctrine of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Why is that? Because the disciples could only settle their nerves and learn to live with untroubled hearts by coming to know their three great Friends.

The Trinity is the most unique aspect of Christian truth. Dr. Henry Morris calls it “undoubtedly the most distinctive doctrine of the Christian faith.” This doctrine sets Christianity apart from all other religions, faith systems, sects, and philosophies. The Trinity is at the heart of who God is, and the great doctrines of Christ and the atonement flow out of a right understanding of the Trinity. Christians are the only people in the world who believe there is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons. This is what makes us different from Jews, from Mormons, from Muslims, from atheists, from Jehovah Witnesses. If there is one single doctrine or truth that makes Christian superior to and unique from every other religion and philosophy on earth, it is the doctrine of the Trinity.

So what is the doctrine of the Trinity? It’s very simple to state: There is One God who eternally exists in Three Persons—the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. This doesn’t mean there are three Gods, or that there is one God in three forms. There is one God who eternally exists in three persons.

Perhaps you’re saying, “I can’t understand that!” Good. I can’t either, and I’m glad I can’t. The fact that it boggles our minds is evidence of its authenticity. If God were small enough to understand He would not be big enough to be worshipped. Trying to get our brains to understand the infinite, eternal, almighty God is like trying to pour the seven seas into a test-tube.

And yet we can understand it as far as the Bible takes us. We can observe the outlines of this truth in the Scriptures; and although it may boggle our minds, it comforts our hearts.

The doctrine of the Trinity says that God the Father is God, but He is not God the Son or God the Spirit. God the Son is God, but He is not God the Father or God the Spirit. God the Spirit is God, but He is not the Father or the Son. There are three distinct personalities, three centers of consciousness. Yet they are indivisible in their deity and are one God.

This is why Jesus told us in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to go into all the world and baptize new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is why the great apostolic benediction in 2 Corinthians 13 says: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

So what Jesus was doing in the Upper Room was describing the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As I've read and studied this passages, I think Jesus was making the following points.

1. The Son Came To Show Us What the Father is Like First, God the Son came to show us what the Father was like. Look at Jn 14:8: Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

From the very beginning of His ministry, from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had been talking about the Father. Philip finally said, "Who are you talking about? Show us the Father."

Jesus answered, "Don't you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me?"

To the best of my present ability to understand the Scripture, I believe that God the Father is invisible. He is spirit. I'm not sure if we will physically see the face of God the Father at all, even in heaven, even in eternity. 1Timothy 1:17 calls Him the "King eternal, immortal, invisible."

But the New Testament consistently teaches that by looking at Christ we can see the qualities and attributes of God the Father. Jesus came to show us what God was like. The First Person of the Trinity is invisible; but the Second Person of the Trinity is the manifestation of God to us in a way we can comprehend. Jesus came to reveal the invisible God. When we look at His ethics, we're looking at the ethics of God. When we see His values, we're seeing the values of God. When we see His love, we're seeing divine love. When we hear His words, we're listening to the voice of God. When we observe His power, we're observing the power of God. When we see Him, we see God.

- The Gospel of John begins on this very note, saying in John 1:18: No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.
- Colossians 1:15 says: The Son is the image of the invisible God....
- Hebrews 1:3 says: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.

2. The Son Came to Reunite Us with the Father

Second, the Son came to reunite us with the Father. Look back at Jn 14:5: Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you really know Me, you will know My Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."

I want to quote a verse to you from the old Living Bible, the original version. First Timothy 2:5 says, "God is on one side and all the people are on the other side, and Jesus Christ, Himself man, is between them to bring them together."

If you need a relationship with God in your life and a spiritual foundation, it only comes through Jesus Christ, who came to bring us to God. The Bible says, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

As I said in last week's sermon:

Jesus is the way—so we worship Him. Jesus is the truth—so we trust Him. Jesus is the life—so we love Him.

3. The Son Was Returning to Heaven But Would Send the Spirit

So Jesus left heaven and came to earth to show us what God was like and to provide a way for us to be reunited with God. But having died for us and rose from the tomb, now Jesus was preparing to return to heaven and to send the Holy Spirit—the Third Person of the Trinity. Look at Jn 14:16: And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus makes one promise after another about sending the Holy Spirit. As He discussed the nature of the Trinity, and said, in essence: "I am leaving. Tomorrow I am going to die for your sins, and then I will rise again. I'm going to do what only I can do and return to heaven with my mission finished. But when I return to heaven, I will ask the Father and He will send the Holy Spirit. This will be much better for you than if I were to stay with you. If I were to stay with you, now that I've taken on

humanity, I could only be in one place at one time. There are certain confinements to My humanity, which I willingly accepted for you. But having obtained redemption, I'm going to return to heaven and send the Third Person of the Trinity—another Comforter, another Advocate, another Personage who can come alongside you—and He can live with you and even live inside you.

4. Christ's Work Would Continue Through Spirit-Indwelled Christians

That brings us to the next emphasis. Jesus said: My work on earth will continue as I do it through Spirit-indwelled Christians. What I've begun, you can continue. What I started in a small way here in Jerusalem, you can continue to the ends of the earth. I've spoken to a few thousand people, but My followers are going to preach to millions. I've reached one small nation here in the Middle East, but My followers, who will be filled with My Spirit, will go to every tribe and tongue and nation and nook on earth. They will do much greater things than I have done, because I will be working in them and through them to multiply our efforts through time and across distance.

I believe this is what He meant when He said: Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

5. We Can Have Untroubled Hearts Because of our Relationship with the Triune God

And that leads to the fifth thing: As we go about working on this planet and living here for Christ and completing His mission, we can have perfect peace and untroubled hearts because of our relationship with the Triune God, because of our Three Friends. Look at Jn 14:18-21: I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see Me anymore, but you will see Me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in My Father, and you are in Me, and I am in you. Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love them and show Myself to them."

Conclusion

How does all this help us? How do we take the greatest theology Jesus ever taught and make it a practical help in our life.

First, we have to receive the offer He makes to us. We have to be reunited with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus did all of this—God made flesh to die on the cross—to give you a spiritual core in your life, to fill up what is missing in your heart, and to reunite you with God. You have to take Him up on His offer and receive Him as your Savior.

Second, we have to realize we can't live the Christian life through our own efforts. It requires Him living within us by His Holy Spirit, and that's why the Bible tells us to be filled with the Spirit. I think it's a good idea every single day to say, "Lord, fill me with your Spirit today. May I be wholly yielded to Jesus. May I be Spirit-filled."

I read the other day that the most dangerous vocation in the United States is... what would you think? It's commercial fishing. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the industry's death rate is 31 times greater than the national average. Fishermen get stranded at sea, they fall off boats, they perish in storms. It's a very dangerous profession. I read a story from Alaska about a self-employed commercial fisherman who was on a nine-day fishing trip. One evening in rough weather the ship listed and rolled over onto its side. The fisherman went into the frigid water. Another man immediately kicked the life raft off the vessel and pulled the emergency inflation line, which should have inflated the raft. But the raft didn't inflate. The submerged man perished because of the faulty life raft.

All of us Christians who are alive on this world are in troubled waters. We're often in storms. If we have the inflation and the fullness of the Spirit we can stay afloat. We can grow in the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, and the rest of it. We can have untroubled hearts. But it takes the daily fullness of the Holy Spirit. And that's why even in my little prayer notebook after all these years, I still have a note to remind me to ask the Lord to fill me with His Spirit day by day. Trying to live in this world without the daily fullness of the Spirit is like trying to stay afloat on choppy waters with a malfunctioning life raft.

And third, I think it helps to train ourselves to think often of the Trinity. A lot of us have Facebook pages. We know how many friends we have, and we know when they comment on our status. Sometimes we look every day to see if someone has made a comment. But on the Facebook page of the soul, we only need three friends—and we should become just as aware of them—more so! than all our other friends put together. We need to learn to practice their presence.

The simplest explanation for the Trinity I've ever seen is this from the pen of Chuck Colson. The Trinity is: God Above, God Beside, God Within. We have a Father who is God above us. We have a Savior who is God beside us. We have a Spirit who is God within us. As Colson points out, "The Trinity...answers the deepest needs of the human heart, offering a depth of spirituality unknown in any other religion."

Let not your heart be troubled. Jesus loves you. He has thrown Satan out of the room. He is going to prepare a place for you. And in the meantime He has sent us the Holy Spirit. We have three special Friends.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.

John 14:21-31

The great Swiss artist, August Benziger, was the painter chosen to paint the official White House portrait of President William McKinley. Benziger was given remarkable access to the President so he could study him at all times and from every angle. The sittings were done in the East Room, and Benziger had access to his canvas and pallets day and night. The painting, when unveiled, was a remarkable likeness of the President. McKinley exuded warmth and dignity and quiet strength, and it was a great hit. Both the President and First Lady felt the artist had truly captured the likeness and the spirit of the President.

Then Benziger was commissioned to paint a second portrait. But this time as the great artist sat down to paint, he sensed something was different. Something was wrong. McKinley was just as kind and patient and dignified, but Benziger felt there was a kind of unease around him. Something had changed, and as Benziger painted the second portrait, it was almost like he was painting a different man. The portrait bore a different tone.

Even before the painting was finished, the artist discovered what had changed. The relationship between Spain and America was breaking down, and the problems were visible on the President's face. Then the Spanish-American War broke out, and by the time the portrait was finished, it showed a man who still exuded warmth and dignity and quiet strength; but this time there was hardness to his countenance that hadn't been there before. McKinley's complexion and his portrait had changed because of what was going on in his life and in his nation.¹

Now, suppose that Jesus Christ were a painter and He could sit down with His canvas and oils and paint your portrait? And suppose He could capture your heart in the painting? Suppose He could paint you as you really feel today? Suppose He could paint your visage in a way that conveyed what is really going on in your heart? How would the painting look?

In the passage we're coming to today, Jesus gave us a portrait of a Christian as He wants us to be. Jesus gave us a picture of His kind of Christian, of His kind of follower. He's getting ready to leave the earth, and He wants to leave us a photograph or a portrait of the kind of people He wants us to be until He returns. Let's pick up our passage where we left off last week, beginning with John 14:21; and we'll read to the end of chapter 14.

1. A Portrait of Obedience (John 14:21-24)

The first thing we notice is that a true Christian is a portrait of obedience. Look at verse 21:

Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them. Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, "But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

Jesus answered, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love Me will not obey My teaching. These words you hear are not My own; they belong to the Father who sent Me.

One of the things I've noticed about this Upper Room Discourse is that it's different from the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord's first sermon and His last sermon are very different in their structure. When I studied the Sermon on the Mount for our series of sermons a year or two ago, I had little trouble finding a clear outline to the message. The Sermon on the Mount has an introduction, a thesis statement, a clear outline, and a conclusion. It's a masterpiece of structure.

I can't find any of that with our Lord's last message. There is no discernable outline that I've been able to see. It's a different kind of message. Much of it is actually conversation—especially in chapters 13 and 14—with the disciples breaking in to ask questions. Instead it reads to me like the epistle of 1 John, in which there are certain themes and ideas that keep recurring. Jesus was saying the same thing over and over, as if He were cycling through the main points He wanted to leave His disciples.

One of those points involved obedience. He kept telling them things like: "If you love Me, keep my commands." And His primary command was for them to love each other.

For example, look back at John 13:14-17: "Now that I have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet... You should

do as I have done... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

And John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”

And here in John 14:23: “Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching.”

And over in the next chapter, John 15:10: “If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commands and remain in His love.”

And Jn 15:12: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Jn 15:17: “This is my command: Love each other.”

In one of his books, the writer Tony Campolo tells about going to see a play by Lorraine Hansberry entitled *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the play, an African-American family inherits \$10,000 from their father’s insurance policy. The mother of the household sees in this legacy the chance to escape the ghetto life of Harlem and move into a little house with flower boxes out in the countryside. The brilliant daughter of this family sees in the money the chance to live out her dream and go to medical school.

But the older brother has a plea that’s difficult to ignore. He begs for money so he and his “friend” can go into business together. He tells the family that with the money he can make something of himself and make things good for the rest of them. He promises that if he can just have the money, he can give back to the family the blessings that their hard lives have denied them.

Against her better judgment, the mother gives in to the pleas of her son. She has to admit that life’s chances have never been good for him and that he deserves the chance that this money might give him.

Well, of course, the so-called “friend” skips town with the money and the family loses everything. The desolate son has to return home and break the news to the family that their hopes for the future have been stolen and their dreams for a better life are gone. His sister lashes into him with a barrage of ugly epitaphs. She calls him every despicable thing she can imagine. Her contempt for her brother has no limits.

When she takes a breath in the midst of her tirade, the mother interrupts her and says, “I thought I taught you to love him.”

The daughter answers, “Love him? There’s nothing left to love.”

And the mother responds: “There’s always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t leaned nothing.”²

Here Jesus Christ was spending His last moments with the disciples, and they were about to deny Him and run from Him and disappoint Him in the moment of His most critical need. But He looked at them and said, “There’s always something left to love.” And His great message on this evening to them and to us is to keep loving each other. Keep loving that father or mother or sister or brother or son or daughter or fellow church member.” We love out of obedience. Because we love Jesus, we obey His commands; and His great command in the Upper Room is to love one another. When we have loving hearts, it is a portrait of obedience.

2. A Portrait of Wisdom (John 14:25-26)

But the picture Jesus paints of His followers is also a portrait of wisdom—wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 25:

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

One of the other themes that Jesus kept bringing up throughout His Upper Room Discourse was His promise to send the Holy Spirit, and in this particular verse Jesus explained one distinctive role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit—the Counselor, the Comforter, the Advocate—would teach us all things and remind us of everything Jesus has said.

Now, I want to suggest there are two applications of this—to the disciples and to us. The first application was immediate and given to the disciples in the room at the time. I believe this is a promise to John and to the other apostles in that room that the Holy Spirit would help them reconstruct the conversations word for word so they could give us an accurate transcription of what was said. I’m not sure Peter, James, and John were able to take notes of everything Jesus said on that evening. Chapter 13 and 14 were informal conversations over dinner. And chapters 15 and 16 appear to have been spoken after they left the Upper Room and while they were walking through the streets on the way to Gethsemane. So how could John have remembered exactly what Jesus said many years later when he wrote the Gospel? Liberal scholars and critics would say he or someone pretending to be John simply made all this up. But Jesus provided an answer for us. The Holy Spirit—who inspired every page of God’s Word—would enable the disciples and especially John to remember exactly what Jesus said. The Bible is a miracle book. It is

breathed out by God inspired, infallible, inerrant. And one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit was to help the Gospel writers assemble their material and reproduce what Jesus had taught.

But there's a further application. When Jesus said the Holy Spirit would teach us all things and remind us of everything Jesus said, that's a promise to you and me. As we study what John wrote, as we study the Gospels and the words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit illumines our minds and helps us recall what He said. Just when I need a verse, very often the Holy Spirit brings it to mind.

Last week I was asked to write the introduction to a new book that's coming out on the words of Jesus. I was very glad for the opportunity, and I want to read to you what I prepared for the preface of this book.

No one ever spoke as He did. Though the world has heard many orators, and though the currents of history have followed the courses of great speeches, the words of Jesus rise higher and plow deeper than any human utterance. Jesus Christ is the most quotable figure of the ages. He has shaped world opinion more than anyone; has rescued more sinners, helped more multitudes, and lifted more spirits than all rhetoricians combined. His phrases, metaphors, and simple maxims have found a home in countless souls for two thousand years: You must be born again. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You are the salt of the earth. Do not be anxious for tomorrow. Love your enemies. Love your neighbor as yourself. Go and sin no more. Go and make disciples.

