



SOUL CHALLENGE

JERRY D. OUSLEY

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BY

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THANK YOU!

I want to use this page to say “thanks” to some very special people who actually helped me write this book. Most of you don’t even know it, but you did!

First, I wish to thank my immediate family, Debbie Ousley, who went to be with Jesus June 30, 2016 after a year’s battle with cancer. The disease beat her body but her soul kicked the cancer’s butt. My children, Jeremy and Megan, brought a lot of joy to my life and gave me a lot to write about. Thank you, children.

My mother, Ruthene Ousley, who also went to be with our Lord in 2017, and my father, Maryland (Mickey) Ousley, my sister and brothers, all my uncles, cousins, aunts and on and on. You guys inspired many a story, let me tell you.

I also want to thank some dear friends, Preston and Jan Shera. You folks have been more of an inspiration to me than you’ll ever know. I appreciate your faith and humor, Preston, and, Jan, your meticulous proof-reading has helped more than you’ll ever know. Thank you.

Finally, I’d like to dedicate this book to Pairlee Colwell (Grandma). This prayer warrior of God inspired me, prayed for me, and helped in ways I don’t even know and probably won’t until I get to talk to her again in Heaven. She left this world in 2000, just barely living to see the turn of the century at age 97. Sometimes I stop when no one’s around and visit her grave, and talk with her awhile. I miss her but I’ll never be lost from her because I know right where she is ...

Forward

This book is the result of a series of sermons from the Gospel of John. It isn't intended to be an intensive verse by verse commentary but rather thoughts that the Lord spoke to my heart as I studied the Gospel. The book covers some sensitive topics and thought-provoking and heart-searching subjects.

Because we are all imperfect and human, I found that many of these chapters required my own repentance as the manuscript progressed. Thank God that He is so merciful! It was an educational experience for me, but it was also a time of change and "moving up" in my own Christian experience.

I hope that you will share my experience as you read through the chapters. Every believer has embarked in a growth journey of progression. It is an exciting journey. It is a challenge and, in many ways, difficult but the final reward makes any hardship more than worth it.

Read this with prayer. Please compare the scripture for yourself. It is important that God speaks to your heart regarding these topics. I know from experience that God will change your life because His word does that. It is He who issues the "*Soul Challenge*."

Jerry D. Ousley

Introduction

Like a whisper, a serpent slithered across the dusty road to the other side. It slid up onto a rock where the blistering sun warmed its cold-blooded body. In the distance thirteen men lifted swirls of dust behind them as they moved down the road, deep in discussion. Jesus had begun the mission assigned Him by His true Father, God Himself. It began with these twelve men that He had personally chosen.

Jesus did not have forms of mass communication or means of rapid transportation, yet in three short years He brought the great teachings given Him by His Father to the nation of Israel. His teaching was not popular nor endorsed by the religious leaders in the country, yet the people were enticed and captivated by what He had to say. He brought a fresh yet thought-provoking interpretation of what God said through the prophets and writers of old.

He loved people. Often it was said, “He had compassion on them ... “and by the power of God working through Him He healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons and worked mighty miracles further displaying God’s awesome power. It was a fresh and new anointing for up until now, God had been silent for a period of about four hundred years.

Yet, when His teaching became deeper and even more challenging, He was left with only these twelve men and one of them was contemplating his betrayal. Still, from that humble beginning the Gospel was introduced. The Church was birthed. He proved Himself to be Whom He claimed to be when He rose from the dead after three days.

Today, in many ways people are still in need of challenge. By and large, the great Church that came into being after Christ’s resurrection and ascension has digressed into a form not unlike that of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. In the time we now live, I believe that Christ continues to bring His thought-provoking Gospel.

It is very likely that we are living in the last days before the second coming of Jesus Christ. If this is true, then we need to be renewed in His great and wonderful truths. It makes us feel uncomfortable. It may make us angry. But as we look at our lives as compared to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, an honest heart search will reveal that we are not in the spiritual place we are supposed to be. We need to re-examine ourselves and move our spiritual relationship with God into alignment with what Jesus Christ preached, taught, and displayed.

It is our prayer that this book will challenge and help you to see where you need to be in your own life. As we come into the place Jesus wants us to be in our individual lives, we will sense the refreshed anointing filling our very souls. We will be closer to our Master than ever before.

Let's walk those dusty roads with Jesus as we move through the Gospel of John and allow Him to mold us into who He wants us to be. Jesus is not "into" masses but He is "into" individuals and He wants you for His service. Come with me and let's see what He has to say.

If you are bold enough and if you have the courage to allow your own values and life to be criticized and possibly exposed as falling short, then let's take "The Soul Challenge" together now ...

CHAPTER 1

The Challenge of the Word

John 1:1-14

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

(John 1:1)

*H*e stepped from the car and for the first time in five weeks saw his two-year-old son. His heart had ached for just a glimpse of his son and his wife. Fantasizing about this moment and imagining how his son would jump into his arms, smothering him with huge, wet, juicy kisses, would be a great moment and one he knew he would never forget.

Instead, when the young boy saw his dad, he just stood there looking as if to ask, "Who is this strange man?" It was far from what this eager father had hoped for and he couldn't help but feel disappointed in his son's reaction.

On the other hand, the circumstances