His words are perfect, infallible and unfailing, always truthful and trustworthy. He never spoke a false syllable or struck a wrong note. The wisdom of God is concentrated into every sentence. His words are powerful. The sound of His voice could make demons flee and storms cease. His message can brighten our lives as easily as sunshine cutting through clouds. His words are practical. The common people heard Him gladly, relishing His simple stories and rules of everyday righteousness. He didn't speak like the Pharisees, but with authority. In listening to Him, we learn to live. His words are peaceful. He said, Peace, be still... Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you.

Hearing the voice of Jesus is the greatest listening we'll ever do.

One day Jesus visited the home of two sisters. One of them, Mary, sat at His feet drinking in every word. When the other complained, Jesus told her Mary had chosen what was needed, the best part—listening to His words.

What if we could sit at our Lord's feet, not just for an afternoon, but for a lifetime, hearing His voice as if He were speaking just to us... If, like Martha, you're worried and upset about many things, turn aside, sit at His feet, listen to His voice, let His words settle into your mind. You'll see why they said, No one ever spoke like Him.

That's a portrait of wisdom—reading God's Word each day, sitting at His feet, and letting the Holy Spirit illumine our hearts and minds as we pour over God's Word.

3. A Portrait of Peace (John 14:27)

Third, the portrait Jesus painted for his followers is one of peace. Look at this incomparable verse 27:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

In this passage we have a legacy akin to an inheritance that would come by the reading of someone's last will and testament. On television, you very often see people gathered for the reading of someone's last will and testament. I've actually never been in a room where this has been done in real life. I've had grandparents and parents and friends who have passed away—and they had wills, as we all should—but there was never that dramatic moment when everyone gathered in a room with baited breath and waited in tense anticipation to see what was left to us—were we going to be millionaires or paupers? That's been a frequent device in murder mysteries and television detective shows.

Well, in this verse Jesus was reading His last will and testament. He didn't have property or houses to leave; He didn't even have a pillow on which to lay His head. He didn't have any money; Judas Iscariot had just absconded with our Lord's last shekel. He couldn't leave His clothing, for the prophets had said it would be divided by His executioners. But He did have one thing to leave His disciples—His peace.

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

How tragic when we fail to claim our inheritance! When we live in anxiety and uncertainty and frantic worry when Jesus Christ, in the last hours of His life, bestowed on us the legacy of His own peace. Nothing could be more beneficial to your heart and mind than to memorize John 14:27—memorize it word for word; learn it well and ponder it often—so the Holy Spirit can bring it to your mind and apply it to your heart during the rough patches of life. "Like a river glorious is His perfect peace—over all victorious in its bright increase!"

4. A Portrait of Expectancy (John 14:28-29)

Finally, Jesus gives us a portrait here of expectancy. He returns to a theme that is mentioned twenty-seven times in the Upper Room Discourse—the excitement He feels about His imminent departure from earth, His return to heaven, and His eventual Second Coming. Look at verse 28:

You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back for you.' If you loved Me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.

I've never kept a list of the number of funerals I've conducted over the years. I wish I had a record of them. I've used many texts and many passages from the Bible. But this is truly one of the best verses you can ever read when a Christian loved one has passed away. This is just what they would tell us: "If you loved me, you would be glad I'm going to the Father."

Here we are, left behind. Here we are, grieving at the separation. Here we are, at a loss to know how to adjust to the sudden absence of a loved one. But if that heaven-bound soul could speak, they would say: "If you loved me, you'd be thrilled that I've been furloughed from earth and am now in heaven." The Bible says, "To be absent with the body is to be present with the Lord."

Jesus said, "I am going away! I'm returning to heaven! I'm returning to My Father! You should be thrilled for Me. But make no mistake—I am coming back for you."

Notice those words, given to us verbatim in verse 28: I am coming back for you.

And so we live in expectancy. Many of you know the President of the United States was here this week. He spoke across the street at McGavock High School, and it was exciting. I can't imagine all the emotions Dr. Wall and his team was feeling as they prepared for a Presidential visit. But even over in our offices, it was hard to work there were the news crews, the protesters, the secret service, the motorcade—tremendous anticipation because of a one-hour visit by the President.

But someone far greater than any President of the United States is coming. He is on His way! He said, "I am coming back for you!" And we should cultivate in our hearts the sense of excitement and expectancy, shared by all who have loved His coming.

Conclusion (John 14:30-31)

Now, I want to conclude by showing you the last verses of chapter 14. Look at verse 30: I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. Who is the prince of the world? It's Satan the devil—who has a human agent. Remember in chapter 13? We read about Judas Iscariot that Satan entered into him. And Judas suddenly left the room and went out into the night. He was going to the enemies of our Lord. He had gone to tell them, "Hurry! You can catch Jesus now. I know where He is. No one is stirring in the streets because all over the city people have gathered for the Passover Meals, and I know where Jesus is holding His Passover meal. I know His secret location. I've just left there. Hurry! You can capture Him tonight!

Jesus, of course, knew this. He said, in effect, "We've got to leave. The enemy is getting read to burst into this room, but this is not where I'm going to surrender to them. I'm going to be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane after a time of prayer. I still have a few things to tell you, but I can tell them to you while we walk. Let's leave this room and make our way through the darkened deserted streets toward the Kidron Valley and toward the Mount of Olives and toward the Garden of Gethsemane. I'll talk while we walk. The devil doesn't have any control over Me, but I'm going to lay down

My life for the world in accordance with the Father's will. But hurry, let's get out of here!

I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over Me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what My Father has commanded Me. Come now; let us leave.

And—here is my speculation—shortly after the room was vacated, Judas showed up with the soldiers. Imagine his perplexity when no one was there. "But they were here just a few minutes ago! Where could they have gone? There's a good chance they've gone to the Garden where Jesus sometimes spends the night." And so Judas and the soldiers follow the trail of Jesus, leading to Gethsemane and the cross, with Jesus having a considerable head start. This allows Him to continue His teachings on foot as they thread through the darkened streets of Jerusalem while He gives us chapters 16 and 17.

But here at the end of chapter 14, He has left us with a locket, with a portrait, a picture of who He wants us to be—and it's a portrait of obedience and love, wisdom and illumination, peace and expectancy, as He says:

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

(Endnotes)

' See August Benziger: International Portrait Painter by Marieli Benziger (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 165-166 and 174.

2 "There's Always Something Left to Learn" by Tony Campolo, in Stories for the Heart, compiled by Alice Gray (Sisters, OR:

John 15:1-8 – Don't Be Troubled – Abide in Jesus

The Winter Olympic Games from Russia have occupied our time this week, and we've been amazed at the skill and poise of some of the athletes. My favorite have been the snowboarders. They fly up in the air and seem to defy gravity, as if they're superheroes. Who wouldn't love having the skill to do that? But it's not just a matter of physical skill. The Olympians need mental skill too. There was an article in The Huffington Post about "The Brain-Training Secrets of Olympic Athletes." The article said that behind the athletes' physical feats is an even more impressive exhibition of mental prowess. With the help of sports psychologists, these athletes have spent years training their minds to tune out distractions, reduce anxiety, and focus on achieving optimal performance. One of their greatest techniques is imaging and visualization. The athletes are taught to sit in a quiet spot and imagine their event. In their minds, they imagine every split second of their event and they visualize themselves doing it perfectly. These visualization exercises are said to be as valuable as actual physical training.

Well, that's a biblical skill too; that's a technique of Christ followers. The Lord God is the one who made the human body and the human mind; He made them to work together; and He gave us the capacity to visualize and to imagine and to meditate. Spiritual truth is often given to us in visual images, in terms we can ponder and visualize.

In our study of John's Gospel, we're coming today to a perfect example of that. The Lord Jesus wants us to understand the nature of the relationship we can have with Him, so He presents it in terms of a vineyard—with vines and branches and a gardener and a rubbish pile and a harvest of fruitfulness. In biblical times there were vineyards everywhere. Today most of us don't have a grape arbor in our backyards, but we still know enough about horticulture to appreciate the imagery. So let's read this passage and then we'll simply identify the images the Lord uses to teach us the truths He wants us to know. Join me in reading John 15:1-8.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in Me, as

I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.

Here in John 15, we have a very simple word picture or analogy. It has five simple elements.

1. The Vine

The first is the vine. Look at Jn 15:1: I am the true vine.

This is the last of the seven famous "I Am" statements of Christ in the Gospel of John. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, our Lord used seven great analogies to describe Himself using the words: "I am."

1. I am the Bread of Life – John 6:35
2. I am the Light of the World – John 8:12
3. I am the Door – John 10:9
4. I am the Good Shepherd – John 10:11 S. I am the Resurrection and Life – John 11:25
6. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life – John 14:6
7. I am the True Vine – John 15:1

John doesn't give us any of our Lord's parables, but he does give us our Lord's analogies, and that's one of the distinctive aspects of his Gospel. When Jesus told a story, we call it a parable. But when He used a metaphor or a figure of speech, we call that an analogy. Mathew, Mark, and Luke are full of parables, but John is full of analogies. In this passage, the analogy is of a vineyard, and Jesus is the grapevine. He said: I am the true vine.

Now, we have to remember the context. Jesus has left the Upper Room at the end of John 14. He is walking through the dark and deserted streets of Old Jerusalem with His disciples. He is headed toward the Garden of Gethsemane. His route would have taken them near the Jewish Temple, the one renovated by Herod the Great. It was the most beautiful building in the world, and among the

symbols on its walls was that of a grapevine. In the Old Testament, Israel was repeatedly described as the vine or the grapevine or the vineyard of the Lord. But here's the interesting thing. Every single time this analogy appears in the Old Testament, the result is disappointment and failure.

I'll give you one example. Look at Isaiah 5. The passage begins: I will sing for the one I love a song about His vineyard.

The vineyard is the nation of Israel and the vineyard owner is the Lord.

My beloved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.

In other words, the Lord cultivated the nation of Israel like a man tending his grapes.

He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

The farmer did everything right, but he couldn't seem to get the vines to produce any good grapes. Every harvest was a bitter disappointment. The nation of Israel had the greatest God anyone could imagine. He was a God of love and of cultivation, a God who nurtured His people. But they were always disappointing Him. There was never the harvest of righteousness He desired.

This passage in Isaiah is an illustration of what repeatedly occurs in the Old Testament. In many passages God is pictured as a vineyard owner or a gardener, and the nation of Israel is the vineyard or the grapevine. If we had time, I could take you to a dozen texts in the Old Testament with this kind of imagery. But again and again the grapevine failed to produce a crop. Every single time Israel is pictured as a vine or a vineyard in the Old Testament, the result is failure. Now on this Passover Eve, as Jesus passed the Jewish Temple with its inscriptions of the grapes and vines, He said: "I am the True Vine. I am the culmination of the nation of Israel. I am the fulfillment of all God desires for this nation and for this world. I am the product that will never disappoint. I am the secret of the truly fruitful and productive life. I am the true vine."

2. The Gardener

The second aspect of this analogy is the Gardener. Look at verse Jn 15:1 again: I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener."

The Bible gives us many ways of looking at our relationship with the Lord. He is the King and we're the servants. He is the shepherd and we're the sheep. He is the light and we're the reflectors. He is the Father and we're the children.

But here is a fresh way of looking at God. He is the gardener and we are the plants. All of us have tried to grow some kind of crop or flower or plant at one time or another. I used to have a beautiful garden when I had time, and beautiful rose bushes before life became too busy. I enjoyed it very much. I believe one of the reasons we love gardening is because God was the original gardener. He planted a Garden eastward in Eden. And gardening is the oldest human occupation. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to dress it and keep it, to tend the plants. Gardening is in our blood, so we can relate to God as the Master Gardener. We could devote an entire series of sermons to the way God cultivates us like a farmer his crops. We have a God who tends to us, who wants to grow and develop and cultivate us and make us fruitful.

3. The Dead Branches

But the third element of this analogy is the deadwood, the dead branches. Look at Jn 15:2: He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit....

Who is this referring to? In the immediate context of that night, I think He was thinking of Judas. Our Lord was saying: "Some people are going to appear to be branches that have a connection to me, but they will not really be attached to Me. They will not really be fruitful. They will be discarded." He was explaining to His disciples why only eleven of them—not twelve—were walking with Him toward Gethsemane.

Let me tell you why I think this is referring to Judas and to people like Judas who have a superficial but not a real connection to Jesus. Let's look at Jn 15:2-3 together: He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Now, why did Jesus use the word clean to describe the eleven disciples who were with Him? Well, He was thinking back to what He had said an hour or so before when He had washed the disciples' feet. Go back to John 13:10: Jesus said, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For He knew who was going to betray Him, and that was why He said not everyone was clean.

So you see, in John 13, our Lord said to the disciples—I have cleansed you. I have washed away your sins. You are clean—except for one person who has refused it—Judas. He is not clean. He has not been cleansed.

And then a few minutes later in John 15, He repeated this word, "Some branches are not clean. They are not fruitful. They are disconnected from Me. But I'm not referring to you. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

The dead branches are those, like Judas, who have a superficial but not a real attachment to Christ. They are cultural Christians.

Judas was superficially a follower of Jesus. He engaged in all the activities and even served as treasurer of the group. But there was no real attachment to Christ, no connection with him, no union, no reality in his heart. He was a follower in appearance only.

Many people in America are cultural Christians. They grew up in a semi-Christian environment. Perhaps they go to church according to some kind of regularity, but they have never made a personal commitment to salvation through Jesus Christ. Their faith is external and cultural and superficial. That's what happened to Judas, and our Lord was warning us here about the danger of not really being connected to the vine.

Jesus was very concerned that we understand the nature of following Him. It's not just giving cultural form to some religion or even intellectual ascent to some truth. It is a matter of being attached to Him personally, of being connected to Him, of being in union with Him like a branch to a vine. It's a matter of truly abiding in Christ. That's why I urge you to make sure your life is personally committed to Jesus, who died and rose again to give you life both abundant and eternal.

4. The Living Branches

But when we do receive Him as our personal Savior and Lord that leads to the next idea—the living branches. We become like branches connected to the vine; and God the Father is the farmer in charge of cultivating the crop. Jn 15:2b-3: ...while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful.

I've never grown grapes, but as I prepared for this message I looked up a monograph on pruning grapevines in home gardens. The author said if you buy a house and in the back is a grape arbor that has become overgrown, it's nothing but a tangled mess of vines going in every direction, you will need to cut away and discard about 85 or 90 percent of the old growth.

The Lord knows there are a lot of unproductive or unhelpful areas to our lives that need to be pruned away. Let me ask you this question: Is there anything in your life right now that, were it to be removed, would make you a stronger and more productive Christian? Is there anything distracting you in your use of time? Anything pulling you away morally?

Or here's another question. Have you encountered a particular loss recently? Perhaps it's the Lord's way of removing some unproductive area of life so you can be more truly fruitful. A man told me recently that he lost a couple of major clients, and at first he was deeply discouraged. Then he decided to trust the Lord with it and he persevered in his business. New clients came and they were better ones. He realized the ones he lost weren't all that desirable anyway, and the Lord was simply pruning the vine to allow for more growth later.

God is a gardener. He prunes and He cultivates our lives in many ways. It's not just pruning that He does. He cultivates our experience in many ways. Any of us who have been gardeners knows that it takes planting and watering and fertilizing and hoeing and shaping—so many duties to producing a fruitful or productive plant. That's what God does for us.

This is what's so wonderful about being a Christian. For a non-Christian person, all the miscellaneous events in life are simply that—miscellaneous events. But for the Christian they are all growth opportunities and grace opportunities. In a sense, all the non-Christians in the world are just wild vines growing hither and yon. But the Christian is a cultivated vineyard and the Lord pays special attention to every branch and twig. All of life is a learning experience. Just like a conscientious gardener, God is constantly tending and training and pruning and cultivating us in godliness and happiness and victory.

5. The Connection

And that brings us to the connection between the vine and the branches, the joint or union or attachment, which is described in the older translations by a very endearing term—abiding. The newer translations use words like “remain.” The idea is the connection between the branches and the vine. If you visit a vineyard, you'll see a strong central vine coming out of the ground, rooted in the earth, and then branches will head in all directions along the arbor or trellis. The single most important thing is the union or connection or association between the branch and the vine. If it's an unhindered connection, the sap will flow from the vine into the branches and provide all the nutrients needed to bear the fruit. It's almost as if the branch has no responsibility or burden except to remain in good connection with the vine. The old translations call that abiding, and notice how many times this word occurs in these verses, as they occur in the New King James Version:

- Jn 15:4: Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.
- Jn 15:5: He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.
- Jn 15:6: If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out...
- Jn 15:7: If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you...
- Jn 15:9: Abide in My love.
- Jn 15:10: Abide in my love, just as I...abide in (My Father's) love.

Ten times in ten verses, the Lord used this term. The idea is that everything depends on our relationship with Christ. Everything

depends on having unbroken union and communion with Him. Everything depends on being so well connected with Him that the sap of the Holy Spirit can flow from Him into us, causing us to bear fruit and to be productive.

6. The Fruit

And that brings us to the next element of the analogy—the fruit. This seems very important to Jesus. He talks progressively here about fruit, more fruit, much fruit, and fruit that remains. But what does He mean by fruit? What is the fruit of Christianity? What should our souls be producing?

Well, the first thing that comes to mind is what the Apostle Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. It seems to me that when Paul wrote about the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he had in mind our Lord's teachings here in John 15. He selected nine attitudes or character qualities or personality traits, and he said this is the cluster of attitudes that grows out of Christian experience. These are the attitudes of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit clones in the lives of His children—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And Jesus refers to some of these qualities in this passage here in John 15.

- Jn 15:9: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in My love.
- Jn 15:11: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- Jn 15:12: My command is this: love one another.

So I think the primary interpretation of fruit has to do with the maturation, with the maturity of our attitudes, with the reproduction of the character of Christ in our lives. This is talking about Christlikeness.

But of course, there's another element to it. In biblical times, grapes had seeds in the middle of them. I know that most of the grapes we get in the supermarket now are seedless, but the best tasting grapes have seeds in them and that's the way they were in biblical times. The seed was for propagation. It was for reproduction. You could take that seed and grow another grapevine. An entire vineyard could come from one seed.

Today we have too many seedless Christians. They may be maturing very nicely in their Christian personalities, but somehow it never translates to winning others to Christ. But notice the phrasing of John 15:16: You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

Notice that word "Go." That's Great Commission language.

Look at that grape! You can harvest it and have two results. You can extract the juice and have a beautiful and refreshing beverage. And you can extract the seed and plant another vineyard. It has refreshing results and reproductive results.

The vineyard and the vine and the branches and the grapes and the fruitfulness—it all gives us one of the most perfect pictures of Christianity in all the world. And the fruit is illustrative of the attitudes of Christ that develop in our personalities, and at the heart of them is evangelistic power and effectiveness.

Conclusion

I know you've all heard of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the American abolitionist and author who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin. Well, Harriet Beecher Stowe was a dedicated Christian and she loved this passage in the Bible. In fact, she wrote a little booklet or pamphlet on the subject, entitled "How To Live On Christ." That little booklet had a profound effect on Christian missions, especially on J. Hudson Taylor and his great missionary organization dedicated to reaching mainland China. I wish I had time to read you the whole pamphlet she wrote, but for the sake of time I'll just read one short paragraph, but it says so very much:

Now how does a branch bear fruit? Not by incessant effort for sunshine and air; not by vain struggles for those vivifying influences which give beauty to the blossom and verdure to the leaf;—it simply abides in the vine, in silent and undisturbed union; and the fruit and blossoms appear as of spontaneous growth.

Have you ever heard of a branch grunting and groaning and trying to bear fruit by its own herculean efforts? No, it just simply remains in unbroken union with the vine, and the blossoms and fruit mature according to the natural processes God set in place. So the lesson is—stay close to Jesus. Stay in unbroken fellowship with Him. Abide in Him. Let His Word abide in you. God the Father is the Gardener. God the Son is the Vine. God the Holy Spirit is like the sap that flows from the vine into the branch. And the fruit matures according to the natural spiritual processes of the soul to make us both refreshing and reproductive, for without Him we can do nothing.

The Bible is the most famous book in the world, but way down on the list are a handful of other books that have stood the test of time and had a tremendous impact on our world. One of those is by the Chinese military general and strategist Sun Tzu. It predates Christ and was probably being written in China during the days of the prophet Daniel. But for 2500 years it has been the world's leading manual on military strategy, and principles from *The Art of War* have been applied to many disciplines and areas of expertise. Two of the most famous maxims in *The Art of War* are "Know Your Enemy" and "Know Yourself."

The exact quote is: "If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles. If you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one. If you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle."

Well, in today's message I want to share with you what Jesus said about knowing yourself and about knowing your enemy. We're continuing our study of the Upper Room Discourse, the last sermon Jesus gave His disciples in the moments immediately before His arrest. He started this message in the Upper Room and continued it as He walked with His men through the darkened streets of Jerusalem on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. Last week we studied the first part of John 15, when Jesus talked about the topic of "Abiding in Christ." He said, "I am the true vine, My Father is the gardener, and you are the branches. If you stay connected with Me you will bear much fruit."

Now we're going to pick up the passage where we left off last week, and I want to read to you and comment on the next segment of what our Lord has to say about knowing ourselves. This is one of the easiest passages to outline I've ever seen. As I began to read it and outline it, the message just unfolded very naturally. Last week we studied John 15:1-8, so today let's begin with John 15:9 and work our way through to John 16:11.

Jesus wants to teach us three things about knowing ourselves.

1. We Are the Most Loved People on Earth (John 15:9-17)

First, we are the most loved people in the world. Christians are loved more than anyone. We live in a virtual atmosphere of love. We are loved of God and loved by Christ. Look at John 15:9:

As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you.

The same measureless, bottomless, fathomless ocean of love that Jesus experienced from the Heavenly Father is what we experience from Him. And we should pass along that love to others. Verse 9 continues:

Now remain in My love. If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Notice the repetition of the word "as." In verse 9, Jesus said, "As the Father has loved Me, I have loved you." And in verse 12, He said, "As I have loved you, you should love one another."

This is the pass-along effect of divine love, and it isn't diminished in the transference. Jesus continued in verse 13 to say:

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in My name the Father will give you. This is My command: Love each other.

So in summary, Jesus said:

- I love you with the same intensity the Father loves Me.
- I love you with a love that can bestow complete and absolute joy.
- I love you enough to call you My friends.
- I love you enough to tell you what's going on, to give you privileged information, to disclose to you what My Father has told Me.
- I love you enough to choose you as My forever friends.
- I love you enough to lay down My life for you.
- And so... I expect you to love one another, too.

There was a story in the newspaper last week about a ten-year-old boy in Michigan who was very lonely. He's battling Asperger's, and he has some challenges with his social skills. So when his mother asked him what he wanted to do about celebrating his eleventh birthday, he told her there was no point in having a party because he didn't have any friends. So his mother created a Facebook page for him titled "Happy Birthday Colin" and she told his story and explained why he didn't want a birthday party. Would

you believe that Facebook page has gotten nearly 2 million fans and more than 150,000 comments including all kinds of Happy Birthday videos from all over the world. In a week or so on his eleventh birthday, they're going to show him that Facebook page and give it to him for his birthday. The headline of the story about it said that a boy who had no friends now has nearly two million—he just doesn't know it yet.

Well, you have more love coming at you than you know, more than you can imagine. Because of Jesus Christ, everyone one of us can go to bed tonight feeling loved. We can wake up in the morning knowing we are the most loved people on earth. Jesus loves you!

But that's not the whole story...

2. We Are The Most Hated People On Earth (John 15:18-25)

We are also the most hated people on earth. Look at the next verse, John 15:18: If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first.

Compare verse 9 with verse 18. As the Father has loved Me, I have loved you. As the world has hated Me, it will hate you. The Father poured His love into Jesus Christ—and we get the spillover. The world pours its hatred onto Jesus Christ—and we get the spillover. Jesus went on to explain in the next verse, John 15:19:

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates Me hates My father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both Me and My father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: They hated Me without reason.

In the first paragraph of our message, Jesus used the word "love" nine times. In this paragraph, He used the word "hate" seven times. There is no way to explain the hatred the world has against Jesus and His followers; it is senseless. They hate Him without a reason. And that's why they also hate us. Right now in our world we're facing two lines of attack. The first is the hostility we receive in a secular culture. The second is the violent persecution Christians are receiving in other cultures.

I've been reading a new book entitled *The Global War on Christians*, written by John L. Allen, Jr., senior Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Report*. He calls the massive worldwide wave of anti-Christian violence, "the most dramatic religion story of the early twenty-first century." He writes, "Christians today indisputably are the most persecuted religious body on the face of the planet, and too often their new martyrs suffer in silence." This is a human rights disaster of epic proportions, claims Allen, and "the world's best-kept secret." While it's true attacks are mounting against adherents of other faiths, eighty percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians.

I wrote about this recently for a column I did for a publication:

"The worst killings may be in Northern Nigeria. According to the watchdog agency Open Doors, more Christians were killed in Northern Nigeria last year than in the rest of the world combined. Christian women are forced at knifepoint to convert to Islam, and the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram is seeking to eradicate Christianity.

"Reports from Iraq tell of over a million Christians put to flight there. The number of known Christians inside Iraq has been reduced from 1.5 million to around 200,000.

No one knows how many Christians are incarcerated in wretched prisons of Eritrea, where several thousand people are behind bars because of their faith. But the phrase "behind bars" is a misnomer. At the Me'eter Prison in the Eritrean desert, inmates, mostly Christians, are held in large metal storage containers that become ovens by day and freezers by night where dehydrated victims drink their own sweat and urine to stay alive.

"John L. Allen asks logical questions when he wonders why there's so much outrage over Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, when the plight of Christians at Me'eter is never mentioned in the press. Indeed in every Muslim-dominated land Christians are oppressed, even in moderate states like Turkey. The Arab Spring has become a Christian Winter in places like Egypt where the Coptic church is facing dire and dangerous days.

"Christians are faring no better under Communism. North Korea remains the most evil nation on earth due to the oppression of its people, especially Christians. According to accounts, eighty people were machine-gunned the other day in a stadium in front of 10,000 people. The crime for some of the victims was owning a Bible. Reports from North Korea have told of Christians being pulverized by steamrollers. Hundreds of thousands of believers north of the Thirty-Eight Parallel have simply vanished. At this very

moment, there are over 50,000 Christians suffering in concentration camps in Korea.

“Turning elsewhere, Christians in India are trying to resist discriminatory laws promoted by Hindu extremists. In the Indian state of Orissa, as many as five hundred Christians were hacked to death some time ago, with thousands more injured or left homeless. As many as 350 churches were destroyed. Just last month, the body of a boy named Anmoi was recovered in North India. He had been tortured and murdered, evidently because he had gone to Sunday School. His face was burned, his mouth tied shut, his toes broken, his stomach scalded with hot coals, then he had been drowned. He was only seven years old.

“In Burma, the government has launched helicopter strikes against Christian regions of the country, with soldiers authorized to kill followers of Christ on sight. Christians in the Central Africa Republic are also systematically targeted for violence.

“According to Open Doors, the most dangerous countries in the world for Christian are, in order of horror: North Korea, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Iran, Maldives, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Iraq, Pakistan, Eritrea, Laos, Nigeria, Mauritania, Egypt, Sudan, Bhutan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Chechnya, and China. It’s hard to estimate the number of Christians who die each year from martyrdom. Open Doors was able to verify 1200 deaths in 2012, but the true number is much higher. Indeed, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell estimated a million Christians were martyred in between 2000 and 2010.

“If much of the media hasn’t yet realized the significance of this story, the Bible anticipated it years ago. The founder of Christianity told His followers: If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”

3. We Are the Most Empowered People on Earth (John 15:26 - 16:15)

Well, I don’t want to end the message on that note, because that’s not where Jesus ended His message. He went on to say that not only are we the most loved people on earth and the most hated people on earth, we are the most empowered people on earth. We are powered by the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 26:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about Me. And you also must testify, for you have been with Me from the beginning. All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or Me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them....

And on down in Jn 16:7:

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in Me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

Jesus said, “As the Father has loved Me, so I love you. As the world has hated Me, it will hate you. So I’m going to send you the Holy Spirit, who will empower you, who will dwell within you, who will teach you everything you need to know, and who will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.”

And the Holy Spirit is doing that very thing at this very moment, at this critical time in history.

As I prepared this message, I read something very exciting. It has to do with the writings of Dr. David Garrison, a missionary pioneer with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. He has traveled in a hundred countries and has written a number of books on missionary strategy. Several years ago, a group of Christian researchers came to him and said something to this effect—there are a lot of clues and stories and rumors and anecdotes about Muslims coming to Christ in various parts of the world, but we’d like to get some hard research on the subject.” So Dr. Garrison began to track down reports of Muslims coming to Christ.

Islam began about 1400 years ago and has managed to forge a “spiritual empire” that stretches from West Africa to Indonesia. More than one in five people on earth are Muslim. This is referred to as the House of Islam. But in recent years there have been many documented cases of Muslims in large numbers, in large groups, coming to faith in Christ.

One of the first of these documented evangelistic movements actually took place in Ethiopia in the late 1800s when an Islamic leader named Sheikh Zacharias had a vision of Jesus and he had some troubling dreams. He went to a Swedish missionary bookstore and obtained a copy of the New Testament. As he read it, he gave his life to Jesus Christ. He was thrown out of the mosque, but he devoted the rest of his life to evangelism and by the time of his death in 1920, he had baptized over 7000 new followers of Christ.¹

That seems to have been one of the first breakthroughs in Christianity penetrating the House of Islam, and there were several more

such stories during the twentieth century. But now, in the twenty-first century, things are accelerating.

Dr. Garrison has traveled to every corner in the Islamic world and interviewed more than a thousand former Muslims who have given their lives to Jesus Christ. According to his studies, there have been more large movements of Muslims coming to Christ in the last two decades than in all the preceding 1400 years of Islam combined.

Dr. Garrison has written a new book—I haven't read it yet entitled *A Wind in the House of Islam*. I'm aware of it because John Stonestreet interviewed him on the radio program, *Breaking Point*, and alongside the report was the thrilling testimony of one of these converts, a brilliant young man named Nabeel Qureshi.

Nabeel grew up in Muslim family. His grandfather and great-grandfather were Muslim missionaries. As a young boy, Nabeel memorized large chunks of the Qur'an. By the time he had reached middle school, he had learned how to challenge Christians who tried to share the gospel. He would ask them to defend the reliability of the Bible or to answer questions about the Trinity, and they seldom could do so. This bolstered Nabeel's faith in Islam.

But when he was a freshman in college, Nabeel met a fellow student named David Wood. David had been studying apologetics and he didn't waiver in his witness, nor did he waiver in his friendship. He showed true love and compassion to Nabeel, but he also gave good answers during their conversations together. He answered all the questions he could and then he investigated the questions he couldn't respond to. Throughout the whole process, the two men stayed loyal in their friendship. The process took over three years.

Eventually, Nabeel Qureshi was forced by the evidence to conclude that the case in favor of Christianity was very strong. And then David turned the tables. He asked Nabeel to give the Qur'an the same sort of critical treatment that they had given the Bible. Nabeel did so with great reluctance, and he was shocked to learn the case for Islam was very weak.

When he learned the case for Christianity was so strong and the case for Islam was so weak, Nabeel went through a terrible mental struggle. The Lord appeared to him in dreams—as we often hear about with Muslims—and finally Nabeel came off the minaret, picked up his cross, and followed Jesus Christ. Nabeel Qureshi has gone on to become a highly educated apologist for the Christian faith. Dr. Nabeel Qureshi is now an itinerant evangelist with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, and his story has just been published in his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*. I listened to his full testimony from an online source and it was one of the most powerful presentations I've heard of the life-changing power of the cross.²

Behind every dramatic story of individuals or groups coming to Christ there are a lot of very ordinary simple Christians like you and me, and lots of very ordinary churches like ours, who are doing the will of God in ways large and small. That's the real art of war. That's the real way to victory. Because of Jesus Christ Lord of lords and King of kings—we are the most loved people on earth, the most hated people on earth, and the most empowered people on earth. And only when we know that do we really know ourselves.

(Endnotes)

¹"Breaking Point This Week: A Wind in the House of Islam" at <http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/discourse/entry/15/24514>.

²You can find Nabeel Qureshi's testimony in several forums by searching online.

John 16:17-33 Don't Be Troubled: God is Up to Something

To me the hardest thing about developing a sermon series or writing a book is finding the right title. Sometimes I'll see the title of someone else's book or sermon, and I say to myself, "I wish I'd thought of that. Why didn't I think of that?" Of course, I often then read the book or listen to the sermon and come to the conclusion that the title was the best thing about it. Let me give you some examples. Here are some great book titles. I'm not actually recommending these books, because I suspect they may not live up to their titles. And yet I think the titles are inspiring. These are the titles of five popular self-help books:

- Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do
- Getting Through What You're Going Through
- The Power of Positive Thinking
- Don't Sweat the Small Stuff
- When You Are Down to Nothing, God is Up to Something

I like those titles. Well, any of them could sum up the passage of Scripture we're coming to today. They all summarize what Jesus Christ had to say in His last hours of freedom with His eleven remaining disciples as He spoke to them in His Upper Room Discourse. I believe the next time I teach through the Upper Room Discourse I'm going to call it: *The Positive Power of Biblical Thinking*.

Now, although Jesus was positive in these chapters in John's Gospel, He was also realistic. He was plainspoken. He knew what was ahead for His disciples, and He knew what was ahead for Himself. He told His men to expect tribulation in this world, that they would be persecuted, and that they would even deny Him. Yet His overall tone was progressive, positive, and full of peace. He told them that although they would face tough times, tough times never last but tough people do. He told them how to get through what they were going through. He told them not to sweat the small stuff but to focus on things above. He told them about the power and peace of His positive thoughts. He wanted them to know that when we're down to nothing, God is up to something.

So today I'd like for us to study this passage of Scripture together. It's the last half of John 16, the final paragraphs of our Lord's Upper Room Discourse—His last meeting with the disciples before His crucifixion. The passage begins with John 16:16 and goes to the end of the chapter. Here Jesus gives us a number of positive encouragements.

The Power of Perspective (John 16:17-19)

His first encouragement is the power of perspective, and the key to understanding this paragraph is to notice the phrase, "in a little while." Look at verse 16:

Verse 16: Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see Me no more, and then after a little while you will see Me."

This sounds like a riddle. As you read through the Upper

Room Discourse from John 13 through 17, Jesus made several statements that sounded like puzzles or riddles. In this case, the disciples couldn't figure it out. The next verses say:

Verse 17-19: At this, some of His disciples said to one another, "What does He mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see Me no more, and then after a little while you will see Me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does He mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what He is saying." Jesus saw that they wanted to ask Him about this, so He said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see Me no more, and then after a little while you will see Me'?"

Notice again that phrase "a little while." It occurs seven times in these four verses: A little while... a little while... a little while.... That's the way Jesus described the three days He would be in the tomb, but also I believe He's speaking to all of us and referring to the amount of time that will elapse until we see His face. In a little while you will see Me. That's the message Jesus is sending down to us now: In a little while you will see Me.

This isn't the only time we see this phrase in the Bible. It actually occurs quite often.

- The Bible uses this phrase to describe our lifespans on this planet. James 4:14 says: What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.
- Job said wicked people will prosper for only a little while then be cut off like heads of grain (Job 24:24).
- The Psalmist said, A little while and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity (Psalm 37:10).
- Isaiah 26:20 says, Go, My people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until His wrath has passed by.
- Peter used this phrase to describe the tough times we endure. The book of 1 Peter both opens and closes with this phrase. Peter was writing to people who were suffering, to those who were enduring persecution and troubles. At the beginning of this first epistle, he talked about the joy of Christ and said, In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (1 Peter 1:6).
- At the end of his book, in 1 Peter 5:10, he gave this blessing: And the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.
- The prophet Haggai used this phrase 500 years before Christ to describe the interval of waiting until the Messiah would be born: This is what the Lord Almighty says: In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come (the Messiah). To Haggai, 500 years was a little while, because God's clocks and calendars are different from ours.
- The book of Hebrews uses the same phrase about our Lord's Second Coming: You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised, for in just a little while He who is coming will come and will not delay.

The Bible says God dwells in eternity. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He gives eternal life to His children, and Heaven is an eternal place. Compared to that, 500 years is a little while. A thousand years is a little while. The span of our lives on earth is a little while. The duration of the wicked is a little while. The remaining years before the return of Christ is a little while. Our separation from our loved ones is a little while. Our suffering or pain or failures last only a little while. We're on this earth for a little while. We're

dead and buried for a little while. We're separated from our Savior and from our loved ones for only a little while. The Lord Jesus is coming again, and He's coming in just a little while. In a little while we will see Him.

Whatever problem you face, it's only for a little while. Whatever separation you endure, it's only for a little while. Jesus said, "In a little while you will not see Me, but in a little while you will see Me." There is tremendous power for God's people in "a little while." That's the power of perspective. That's God's perspective. A little while is all the time God needs. He can do remarkable things in a little while.

The Power of Praise (John 16:20-22)

That leads to the power of praise and rejoicing. Verse 20-22 say: Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices.

The Greek words for weep and mourn are powerful terms that have to do with the kind of loud and convulsive grief that characterized the culture of the times. We often read in the Bible of people loudly wailing and tearing their clothes and expressing their grief without restraint. Jesus warned His disciples they were going to enter a painful period like that, but it would abruptly be turned into joy. He compared it to a woman giving birth in pain then abruptly experiencing the joy of that little baby.

You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

He was predicting the rollercoaster of emotions they were about to face—the horror of His crucifixion and the exuberance of His resurrection. The grief would come and go, but the joy would come and stay. I've come to deeply appreciate the biblical subject of joy. I'm going to preach about it, Lord willing, next year. I came to realize the prevalence of this subject in the Bible after I tried to do a personal Bible study on the subject of joy. This was a few years ago. I thought it'd be good for me to see what the Bible had to say about joy. But there were too many verses—hundreds and hundreds of them. The more I studied them, the more cross-references I had to track down. I was overwhelmed with the topic of joy, and I've never finished my Bible study. There were just too many verses; and that became the point: God expects us to be experts in joyology—in the theology of joy.

The verses here in the Upper Room Discourse are some of the best. It's incredible that on the night He was betrayed, on the night the disciples were overcome with foreboding, when darkness and anxiety was in the air, when the Roman soldiers were on their way, when the cross was only hours away, when Satan was on the prowl—on this night Jesus had so much to say about the nature of joy.

I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (John 15:11).

You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy (Jn 16:20).

Your joy will be greater than the joy of a new mother holding her baby (16:21).

I will see you again and you will rejoice (16:22). No one will take away your joy (Jn 16:22).

Your joy will be complete (16:24).

You will have the full measure of My joy within you (17:13).

When we discover the power of praise of rejoicing and power of joy, it is truly personality altering. It's based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the resurrection of Christ, we have joy that is complete, grief that is turned to joy, the full measure of the joy of Jesus within us.

The Power of Prayer (John 16:23-30)

And then Jesus tells us about the power of prayer. This is a subject that comes up repeatedly in the Upper Room Discourse. In fact, Jesus says on seven different occasions in this one message that God will answer our prayers offered in His name. Seven times in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus offers to answer our prayers. Look at the next verse:

Verse 23: In that day you will no longer ask Me anything. Very truly I tell you, My Father will give you whatever you ask in My name.

In other words, Jesus said to the disciples: For the last three years, you and I have been talking face to face. We've been together in the city and in the countryside, in rooms like this and along country lanes. Whenever you wanted to pray, all you had to do was look over at Me and talk to Me. Now I'm going back to heaven, and after the resurrection the nature of prayer is going to change. You must learn to pray in My name. Realize when you pray, you have My authority behind you. God will listen to your prayers as if He were listening to Me. Whenever you want to pray, whether you're in the city or in the country, whether you're at home or on the road, all you have to do is look up and speak to the Father in My name.

We often end our prayers with the words “in Jesus’ Name.” What does that mean? It means we’re asking God to hear and answer our prayers in the same way He hears and answers the prayers of Jesus Himself. It means we are praying in Jesus’ authority. Those kinds of prayers can be very effective.

A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity of speaking at a men’s retreat in California, in the mountains just east of the San Joaquin Valley. When I arrived there the weather was perfect, but that troubled the organizer of the event. We had a long talk about it. He said, “Last year during this event we had a heavy snow. The year before we had a heavy rain. But this year we’ve had a terrible drought. The San Joaquin Valley is the breadbasket of America. Most of the nuts and berries and fruits come from here. But it’s been so dry farmers are suffering, some are losing their farms, and many of them aren’t even planting their crops this year. The nut trees aren’t producing and the price of almonds will rise. Food prices are going to skyrocket all across the nation. Some of the men are leaving this retreat on Sunday and going to Modesto, because there’s a prayer meeting at the courthouse on Monday for rain.”

Well, I spoke that day and the next, then flew back home. I don’t know how the Modesto prayer meeting went or who showed up. It wasn’t covered in the news as far as I could see. But I did notice in the news that the following week was a stormy week in California. Heavy rains swept over the state and over the San Joaquin Valley. Their fear of drought turned into fear of flooding. Heavy snows came to the Yosemite Valley. I don’t know of any newspaper that connected the prayer meeting to the weather, but it wouldn’t be the first time God has answered prayer like that. It reminded me that behind the machinery of the world and behind the machinery of our church and behind the machinery of our lives is the power of prayer.

The passage goes on to say: Until now you have not asked for anything in My name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

There’s great joy in developing a life of prayer.

Now, perhaps Jesus saw that His disciples were struggling to understand His riddles and analogies and figures of speech. On in verse 25, He said:

Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about My Father. In that day you will ask in My name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father Himself loves you because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God.

In other words, He told us here plainly and without symbolism that because of what He was about to do on the cross, we’d be able to have a direct relationship with God through Him. And do you remember what happened the moment He died? The curtain leading to the Holy of Holies in the Temple mysteriously ripped in two, indicating that now through the blood of Jesus Christ we have a direct and living way of coming into the presence of the God of the universe whenever we pray.

Verse 28 continues: I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” Then Jesus’ disciples said, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that You know all things and that You do not even need to have anyone ask You questions. This makes us believe that You came from God.”

The Power of Presence (John 16:31-32)

That leads to the next element on getting through tough times the power of presence, the presence of God.

Verse 31-32 says: “Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave Me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for My Father is with Me.”

Every time I read this, I think of the very similar statement the apostle Paul made at the end of his life, as described in 2 Timothy 4:16-17. Describing his trial before the Roman Emperor, Paul said: “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.”

Sometimes it’s good to learn a new word or a new phrase, so let me give you one. It’s the Latin phrase *Coram Deo*. The word *Coram* is Latin for before. And *Deo* means God. *Coram Deo* is a phrase that means to live before God, to live in His presence, to live under His authority, to recognize that wherever we are, He is there—and so we’re on sacred ground. Jesus was living *Coram Deo* in the Upper Room. Paul was living *Coram Deo* in the prison cell. In the darkness of the night when everyone abandoned Jesus, the Father was there. In the intimidation of the imperial court when everyone abandoned Paul, the Lord was present. The true Christian life—true spirituality—is found in living *Coram Deo*, in the constant presence of the Lord.

The Power of Peace (John 16:33)

And that leads to the final encouragement Jesus offered—His last words of His last sermon to His disciples—verse 33: I have told

you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

This is one of the verses we could hang on our wall or memorize or write out on a card on our desk. It's one of those classic statements we keep coming back to again and again. But we often only quote the last half of the verse. Certainly the last half of the verse is very wonderful. It's a motto. It's a summarization. It represents the last sentence of the last sermon of our Lord Jesus on this planet: In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

That tells us that in reality we'll have a lot of problems in life, but our attitude should be one of cheer and encouragement. The older translations say: "Be of good cheer!" We should stay doggedly positive even in times of trouble. While being realistic, we must always take the most optimistic view of things. The reason is because Jesus has overcome the world. In rising from the dead, He defeated sin, death, hell, and the grave. The world is overwhelming; but He is overcoming.

But don't forget the first part of the verse: I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace.

Notice especially those words in Me. The verse could have read: "These things I have spoken to you so that you may have peace." But that is not what the verse says or means. It's not just the words of Jesus that give us peace. It's Jesus Himself. Inner peace resides in a personal relationship with Him, and His words simply point us in that direction. Without friendship with Him, His words are mere platitudes. But we are in Christ, and when we're in Christ we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us, for He has overcome the world.

This is the positive power of biblical thinking—the power of perspective, praise, prayer, presence, and peace. This is the positive power of Him who has overcome the world.

Or, to put it differently: Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do. When we're in Christ, we can get through what we're going through. So don't sweat the small stuff. Remember: when you're down to nothing, God is up to something.

John 17 When Jesus Prayed for Us

On the Sunday mornings of 2014, we've been working our way through the last half of the Gospel of John. The first half of John's Gospel covers three years, but the last half covers only a few days as it details for us the events of the last week of our Lord's natural life. In John 13, He met with His disciples in the Upper Room for the Last Supper. In that chapter—John 13—He bathed their feet and then He began giving His final sermon to them. In chapter 14, He said, "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 to prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto Myself... Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you." Then they left the Upper Room. They left quite abruptly, very quickly. I think it was because Judas was leading the authorities to that place. So Jesus and His eleven remaining disciples left and as they made their way eastward through the nearly empty streets of ancient Jerusalem, He continued teaching them. In chapter 15, He said He was the vine and they were the branches, and He advised them to remain connected to Him, to abide in Him, and so to bear much fruit. He continued teaching in chapter 16, stressing things like praying in His Name and depending on the Holy Spirit, and then He wrapped up His sermon at the end of chapter 16 saying, "(I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

By this point, the little party was probably exiting the old city, leaving via an eastern gate. They were not yet across the Kidron Valley. Whenever I visit Israel, this is my most fascinating spot. Right on the eastern flanks of the old city of Jerusalem the road suddenly goes down into a deep valley and up the other side to the slopes of the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane is located. Jesus exited the city through one of the gates and there at the base of the great walls, somewhere on the western slopes of the Kidron Valley, He paused and finishing His Upper Room Discourse with a prayer.

That prayer occupies the entire 17th chapter of John. This is arguably the greatest prayer in the Bible. It was the longest recorded prayer we have from the lips of Jesus. This prayer has been called many things. Some call it the True Lord's Prayer; others call it The Consecration Prayer; or The Prayer of the Departing Redeemer; or The Farewell Prayer. I like to call it the Lord's High Priestly Prayer.

Today I want to devote one message to this chapter and to this prayer, and I want to begin with two preliminary insights.

First, when we study this prayer we get some clues about what Jesus Christ may be praying for us right now at the Father's right hand. The Bible says that Jesus always lives to intercede for His people. He is our great High Priest, and He prays to the Father on our behalf. Wouldn't it be interesting and encouraging if we could flip a switch for just a couple of minutes and hear a live transmission of what Jesus is saying as He prays for us in heaven? Well, John 17 gives us a good clue about it.

This idea came to me through the writings of the old Puritan, Thomas Watson. "This prayer which He made on earth," said Watson, "is the copy and pattern of His prayer in heaven. What a comfort is this; when Satan in tempting, Christ is praying. This works for good."¹

The second thing to notice is that this prayer is organized. I'm going to show you this organization today because I don't want us to miss the incredible fact that this prayer is organized. Jesus was probably less than an hour away from being arrested. Finishing His prayer, He would hike to the bottom of the Kidron Valley, push open the gate and enter the Garden of Gethsemane, pray intensely while the disciples struggled to stay awake, and then the mob would show up to drag Him away. Yet even at this critical moment, Jesus didn't offer a scattered prayer or an unstructured prayer or a haphazard prayer. His prayer was organized into three divisions.

Now, there's a lesson for us in all this. Two different people have come up to me recently and said, "How do I pray? How is prayer done? How do I learn to pray?"

Let me give you three words:

First, calendarize it. Get it on your calendar. Make it a regular part of your daily agenda. You have to find a regular time every day to pray. You have to sit down and say to yourself, How can I change my daily routine so that I have five or ten or fifteen minutes every day to talk with the Lord? When can I do this today and every day? The most important thing about us in terms of effectiveness and efficiency is our daily routine. Everyone needs a daily routine. Now, every day is different, of course. But most of us have some common structural elements in our day. We typically get up and go to bed at about the same time every day. We have school or work schedules. We have one or two or three meals every day. Perhaps we have a shower every morning or a bath every night. Perhaps we have a coffee break mid-morning. Most of us have a daily routine. So we have to ask ourselves, how can I adjust my daily routine for five, ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes for Bible reading and prayer? Jesus told us to go into our inner room, close the door, and talk to our Father in secret. We have to do this every day. Is it better for you first thing in the morning, or last thing in the evening, or everyday at the lunch hour? Calendarize it. Routinize it. Habitualize it. Stick with it until it's as much a part of your day as your morning coffee.

Second, personalize it. When you close the door and you're alone in your secret spot, practice what we talked about last week—*Coram Deo*—the presence of God. Visualize the Lord there with you and just talk to Him as if you were talking to your best friend. It's often good to pray out loud.

Third, organize it. You might begin developing a prayer journal or a little prayer notebook or a list on your tablet. You might begin every day with praise and thanksgiving, and then move to confession, and then pray for your family, and then pray for your friends, and then pray for world needs. But the very prayer of Jesus here in John 17 shows us that a good prayer isn't just a meandering confused set of words but it has some thought and organization around it.

So with that as background let me show you what Jesus prayed in John 17 at the end of His Upper Room Discourse.

1. Jesus Prayed for Himself (Jn 17:1-5)

First, He prayed for Himself. He just talked to the Father about how He had come down on a mission and how that mission was being completed and how excited He felt to be so near to returning to His glorious throne. This is Jn 17:1-5:

Jn 17:1: After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed: Father, the hour has come.

All the way through John's Gospel, there are references to the hours and to the time sequence of the life of Christ. Now the final hour had come and Jesus was on the verge of finishing His mission. His great desire was to glorify the Father. He went on to say:

Glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him.

That was His mission—to grant eternal life. I was going through some old papers last week and I came across a note about the final words of my Uncle Alton. My mother had several brothers and sisters. One of her older brothers, my Uncle Alton, was in the hospital in bad shape. But he looked up at family members and said, "I believe the Lord's going to take me home to heaven. And don't worry. It's just a sweet little journey."

That's the meaning of what Jesus did, of what He said. He came to give us eternal life. And He went on in the next verse to further describe the nature of eternal life.

Jn 17:3: Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.

This is a powerful Gospel verse. This is the verse that was instrumental in the conversion of John Knox, the Reformation hero of

Scotland. When Knox was dying, his wife was standing by his bedside. “Go!” he told her, “Go, read where I cast my first anchor!” She needed no more instructions for she knew what he meant. She fetched his Bible and read this verse to him. And those were his last words. He wanted again to hear the verse on which he had first cast his anchor—This is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. Jesus went on to say in Jn 17:4-5:

I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.

In other words, “Father, You sent Me down here to provide eternal life for My people. I have brought You glory by finishing the mission and I’m ready to ascend back to Heaven and take My place with You on our eternal throne. I have gloried You, and now I ask You to glorify Me.”

We can’t enter into all those words mean—we can never fully explain them—but in this first paragraph we have a summary of the entire message of the Bible and the total mission of Christ.

2. Jesus Prayed for His Disciples (Jn 17:6-19)

Now, in verses 6 through 19, Jesus prayed for His eleven remaining disciples. He began this part by reviewing His history with Peter and James and John and the others.

Jn 17:6-8: I have revealed You to those whom You gave Me out of the world. They were Yours; You gave them to Me and they have obeyed Your word. Now they know that everything You have given Me comes from You. For I gave them the words You gave Me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from You, and they believed that You sent Me.

And now He begins to offer the special petitions they needed. Jn 17:9 continues:

I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they are Yours. All I have is Yours and all You have is Mine. And glory has come to Me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name, the name You gave Me, so that they may be one as We are one.

This world is a dangerous place for God’s people. The Bible teaches that this world is the devil’s playground. This world is the devil’s battlefield. The Bible teaches that we are here as expatriates to do whatever God calls us to do like foreign ambassadors in a warzone. There are demonic powers everywhere around us. Satan desires to sift us like wheat; he’s like a roaring lion prowling around looking for someone to devour. But we have the name of Jesus over our heads and divine protection given us in answer to the Lord’s prayer here in John 17.

Now, it’s true that every one of these eleven disciples were persecuted for their faith, and ten of the eleven died violently from persecution. But not until they had finished their mission and were ready for God to take them to heaven. The same is true for us. Jn 17:12 goes on to say:

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name You gave Me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. I am coming to You now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them.

So we’re not only on a dangerous mission needing protection, but we’re to carry out our mission with joy! With the full measure of the joy of Christ!

This is how we’re different from a military commando unit. When our government sends in special forces, when the Navy SEALs are deployed, for example, they need protection. They go into a deadly situation, and they may go in with a sense of preparation and determination. They may be mentally prepared. At the conclusion of their mission, they may have a sense of pride and satisfaction. But we don’t normally think of “joy” as the best word to describe their mood or mindset. But for the Christian, we’re God’s Special Forces on earth and we’re in constant danger requiring His protection, but our attitude should be characterized by joy.

Joy is a habit of mind we need to get into. It’s a mood we need to cultivate over a lifetime. We’re to have the full measure of the joy of Christ within us. In Jn 17:14, Jesus went on to describe why His disciples would need protection:

Jn 17:14: I have given them Your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one.

This is a great prayer to adopt for your children and grandchildren.

Jn 17:16 goes on to say: They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth. As you sent

Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

The idea of being sent on a mission is a theme of the Gospel of John and it's an idea that shows up repeatedly in this prayer. He ends this section by saying in Jn 17:19:

For them I sanctify Myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

3. Jesus Prayed for Us (Jn 17:20-26)

So in Jn 17:1-5, Jesus prayed for Himself and He said, in effect, "I have glorified you by finishing My mission." In verses 6-16, He prayed for His eleven disciples, saying, in effect, "Now I'm sending them on a similar mission and they will need all the protection and joy they have get." And now He ended the prayer by praying for you and me, for His followers through the ages, for the church He came to establish, and for all future believers. Look at Jn 17:20:

Jn 17:20: My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

His great concern is for the unity of His people through the ages, for the protection and unity of His church.

Jn 17:22: I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one—I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

And then our Lord adds one other thing. He prays for our safe arrival in heaven at the end of our mission.

Jn 17:24-26: Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know You, I know You, and they know that You have sent Me. I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known in order that the love You have for Me may be in them and that I Myself may be in them.

That's the end of our Lord's High Priestly Prayer in John 17, and notice how the next chapter begins: When He had finished praying, Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and He and His disciples went into it...

And here, in this Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed some more—perhaps another hour—before suddenly the torches and swords of the Roman and Jewish authorities converged on that spot to arrest Him and lead Him off to His death.

Now, there's obviously a lot of depth and meaning in John 17 that we just aren't able to explore in one sermon. We can spend a lifetime pondering our Lord's High Priestly Prayer. But I want to go back to what I said earlier. If Jesus of Nazareth needed to fortify His life and ministry through prayer, how much also do we! We can learn something from this chapter about how to pray, and we begin to develop consistent prayer habits when we calendarize prayer—that is, we work it into our daily schedules in a consistent way; when we personalize our prayers and talk to the Father just as naturally as Jesus did here in this chapter; and when we organize our prayers and follow a simple routine to help us pray with a bit of structure and order. Jesus prayed in concentric circles—for Himself, for His immediate disciples, and for His future followers. Perhaps there are some natural concentric circles in your life that will lend themselves naturally to a structure of prayer.

And if today your heart is empty and you don't have a relationship with the Lord, remember verse 3: Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

You can come to know Him today as Lord and Savior, and this can be the verse on which you first cast your anchor.

(Endnotes)

1 Thomas Watson, *A Divine Cordial* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., 2001), 17.

John 18 What Happens When Jesus Says, "I Am He!"

Today in our studies through the Gospel of John we're coming to Jn 18. In terms of the time frame, the events of this chapter occurred sometime around midnight on the last night of our Lord's natural life, and they happened in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the chapter in which Jesus Christ is captured, bound, dragged away for a series of illegal trials, and finally condemned. As I read this chapter over and over, I just marveled at how completely the enemies of our Lord failed to dehumanize Him. He would not be beaten.

The world and the devil are constantly seeking to dehumanize us. When someone does not treat us with respect, or when we become a victim in some way, or when society tries to strip us of our self-esteem—that's dehumanization.

In his memoirs, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote about taking his daughter to the beach in East London, South Africa, many years ago, during the days of apartheid. The portion of the beach that was reserved for blacks was rocky and the least attractive section. Nearby was a playground, and Tutu's daughter would sometimes say, "Daddy, I want to go on the swings." Desmond Tutu struggled to try to explain to his daughter why she was excluded from that playground. Other children were swinging there, but she could not. Tutu wrote in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, that the experience made him feel "so dehumanized, so humiliated, so diminished."

- That's the evil at the heart of concentration camps, where people are stripped of every shred of their humanity. They are dehumanized. They're treated worse than animals.
- This also happens in the prison system. People's names are taken away and they become numbers. Every aspect of the prison complex has the effect of dehumanizing the inmates
- On another level this is what happens when a child is bullied at school.
- This is what happens when a wife is battered or abused in a domestic relationship.
- We feel dehumanized when we're not respected at work.
- Sometimes we can feel dehumanized just because there are lots of us—7 billion people on the planet—and in crowds of people sometimes we're herded around like cattle.
- Facing disease and going through the indignities associated with treatment can have a dehumanizing effect on us.
- A sense of failure can dehumanize us.
- When a Christian student is bullied or belittled by an atheistic professor, it can be a dehumanizing experience.

In a thousand ways, the devil tries by hook and crook to dehumanize us, to lower our self-worth, and to make us feel we're nothing special. At the heart of it, that's what the theory of evolution does. It tells us we're nothing special; that we're not created in the image of God; that we aren't created at all. It tells us we're nothing more than primordial sludge that somehow experienced a series of random occurrences that made us into animals with no future, destined to perish without hope. How dehumanizing is that!

This world has a satanic way of trying to strip us of our dignity and our self-worth. But there's one kind of person who is remarkably resistant to these attempts, and that's someone who thinks like Jesus. Jesus-followers are very hard to defeat.

All this came to mind rather forcibly as I studied John 18. From every direction, the enemies of Jesus tried to dehumanize Him—but it was impossible. Jesus remained self-possessed and fully in charge of His own attitudes, even when His fate appeared to be at the mercy of others. What I'd like to do this morning is to read through portions of this chapter so we can see its power for ourselves and pick up some clues about maintaining our personal tranquility and dignity even when others try to demean us. Let's begin with verse 1:

Jn 18:1: When He had finished praying, Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and He and His disciples went into it.

Throughout our studies of the Upper Room Discourse, I've tried to help us visualize the scene and sequence of the events on this last evening of our Lord's life. Jesus met with His disciples for the Passover meal and began by bathing their feet. Then He started talking with them around the supper table in the Upper Room. Suddenly Judas Iscariot left the room, going, as Jesus knew, to summon troops. Shortly afterward Jesus made a hasty exit. He continued teaching as He and His disciples wended through the nighttime streets of Jerusalem. They passed the temple towering above them on Temple Mount, and then they exited the city through one of the massive gates nearby.

Here, perhaps just outside the walls, Jesus paused and offered the prayer recorded in John 17. Having finished His sermon and His prayer, Jesus led His disciples on down the steep road on the eastern flank of the city, across the gorge known as the Kidron Valley, and into a garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Here they unlocked the gate and entered the Garden of Gethsemane. It was probably about midnight.

We assume Judas led the soldiers back to the Upper Room, expecting to find Jesus there. I wish I could have seen the look of his face when they burst open the doors and the room was empty. But Judas knew very well where Jesus had likely gone; so he said, "Follow me, I think I know where He might be." And so Judas led the delegation of soldiers along the same route Jesus has taken an hour or so before.

Jn 18:2: Now Judas, who betrayed Him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with His disciples.

Evidently this was a walled olive orchard with an olive press—it was a little factory or olive oil processing center—and the owner had made it available to Jesus whenever He wanted it. According to Luke 32:37, Jesus and His disciples often camped here at night when they were in Jerusalem. Perhaps it was a place they rented, or maybe the owner provided it at no charge. During festival times, Jerusalem was filled with thousands of people and they camped out everywhere. Our Lord had a regular spot—this enclosed olive orchard. We know that Jesus spent some of His nights that week in Bethany, a couple of miles away. But the disciples were apparently accustomed to coming to Jerusalem and lodging here in this garden. So for all they knew at this late hour about midnight—Jesus had brought them here to get a good night’s sleep in a place where they routinely lodged. Perhaps that helps explain something we read in the other Gospels—how the disciples grew tired and fell asleep. Jesus stayed awake and prayed earnestly, but the others had trouble staying awake. Maybe they had already snuggled into their blankets. At any rate, they were interrupted and roused awake by the sudden appearance of a large delegation of soldiers and Jewish officials coming with Judas to the gate of the garden with torches and lanterns and swords.

Jn 18:3: So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons.

The soldiers were evidently Roman soldiers, accompanied by Jewish officials. This is where we see the sublime self-possession of the Lord Jesus Christ. The next verse says:

Jn 18:4: Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to Him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

Here we have a reference to the omniscience of Jesus. He knew everything that was about to happen, which means He knew in advance all about His imminent arrest, His crucifixion, His resurrection, His ascension, His eternal rule and reign—He knew everything. And this knowledge gave Him poise and calmness and self-assurance and strength of mind.

People who possess a deep knowledge of God and His Word cannot be dehumanized. We know too much. We know God loves us. We know we’re made in His image. We know we are unique, special, and wonderfully blessed by the grace of God. We know Jesus died for us. We know we have eternal life. We know all things work together for good. We know this world is full of evil, but the Lord is on His heavenly throne. We know we’ll have tribulation in this world, but we’re to be of good courage for Christ has overcome the world. So Jesus, with omniscient knowledge and remarkable self-possession, went up to the leader of the military contingent and said, “Who do you want? What are you doing here? Who are you seeking.”

And now we come to a very powerful moment. When Jesus asked them whom they were seeking, they replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Look at what happened next:

“I am He,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

When Jesus uttered the words, “I Am He!” a force radiated from His personality like the blast from a bomb. When a bomb goes off, the area around the explosion becomes over-pressurized and the air particles rush outward with tremendous velocity, and whatever or whoever is nearby feels the blast wave or the shockwave. The power of that invisible wall of percussion—that invisible shockwave—can kill a person in an instant. Well, when Jesus uttered the words, “I Am He!” it’s as though a bomb exploded, sending a shockwave from the depths of His omnipotent personality. He controlled its volume and velocity. It could easily have been so powerful it would have killed every one of them. It could have been so powerful to have destroyed the city of Jerusalem. The whole city silhouetted against the western sky on the hill across from Him could have easily crumbled at the sound of the words “I Am He,” just as if an atomic bomb had been detonated or a massive earthquake had struck. The sound of His words could have caused the foundations of the earth to crumble and the stars to fall from the skies. It could have caused the entire universe to collapse, as will happen at the end of time. But on this occasion Jesus was determined to die for the sins of the world; and so our Lord controlled the force of the shockwave and it didn’t hurt anyone; it just sent them spilling backward. But it was a token of His almighty power and of His true true identity: I am He!

The soldiers and officials struggled onto their feet and reassembled themselves and stood there not quite certain what had happened to them. So Jesus helped them out by resuming the conversation.

Jn 18:7: Again He asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they said. Jesus answered, “I told you that I am He. If you are looking for Me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words He had spoken would be fulfilled, “I have not lost one of those You gave Me.”

There we have another secret of people who are resistant to dehumanizing treatment—their primary concern is for someone else. All the way through this chapter, Jesus displays great concern for others; we don’t have time to study it in detail, but when we’re focused on the needs of someone else it takes a lot of the spotlight and pressure off of ourselves. We’re not nearly as defensive as when we’re all wrapped up in ourselves.

Now, let's go down to Jn 18:12: Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound Him and brought Him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.

For many years, the high priesthood of Israel was passed back and forth between a man named Annas, and his five sons, and his son-in-law Caiaphas. Caiaphas happened to be the high priest at the moment, although the old man Annas was still influential. So Jesus was first taken to Annas for questioning and then to Caiaphas (verse 24). One of the most interesting things I can say about this passage is that in 1990, construction workers on the outskirts of Jerusalem discovered an ancient burial cave, and in that cave was the ossuary containing the bones of a sixty-year-old man from the first century bearing the name Caiaphas. This was in 1990, quite recently. It was a very elaborate ossuary, as befitting a man who was high priest. And indeed, we believe this is the burial box and very the bones of this man in this chapter, before whom Jesus was brought and placed on trial. It is an astounding archeological discovery. And that's not all.

There's one other detail about the discovery of the Caiaphas ossuary (or bone box) that is as intriguing as any mystery of archaeology. Inside the tomb were two old Roman nails, and one of them was inside one of the Caiaphas family ossuaries. Some scholars speculate they were simply used to scratch the names on the bone box. But other scholars say the bent shape of the nails is consistent with bending the end of the nail over onto and against the flesh of a crucifixion victim to affix him to a cross. There are also some ancient Jewish sources pointing to old traditions that crucifixion nails had special curative powers. The Roman historian Pliny said that nails could be powerful amulets if they are associated with crucifixion. There are references in ancient rabbinic literature about the magical powers of crucifixion nails.

Beyond that we cannot say. But there's virtually no doubt that in 1990, the tomb of the Caiaphas of John 19 was discovered, and in it were the bones of a sixty-year-old man whom we believe to have been Caiaphas himself. And there were also two Roman nails, which had possibly been used in a Roman crucifixion. I'm not sure where the nails are right now; probably locked in a safe somewhere in Israel; but you can see the Caiaphas ossuary whenever you visit the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

So now there unfolds a series of hearing and trials that consume the evening, from the hours of, say, midnight, to dawn. When you compile the four Gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you see that Jesus faced a series of seven different trials or hearings. The first three were religious trials by Jewish officials—before Annas, before Caiaphas, and before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council). Then the Jewish officials handed Jesus over to the Romans for another series of three hearings or trials—before Pilate, who sent Him over to Herod, who sent Him back to Pilate. The seventh hearing was when Jesus was presented to the public mob, who condemned Him with cries of “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

- Before Annas (John 18)
- Before Caiaphas (John 18)
- Before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27)
- Before Pilate (Matthew 27)
- Before Herod (Luke 23)
- Before Pilate again (Luke 23)
- Before the People (All Four Gospels)

Within this context, let's skip down to Jn 18:28, when Jesus is handed over to the Roman court of Pilate:

Jn 18:28: Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

This doesn't necessarily refer to the Passover Meal, which had occurred the preceding evening. The Passover (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) was a weeklong affair.

Jn 18:29: So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

Jn 18:30: “If He were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed Him over to you.”

Jn 18:31: Pilate said, “Take Him yourselves and judge Him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death He was going to die. Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoning Jesus and asked Him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jn 18:34: “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about Me?”

Jesus answered Pilate's question with a question, which is a common trait of people who won't allow themselves to be intimidated.

Jn 18:35: “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed You over to me. What is it You have done?” Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now My

kingdom is from another place.”

Jesus referred to His kingdom, but He said several things about it.

- First, it was His Kingdom. It belonged to Him, which means He was not just a king but the King.
 - Second, His kingdom transcended the world. It was bigger than the world and larger than time.
 - Third, His servants weren't so interested in political revolution as in spiritual revolution.
 - Fourth, His kingdom has its origin and center in another place—not in the city of Jerusalem but in the city of New Jerusalem.
- Pilate had trouble absorbing this.

Jn 18:37: “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me.”

With this prisoner, the prisoner was judging the judge. Jesus said, in effect, “I was born and I came into this world to give the true facts to the human race. I came to tell the truth and to be the personification of the truth. I am the truth. I came into the world to provide information about life and death and eternity, about God and heaven and hell and salvation. I came with the Gospel truth. You ask me what kind of man I am, but now we will see what kind of person you are. If you're a man of truth, you will listen to Me. If you are not, your duplicity and weakness will be revealed for all of time and eternity.” At that, Pilate scoffed.

Jn 18:38: “What is truth?” retorted Pilate.

That's the politically correct answer—there are no absolutes; there is no truth; your morals and philosophy and ideas can be whatever you want them to be. Jesus said, “The reason I was born and came into the world was to bring the truth to the human race—the absolute eternal truth, the facts about life and death and reality.” To which our society responds, “What is truth? There is no truth. There are no absolutes. Truth can be whatever we want it to be.” That leads to utter and ultimate dehumanization.

Let me conclude in this way. You may have noticed that I didn't give a set of points or a formula on resisting the dehumanizing influence of the world. Maybe you have someone who is tearing you down. Maybe you have someone who fills your ears with ugly statements about yourself. Maybe you have someone who is a bully in your life. It's not a three-point outline I want you to see in this chapter—it's the spirit and attitude and self-possession and poise of Jesus Christ.

Here in this chapter and in the next we have the single most dehumanizing set of evils that has ever befallen anyone—being seized in front of His friends, abandoned by His followers, denied justice, shuffled from courtroom to courtroom, condemned by everyone, slapped in the face, handed over to be stripped and scourged and ridiculed and nailed to a cross like a snake being pinned to a post, which is a biblical picture, until He bled and suffocated to death.

And yet, Jesus never allowed Himself to be dehumanized. At every point, He was full of self-possession, honesty, compassion, and an awareness of His mission and His mercy. He knew too much to be dehumanized. He loved too much to be defeated. He judged His judges and three days later overcame the cords of death and the bonds of the grave. That's why when we follow Him, we have the God-given capacity to withstand the dehumanizing blows of the world. We are serene in our Savior. We have strength and an understanding that's from another world. That's why your enemies (including the devil) just don't know what to do with you.

Many years ago we had a man who came several times and preached for us. I developed a deep appreciation for him. His name was Joseph Tson, and he was an evangelical leader in Romania during the days of the Soviet Union. He told us stories of his times of persecution. He told us he was often summoned before government officers, who used every tactic to break his faith in Christ. Once, being interrogated at Ploiesti, an officer threatened to kill him. “Sir,” replied Tson, “let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.”

The officer was perplexed at that. So Joseph Tson explained it to him. “Here is how it works,” he said. “You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who has a tape will pick it up and say, ‘I'd better listen again to what this man preached, because he really meant it; he sealed it with his life.’ So, sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me.”

The officer sent Tson home.¹

This is a brutal world, and all of us have times when someone tries to bully us or beat us down. Don't let them. Let the Lord Jesus Christ arise within you. Let His information sustain you. Let His compassion grip you. Let His serenity keep you. Let His death inspire you. And let His resurrection be the anchor for your soul and the rejoicing of your heart.

And always remember what happens when Jesus says: "I Am He!"

(Endnotes)

1 Also related in Josef Tson, "Thank You for the Beating," in Christian Herald, April, 1988.

John 19

Today is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Passion Week. This coming Friday is the day when we commemorate the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and we call it Good Friday. Do you know where that phrase comes from? Why do we call this day—Good Friday? The answer is that we honestly don't know. No one really knows when and where and why Crucifixion Friday came to be known as Good Friday. The word "good" is sometimes used in the Bible in the sense of "holy." So the term Good Friday might be derived from some medieval expression such as Holy Friday. The word good may be related in its etymology to the word God. Our word, Goodbye is apparently a contraction of the phrase God Be With You. So the term Good Friday might be derived from some medieval expression such as God's Friday. But we don't really know; the real source of the title Good Friday has been lost to us. Furthermore it sometimes strikes us as an odd phrase. If we had been there, if we had seen the blood and the incredible human suffering that took place, if we had seen the cruelty of men to other men, if we had heard the screams and witnessed the torture of the event, none of us would have described it as good.

Yet the cross is the means by which God poured all the blessings of His goodness into our lives, and that's why the phrase Good Friday is not inappropriate. That's why the cross has been the primary symbol of Christianity from ancient times. The cross is central to the Bible, central to God's plan of redemption, and central in the heart and soul of Christians everywhere. The day we commemorate as Good Friday is the most dramatic day in the entire history of the world.

You may recall that last November 22 we commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of President John Kennedy. I was surprised to feel quite emotional that day because I remember the event with clarity and it took my mind back to a specific set of memories in my childhood. I was in grade school and I can still remember the moment when I heard Kennedy had been shot and the moment an hour or so later when I learned he was dead. I was with my dad, and I can remember the details quite well. Everyone my age and older can remember when and where they were when they heard that news.

For my parents' generation, the same was true about Pearl Harbor. For my children's generation, it was 9/11. I suppose every generation has its defining, history-altering moment when time seems to stand still and we instantly know our world will never be the same. But there is only one moment and one event in the span of human chronicles that truly defined all of the history in the entire world and for all of time. Even secular historians, if they're honest, will have to agree that the death of Jesus Christ is the most world-shaping, history-altering, life-changing, time-bending event that has ever occurred. How do you explain that? The simple death of a young Nazarene carpenter in a troubled corner of the Roman world has changed this earth more than all the battles that have ever been fought, more than all the rulers who ever lived and died, and more than all the cataclysms and catastrophes that have ever or will ever descend across the horizons of history.

Well, today in our Sunday Bible studies through the Gospel of John, we're coming to this event, and to the events of Good Friday and to the story of the cross. I'm going to begin with our Bible reading and Bible study where we left off last time. We've been studying the Gospel of John for many months, but in the next couple of Sundays we're coming to the final chapters, and today we're coming to John 19, beginning with verse 28. Jesus is, at this point in the chapter, affixed to the cross and closing in on His final moments. It's hard to read, and hard to preach and teach; but John doesn't dwell on the gory details. He just gives us the facts and tells us in a very simple way what happened. So let's begin with John 19:28:

Jn 19:28: Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

Earlier Jesus had refused anything to drink, but now He asked for something. The one who called Himself the water of life was dying of thirst, and the one who promised living water was suffering intense dehydration.

Like almost everything else that happened that day, this was prophesied and predicted in advance. Psalm 22, the Crucifixion Psalm, describes the cross of Jesus a thousand years in advance as though the writer were witnessing the scene first hand. Crucifixion had not been invented as a form of execution when Psalm 22 was written, yet the Psalmist described the scene with remarkable accuracy. One of the aspects of crucifixion is extreme thirst.

- Psalm 22:15 says: "My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."
- Psalm 69 adds: "My throat is parched... They... gave me vinegar for my thirst."

Having previously refused anything to drink, Jesus now indicated He needed something for His thirst. Why is that? I think we have a clue in the next verses:

Jn 19:29-30: A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When He had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."

It's possible Jesus had become too parched and His mouth too paralyzed to speak, so He managed to whisper through quivering lips that He was thirsty. He was given a little bit of wine vinegar to hydrate His mouth; and with lips and tongue moistened a bit, He was able to cry out with His last ounce of strength: "It is finished!" And with that He gave up His spirit.

Now, one of the greatest questions we can ever ask or answer is this: What did Jesus mean by the word it? To what was He referring? Did He simply mean His hours of pain and suffering were now over, that His life was finished, that His pain was now behind Him? If that were all he meant, those words would have little enduring significance. It is universally understood that Jesus meant more than that. Only hours before in His prayer in the Kidron Valley, Jesus had said, "Father, I have brought You glory by finishing the work You gave Me to do." He was referring to His mission of providing salvation and atonement and forgiveness and hope to our planet. Jesus meant that His work was over, His assignment of saving the lost was now finished, that everything had been accomplished necessary for the redemption of the human race. He had now completed His mission.

Hebrews 9:26 says: He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

The great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said about this phrase: "Contemplate man's noblest achievements—the intellectual and the physical; the touch of human imperfection and incompleteness mars and traces all. The great truth, then, stands out like a constellation flaming in its own solitary orbit, that there never was but one Man who could gaze with complacency (satisfaction) upon His work and, with His expiring breath, exclaim, "It is finished!" That man was the God-Man, Mediator, who, as the Son and yet the Servant of the Father, relinquished His Throne for a Cross, that He might accomplish the redemption, work out the salvation of His Church—the people given to Him of God—and who, on the eve of that Redemption and with all the certainty of an actual Atonement, could thus breathe His intercessory petition to Heaven, 'I have finished the work which You gave Me to do.'"

Lifted up was He to die;
"It is finished!" was His cry.

And thus Jesus bowed His head, gave up His spirit, and died.

Jn 19:31: Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.

This is such a brutal verse I really don't want to deal with it. Historians tell us a crucifixion victim could languish for hours and hours, perhaps for days; but not if his legs were broken. The victim was stretched out on the cross in a way that made it impossible for him to breathe without pushing up with the legs to free the lungs a little bit for each breath. Every breath was an agony because it involved this excruciating motion. Pushing yourself up; rubbing your flayed back against the splintered post; gulping a mouthful of air before falling downward with the weight pulling at your palms or wrists. The word excruciating comes from the term crucifixion. So if the officials wanted to hasten the victim's death, they simply swung a heavy object such as an iron bar or mallet into the legs and shattered them. Some victims died from the trauma of the blow; and the others died quickly from asphyxiation.

Jn 19:32: The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

The purpose of this seems to have been to make absolutely certain Jesus was dead. This proves He had not just passed out or swooned, but He was dead; and He was proven doubly dead from the violent attack of the spear.

Jn 19:35: The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.

John seems to have been referring to himself as the one who was an eyewitness of the Lord's death. As far as we know, John is the only disciple who stayed near the cross as Jesus died.

Jn 19:36: These things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of His bones will be broken," and, as another Scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Here again John points out that every aspect of the death of Christ was predicted in advance. Zechariah spoke of the Jewish leaders as looking on the one they pierced.

And in Exodus 12, written in the Old Testament days of Moses, the people were told to make sure they did not break the legs of the Passover Lamb. Psalm 34: 20 adds, “He protects all His bones, not one of them will be broken.”

Now, having described the suffering and death of Christ, John proceeds to tell us about His burial.

Verse 38 says: Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

As I studied this, I couldn't help reflecting that the first and last men to care for our Lord's body were both named Joseph. They were both named for the Old Testament patriarch, the Joseph of Genesis, who was the beloved of his father, who was rejected by his brothers, who was thrown into a dark grave or cistern, and who came out of the ground and went on to become lord of the land—Joseph, the man who later forgave his brothers and provide for them. This was the Joseph of the Old Testament, and he was the namesake for two men in the New Testament.

It was Joseph of Nazareth who tenderly took our Lord's newborn body, fresh from the womb, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and tenderly laid Him in the manger; and it was another Joseph who took our Lord's battered body from the cross, wrapped Him in burial clothes, and tenderly placed him in the tomb.

Who was this particular Joseph—Joseph of Arimathea? We don't know as much about Joseph as we would like. Archaeologists have not yet discovered his hometown of Arimathea yet. We don't doubt there was such a town, but its specific location is lost to us. But we do know the bare facts about Joseph, because each of the four Gospels gives us additional information about him.

- Matthew says he was a rich man, and he had just commissioned his own tomb to be cut out of a rocky place just beyond the walls of Old Jerusalem. The garden containing this newly-hewn tomb was near the execution site.

- Mark tells us he was a prominent member of the Jewish ruling counsel, the Sanhedrin, and that he was himself waiting for the kingdom of God. In other words, he was a righteous man who had been longing and looking for the Messiah.

- Luke tells us he was a good and upright man who had not consented to the decision of the Sanhedrin to condemn Christ. He had objected. Apparently he and Nicodemus were the dissenting voices. They had been secret disciples of Christ, but events had brought them out in the open and they bravely stood for Jesus and demanded He be properly buried.

- John tells us the details of how he and Nicodemus cared for our Lord's body, even the amount of spices they brought for the burial.

So continuing with Jn 19:38b: Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

Here were two men, presumably older men, who had a heart for Christ. It had been very difficult for them, because Christ wasn't popular in their circles. They had tried to gently do what they could for Him behind the scenes. But in the final analysis they had to come out of hiding and, at great personal risk, declare their allegiance to Him and assume responsibility for caring for His body. Even that was in accordance with Old Testament prophecy, for Isaiah 53 says: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death.”

Sometimes we want to serve the Lord secretly. It's hard to be open and public and bold about our faith. But there's no getting around it. Sooner or later, we have to declare our allegiance. Our family may ridicule us; our friends may reject us; those closest to us may be grieved. But the Bible says, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to everyone who believes.”

Jn 19:40: Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

As it turned out, He was only a transient in the tomb. It was a temporary stay. He only needed a three-day lease. He stayed there for for less than seventy-two hours. The very next verse John 20:1—well, that's Easter. That's resurrection Sunday.

Now, what can we learn for ourselves from this passage? The main lesson is that God wants to change our own history. He wants to change the trajectory of your life. I began the message talking about how certain events have such a shattering impact on our world and that we ever forget where we were when we heard about them. That's not only true for world history; that's true for our personal history. When something terribly bad happens to us, it creates trauma; and we might later struggle from post-traumatic issues. But when Jesus comes into your life, it changes you in a good way. Christ was lifted up on the cross to die, but the power of the cross lifts us up to abundant and eternal life. There's an old hymn that says:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
And it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to Thee!

How would you like something to happen to you today—on the Palm Sunday—that you would remember the rest of your life? Alexander Solzhenitsyn was one of the greatest literary heroes of the twentieth century. He wrote *The Gulag Archipelago* about the terrors of the Soviet forced labor camps, and he himself wrote from experience. As a young man, he was imprisoned in the gulag and forced to labor endless days with backbreaking work while the guards slowly starved him to death. One day, Solzhenitsyn said, hopelessness overcame him. He stopped working, dropped his shovel, and slowly walked over to a bench and sat down. He knew that at any moment a guard would order him up, and, if he failed to respond, he would be bludgeoned to death, probably with a shovel. He had seen it happen many times. As he sat there, waiting, head down, he suddenly felt a presence. He looked up and there was an old man with a wrinkled face that contained no expression at all. The man was hunched over. But with his stick, he drew something in the sand at Solzhenitsyn's feet. It was the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at that symbol, his entire perspective somehow changed. He knew he was one man pitted against the Soviet Empire, but he also knew that hope for all mankind was represented by the simple cross of one man who stood against the history of the world and triumphed. Getting up, Solzhenitsyn picked up his shovel and returned to work, not knowing that one day his writings on truth and freedom would enflame the world.¹

In Galatians 6:14, the apostle Paul said, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (NKJV).

To embrace the message of the cross today, I invite you to pray with me these words, simply and sincerely: "Heavenly Father, I believe Jesus Christ died and rose again for me. Today as best I know how I repent of my sins and receive Him by faith. I ask Jesus to become my Savior and the Lord of my Life. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

(Endnotes)

¹Charles Colson, *A Dangerous Grace* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 69-70.

John 20

Life is a very emotional thing. We spend vast amounts of our energy just trying to deal with all our emotions. I saw a pedestrian list the other day of the kind of common everyday human emotions we all experience, and guess how many items were on the list? Nearly 300! Imagine having that many forces inside of you all the time. This list of emotions was arranged in alphabetical order and just the items in the "A" group overwhelmed me. There were twenty-six "A's," like agitated, aggressive, amazed, anguished, amused, angry, annoyed, anxious, appreciative, ashamed and so forth. It's no wonder we have trouble with all these emotions swirling around us in an endless stew of attitudes and hormones and sentiments and reactions. Many of our most vexing problems in life are related to our emotions. Some of you may be struggled with negative emotions or difficult emotions today. We never know what will trigger some unexpected emotional response inside us.

That's where Easter comes in. When we drop the reality of Easter into the conglomeration of our emotions, our attitudes are instantly improved. Now matter what emotional problems you're having, Easter lifts the tide of every healthy emotion and lowers the waterline of all the unhealthy ones.

I want to submit that Easter is the basis—and the only basis—for healthy emotions and for emotional self-control. That's what we find when we look at the Easter story as it's presented to us in John 20. Today I'd like to devote the entire message to a very simple analysis of this chapter.

This chapter has 31 verses. The first part of the chapter is an introduction that tells us the story of what happened at the empty tomb. And the rest of the chapter gives us three different people or groups who had an emotional transformation because of that empty tomb: Mary Magdalene, the Disciples, and Thomas. And the chapter ends with a powerful statement of purpose.

John 20: Easter!

Introduction – the Resurrection (Jn 20:1-10).

A. Mary Magdalene – From Grief to Purpose (Jn 20:11-18)

B. The Disciples – From Fear to Joy (Jn 20:19-23)

Introduction (Jn 20:1-10)

Let's begin with the wonderful story John told of what happened that first Easter.

Jn 20:1: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

All through way through his Gospel, the apostle John has emphasized light and darkness. He often used those words literally; and he often used them symbolically. And sometimes he used them in ways that were both literal and symbolic. In this case, it was literally dark when Mary Magdalene got up. She rose before the sun and she dressed herself in the darkness and prepared to go to the tomb before the dawning. But it was also dark in her spirit and dark in her heart. She was a grief-stricken woman. And when she arrived at the tomb, everything was wrong. The stone was no longer in front of the tomb, and the body of Christ as missing. The other Gospel writers tell us the soldiers who were supposed to be guarding the tomb were standing around dumbfounded as if they were dead men.

Jn 20:2: So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!"

The apostle John who wrote this Gospel referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. These two men were staying somewhere nearby, and perhaps they were just getting up themselves when they heard Mary pounding on their door or shouting through the window.

Jn 20:3-4: So Peter and the other disciple started to the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

John was apparently the quicker runner.

Jn 20:5: He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb.

We know how impetuous Peter was.

He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

It was as though the body of Jesus had simply passed right through the grave clothes.

Jn 20:8: Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

The word "finally" tells us that John truly was hesitant to enter that dark cave. But as soon as he went inside and saw the grave clothes there, he instantly believed. Verse 8 goes on to say:

He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead).

In other words, John truly did believe at that moment that Jesus had risen from the dead, but he didn't understand anything about the event. He didn't understand it had been predicted just this way in the Old Testament. He didn't understand the significance of it. He just knew something extraordinary had happened. If someone had simply stolen the body of Christ they would never have taken the time to unroll the shroud or unpack the 75 pounds of spices or neatly arrange the grave clothes back on the slab. John instantly perceived what had happened, but he didn't have any sense of explanation for it.

Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

So that's the introduction. That sets the stage for what now happens to these three people or groups of people who are struggling with powerful and destructive emotions.

A. Mary Magdalene – From Fear to Joy (verses 11-18)

The first cameo involves Mary Magdalene. Notice how she moves from grief to purpose.

Jn 20:11: Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying.

I don't have time to tell you everything the Gospels say about Mary Magdalene, but she was a successful businesswoman from the town of Magdala whose life had nearly been destroyed by demonic possession. Jesus cast out her demons and set her free, and she became one of His most faithful supporters. Now she was crying, she was grief-stricken.

Grief is one of our hardest emotions. It may be the most devastating of all human emotions. Our hearts have been torn this week as we've seen the parents of the high school students in Korea who perished in the accident on the ferryboat. Hundreds of teenagers trapped inside that ship as it sank, as though they were descending into a tomb. Some of them sent texts. The anguish and grief is so overwhelming we have to turn away from it. We can't watch it without our own hearts breaking.

That's the way Mary and the disciples of our Lord felt when Jesus died and when He was buried. Their grief was so dark and deep it seemed impossible that life could ever again be normal or happy. But look what happened. Verse 11 goes on to say:

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put Him."

You might wonder why Mary wasn't more startled by the angels. She was too grief-stricken to think, and her eyes were too tear-filled to see. Verse 14 continues:

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

Perhaps she didn't look at Him very closely or perhaps, as I said, her eyes were blurry from crying.

Jn 20:15: He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking He was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him."

And now we have one of the most dramatic and tender moments in the entire Bible.

Jn 20:16: Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Matthew tells us she was gripping our Lord's feet. Now the next sentence has puzzled expositors for centuries. One man said it was among the most puzzling verses in the Bible.

Jn 20:17: Jesus said, "Do not hold on to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to My brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'"

I cannot tell you definitely exactly all that Jesus had in mind when He said that, but here is a suggested paraphrase. "Now let go of Me, Mary; stop clinging to Me. You and I both have work to do. I'm in the process of wrapping up My work here and ascending to the Father, and you are now officially the first missionary of the resurrection. Run and tell My disciples that I'm alive and that you have seen Me." And that's what she did. And her grief turned into resolve.

Jn 20:18: Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" and she told them that He had said these things to her.

Without Easter there is no alternative to crippling, deepening, paralyzing grief. But with the resurrection, the grief turns into purpose and mission and zeal to share the message of the resurrection with others.

When I know Jesus and you know Jesus and one of us goes to heaven first, there is understandable grief; but that grief somehow refocuses our attention on spreading the Good News of Jesus until He comes or until He takes us home. But without Easter, there is nothing but death. Without Easter—without today—there would no tomorrow—nothing but darkness. The philosopher could say, "Everything is meaningless." The troubadour could sing, "All we are is dust in the wind." Whether we lived another fifty minutes or fifty years would matter not. Shakespeare would be right: Life is an idiotic tale, signifying nothing.

B. The Disciples – From Fear to Joy (Jn 20:11-19)

Now we come to Jn 20:19, and we deal with the disciples—with ten of them. Judas is dead and Thomas is AWOL. But the others have gathered in fear and uncertainty on Sunday evening, trying to figure out what had happened.

Verse 19: On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders....

Fear is another difficult emotion. Let's go back to the images of the Korean boat. Those parents, waiting on the docks, were gripped with terrible, soul-crushing fear. I know that fear has its purposes. I know that fear can release adrenaline that can save our lives. I know that fear can give us needed caution in life. But I hate fear. I really hate fear in all its forms—whether it's terror or dread or anxiety or panic. Everyone in this room goes in and out of moments of fear. But look what happened.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

I love that Bible verse. It's John 20:20, and it gives us true 20/20 vision. The old translations say: "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord."

It is the presence of the risen Savior, who is present even here right now in this very room by His Holy Spirit, that takes our fears and exchanges them for peace and joy.

Verse 21: Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you."

That's John's version of the Great Commission.

Verse 22: And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

In other words, I'm going to send the Holy Spirit upon you on the Day of Pentecost and give you the message of forgiveness. I'm going to give you the right and the authority to tell everyone on this planet how they can find forgiveness of their sins based on what I have just done on the cross. If they receive that message, they will be forgiven; if they reject it, there is no other means by which they can have eternal life."

C. Thomas – From Doubt to Confidence (Jn 20:19-29)

Of course, Thomas wasn't there. In today's terms we would say he skipped church. He was evidently too despondent and disillusioned he didn't want to be part of the gathering, and as a result he missed Jesus. But Jesus didn't want to miss Thomas, so look what happened.

Jn 20:24: Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe."

And now we have one of the greatest declarations of the Bible and the climatic moment in the Gospel of John. Everything in the Four Gospel has been building up to this great profession:

Jn 20:28: Thomas said to Him, "My Lord and my God."

Jn 20:29: Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

And that's what we must all say: Jesus Christ is our Lord and our God, and He has proved it by rising from the dead! And by the way, Thomas went on to become the apostle of India, taking the Gospel into the Indian subcontinent in a way that planted the seeds for the evangelism that's taking place there to this day.

Conclusion – the Purpose of the Gospel (verses 30-31) Well, at this point in John 20, John stops his narrative. The story of the life of Christ is all summed up in that declaration from Thomas, and John simply follows it with his statement of purpose explaining why he wrote the Fourth Gospel.

Jn 20:30-31: Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written

that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

I want to ask you today if you have done that very thing. Receiving Christ as your Lord and your God doesn't just happen because you attend church or because you have a Christian family. It's a definite decision that you have to make.

Last year I was with my friend, Dr. Bill Jones, President of Columbia International University. I think Bill has a gift of leading people to Christ, and so I asked him how he himself became a Christian. What he told me took me by surprise. He told me he had actually led his mother to Christ before he himself was even a Christian. He was a university student at the time, at Georgia Tech. His roommates kept sharing the Gospel with him, using the famous little booklet by Campus Crusade about the Four Spiritual Laws. Bill wasn't interested. But then his mother developed a life-threatening illness and went into the hospital. When he went to visit her, she said something like: "Bill, I may die. I need to know how to go to heaven. I need to become a Christian. What do I do?" Bill said, "I don't know, but my roommates have a little booklet that will tell you." He went back to his dormitory, got one of the booklets, drove

back to the hospital, and read it to her word for word, one page at a time. It said:

Have you heard of the Four Spiritual Laws? Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern your relationship with the Lord.

1. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

- God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life – John 3:16
- I have come that they might have life, and might have it abundantly –John 10:10
- Why is it that most people are not experiencing that abundant life?

2. Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.

- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God –Romans 3:23
- The wages of sin is death (separation from God) –Romans 6:23

3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and peace for your life.

- God demonstrates His own love toward us in this, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us –Romans 5:8

4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

- For as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name –John 1:12

On the back of the booklet was a prayer, which Bill led his mother through, phrase-by-phrase: Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me into the kind of person You want me to be.

Mrs. Jones was wonderfully saved, and she lived the rest of her life for the Lord. It was another month before Bill became a Christian, led to Christ by his persistent roommates. And today he's the president of a university that has trained and sent forth thousands of people into the work of the kingdom.

I don't know what set of emotions are cycling around in your heart today. I don't know if you're agitated, aggressive, amazed, anguished, amused, angry, annoyed, anxious, appreciative, ashamed, or whatever.

But I know this. Without the risen Jesus, we cannot be truly healthy in our emotions. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only foundation for true emotional and spiritual well-being. The resurrection turns grief into resolve, fear into joy, and doubt into confidence. He can transform your emotions, your life, and your eternal destination and destiny today if you will simply say, as Thomas did, "My Lord and my God!"

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John 21

Do you remember the old story about the old obsessive-compulsive music professor who had a rebellious son? Sometimes just for meanness, the boy would come in late at night, walk over the piano in the drawing room, and slowly play the notes of the scale – do, re, mi, fa, so – but the boy would omit the last note, the final note of the octave. He would go on to bed, but invariably his old father could not possibly go back to sleep without getting up, descending the steps, and striking that final "C" to resolve the scale.

Well, I'm that professor. I began preaching through the Gospel of John last August on the first Sunday of the month. Between August and December we covered the first half of the Fourth Gospel, which tells the story of three years in our Lord's life. Then in January, we began another series that covered the last half of the Gospel of John and focused on the last evening of our Lord's life.

Now, looking back at our nine months of study in John, I want to give you a simple outline for the book that may help you when you study this book in the future. Think of the Gospel of John as having a prologue, two main sections, and an epilogue.

- John begins with a wonderful prologue that covers the first eighteen verses of the book—John 1:1-18: In the beginning was the Word... and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh.

- Then first half of the Gospel of John begins with Jesus being baptized and anointed by the Holy Spirit in the region of Bethany beyond the Jordan; and it ends with a resurrection—the resurrection of Lazarus. This section covers about three years and goes from chapter 1 to chapter 11.
- The second half of John begins in chapter 12 with Jesus being anointed by Mary in Bethany of Judea, and it ends with a resurrection—the resurrection of Jesus in John 20. This section covers about one week.
- Now, there is an epilogue—and that's the final note of our scale. Preaching and teaching through the Gospel of John has been a dream of my life, and we've taken nine months to do it. We finished our series on Easter, but we still have one chapter to go.

So today I want to give a final message from John's Gospel and look at that epilogue in John 21 as I begin a new series of messages entitled: "Things I've Been Thinking About." For the next several weeks I want to explore several topics related to our culture and world. We'll look at various passages of Scripture, but today I want to use John 21 to launch this new series as we deal with the topic: "Recovery: Moving On After Messing Up."

How does anyone mess up worse than Simon Peter? So impetuous! So flawed! So prone to relapse! So subject to failure! Do you know anyone like that? Well, of course, I know someone just like that—it's me, and you. Somehow we're all a little like Peter in his undesirable traits, and that's why we love him so much. We identify with him.

The very worst moment of his life was when he lost his nerve during the arrest and trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Three times he denied knowing our Lord. Three times he lied to save his own skin, and he fled from Jesus at the Lord's point of greatest need. But he recovered. He moved on after messing up. Today I want to show you how he did it, because the lessons are transferable to us.

1. Have a Secret Meeting with Jesus (Mark 16 and 1 Corinthians 15)

First, have a secret meeting with Jesus. I want to show you two verses about this before we get into John 21.

- The first is Mark 16:7. This is what the angel said to the women who came to the tomb on Easter Sunday: Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.' Notice that phrase: "Tell His disciples and Peter." Peter's catastrophic failure had blown him out of the orbit of discipleship. He no longer felt worthy of the Twelve. Have you ever felt excluded? You have ever messed up so badly you didn't feel you were part of the human race? Or part of a family? Or part of a church? You just simply dropped out. That's how Peter felt.

- But now we have a curious little verse in 1 Corinthians 15. This is the resurrection chapter of the Bible, in which the apostle Paul talks about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus as a historical event and about the coming resurrection of all believers. Beginning with 1 Corinthians 15:4, we read: He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and... He appeared to Cephas (Peter), and then to the Twelve.

There is nothing in the four Gospels about this secret meeting between the risen Christ and Peter, which evidently occurred sometime on Easter Sunday before Jesus appeared to the other disciples. Somehow, evidently sometime on Easter Sunday, when Peter was so confused and so ashamed, Jesus met with him. Maybe in heaven we can ask Peter what was said. It was too personal and too private to record. Not even the Holy Spirit wanted to disclose the content of that meeting, because it is unrecorded in Scripture. But we would assume Peter there confessed his failure and Jesus reassured Peter of cleansing and grace and forgiveness. I believe that is a real thing. I believe that is biblical.

That's how to move on after messing up. Lot's of people have done this. I recently read the story of Godwin H. Barton, a Native American living in Canada who shared his story in one of the famous Chicken Soup books. Some years ago, he and his girlfriend Phyllis went out to a local Greek restaurant and then dancing and night clubbing. They were in a very loud and semi-dark place with all the strobe lights and excitement, and he was having one drink after another. Looking over at Phyllis, he said, "Hey, baby! Do you might if I get drunk tonight?" She said, "Sure! Why not?" She couldn't stop him anyway. He drank so much and got so wasted that he got disgusted with himself and a look of true heaviness came over his face. Phyllis looked at him and asked, "Are you all right?" He began to cry and he let her take him home. He awoke the next morning sad, sick, sorry, and extremely hung over, and Phyllis said to him, "You're not going to like yourself very much when you see what you've done."

Barton made his way to the living room and saw the destruction he had caused. "I did this?" he asked. Phyllis said, "Don't you remember?" "No. Why? Why did I do this?"

"We had just left (the club)," said Phyllis. "You were quite drunk and I wanted to get you home. You stopped in the parking lot across the way. I looked at you. Your eyes and your face were as if you had become a different person. I asked if you were okay. You said yes."

But then Barton started shouting one question over and over: "Why?" He seemed very upset with himself. He clenched his fists. When they got home he kicked in the door, still shouting, "Why?" He began smashing everything, punching the walls and kicking holes in them. He flipped over the couches and armchair as though they were paperweights. He smashed the coffee table. He was crying and asking, "Why?"

And then, as Phyllis watched, Barton went to the doorway to the kitchen. He didn't go in, he just stood in the doorway and started talking to someone. She watched him from an angle behind him as he was engaged in an earnest conversation, motioning with his hands.

Phyllis was telling him all this, but Barton didn't remember any of it. She asked if he remember who he thought he was talking to or what he was talking about, but he didn't.

Well, she said, "Whatever you two talked about, it must have been something good. Afterward you changed completely. You turned back to me with an incredible look of peace in your eyes and on your face. You walked toward me, and of all the damage you had done, the only thing that you picked up was the calendar with the picture of Jesus on it. You pinned it back onto the wall, then said, "Let's go to bed sweetheart, I'm tired."

From that day, Godwin Barton was a changed man. He's been a sober man. He's been a man with a message of Jesus and of grace. He said that he now sometimes thinks about all the places from which he came worlds of seemingly unrecoverable loss and immense pain, but a hand of grace reached him in the darkness. He has moved on after messing up so many times and, he said, no longer lives in a world dominated by drugs, alcohol, rage, and pain.

The funny thing is Godwin Barton doesn't even remember exactly what happened to him on that night so long ago. But somehow Jesus met him and put his life back on course.¹

Now, I don't want to leave the impression that we should have some sort of esoteric, mystical, magical moment with the Lord. I'm not into out-of-body experiences. But I do believe that in a biblical and real way, we need to meet with the Lord in a serious conversation that involves confession and forgiveness, and that realigns the direction of our lives.

That's the first step to moving on after messing up. We need a secret, sacred meeting with our Lord, in which we earnestly confront our own failure, confess our own sins, and find reassurance of His forgiveness and mercy and grace. The same kind of secret, sacred meeting that occurred between Peter and Jesus is available to you and me—and it's just as necessary for us and it was for Peter.

2. Recall God's Past Mercies to You (John 21:1-14)

Second, recall God's past mercies to you. And that brings us to this final chapter of John's Gospel. I want to simply read you verses 1 through 14, and I want you to think about how Jesus orchestrated the atmospherics and recollections of the prior three years in this one event:

Afterward Jesus appeared again to His disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did so, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

"Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many fish the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.

These verses are so evocative. Jesus arranged the details of the scene to evoke so many prior and precious moments and memories in Peter's heart. In these verses are flashbacks to many earlier Gospel stories.

- The original calling of the first disciples by the Sea of Galilee
- The miraculous catch of fish
- The feeding of 5000 with bread and fish
- The breaking of the bread during the Last Supper
- The early morning resurrection of Christ

There are hints and traces of all these stories woven into the scene here in John 21. Sometimes when we want to start a new chapter or make a renewed dedication of ourselves to the Lord or get a new start—it helps to revisit those past decisions that are so precious to us. Sometimes we can physically visit a spot of dedication. I have several places that are sacred to me. I can go back there and instantly recall the decisions I made and the grace I found. It might be your old church, or your mother's grave, or the river where you were baptized, or the campground where you were saved. Even if we can't physically revisit the place, we can go there in our minds and hearts. The Bible refers to this as having places called Ebenezer. In 1 Samuel 7:12, when Samuel and the Israelites wanted to make a fresh start, they took a stone and set it up at a particular place and called it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us." It was a mile marker in their spiritual progress. We need mile markers in our spiritual autobiographies, and sometimes we need to go back and revisit them.

Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

3. Rededicate Yourself to Love Jesus (John 21:15-17)

Third, we have to rededicate ourselves to love Jesus. Look at verse 15:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?"

We don't know what Jesus meant by the word "these." I think Jesus gestured to the fish and boats. Peter had reverted back to his old profession, and Jesus said, "Do you love me more than your old life as a fisherman?" But it could have been anything. The Bible purposefully does not tell us what the "these" are because it's a question addressed to all of us. Do we love Jesus more than anything else?

"Yes, Lord," he said, "You know that I love You." "Feed my lambs."

"Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Take care of My sheep."

The third time He said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love Me?" He said, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Three times Peter had denied our Lord; and three times he reaffirmed his love for Jesus. The entirety of our Christian experience is summed up in our love for Him. Do you love Jesus more than the habits and relationships that have crowded into your life? Do you love Him more than the feelings and attitudes that have taken over your heart? Are you willing to leave everything behind and follow Him?

4. Redeploy in the Service of Jesus (John 21:18-19)

And that leads to the last step. We have to redeploy in His service. God is never finished with the repentant soul. We may mess up, but His grace can always restore us to usefulness. The Lord is not finished with you yet. But when we redeploy in His service, it costs our lives. Look at verse 18:

Verse 18: Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then He said, "Follow Me."

5. Don't Worry About the Other Guy – Just Follow Jesus (John 21:20-25)

The next step is seen in verse 20: Don't worry about the other guy. Just follow Jesus. Look at verse 20:

Verse 20: Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back

against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray You?”) When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

Peter was looking back at John. This verse really shows us how jealous and envious and competitive we are. Peter and James and John had suffered a great deal of strife over which of them was the leader of the apostolic band. I don't have time to trace this argument, but Peter and John had both been very petty and defensive and ambitious. They both wanted to be first. And here, even after the resurrection, even in the mist of this beatific moment, even as the sun rose over the Golan Heights and shimmered in the soft swells and waves of Lake Galilee, even here as Peter spoke to His risen Lord in the morning sunrise—even here he was looking over his shoulder and saying, “But Lord, what about John?”

I have news for you. You are not like anyone, and God doesn't intend you to be like anyone. No two stars are alike; no two snowflakes; no two sparrows; no two souls. The Lord has an infinite quantity of molds, and no one else is fashioned as you are, in your personality, in your body, in your giftedness, in your life experiences, and in the purposes and plans He has for you. The Bible says we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we should rejoice in our God-given individuality and in the individual plans God has for us.

- The apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10, “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”
- He said in Galatians 6, “Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load.”

Well, when Peter looked at John and said, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus spoke the last of His words recorded in the Gospel.

Verse 22: Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow Me.”

Now, interestingly, the Gospel of John comes to an end with an explanatory comment. As far as we can tell from history, the writer of this Gospel—St. John the Apostle—was the last surviving member of the Twelve Disciples and he lived to an advanced old age. Some people began saying, “Well, Jesus is going to come again in John's lifetime.” So we have this final word in the Gospel of John.

Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Now we know that Peter got himself back on track, because when we turn the page we're suddenly in the book of Acts, and Peter is there, in Jerusalem, leading the group in prayer and praise and planning as they await the day of Pentecost. And as we know he went on to become one of the greatest heroes of missionary history as he took the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Almost all our greatest heroes in the Bible messed up at some point in their lives. Moses killed a man, David committed adultery, Jonah ran away in rebellion, Elijah had a nervous breakdown, and so forth. But those failures never disqualify us from loving our Lord or from serving the Lord in whatever capacity He ordains for us. Sometimes in the grace and providence of God, our past faults and failures may enable us to serve Him in new ways to reach people at a point of need that parallels our own history. But it's important to follow the steps of John 21 just as biblically as we can.

- Meet with Jesus privately in a special and sacred and secret way.
- Recall His past mercies.
- Rededicate yourself to love Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.
- Redeploy in His service.
- And in the process don't look over your shoulder at the other guy. If Jesus wants that fellow to be the greatest in the world or to tread on the heights or to stay on this earth until the Second Coming, what is that to you? You just follow Jesus. He's not finished with you yet. He is just beginning.

(Endnotes)

1“Touched by a Higher Power” by Godwin H. Barton in *Chicken Soup for the Recovering Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2004), 12-15.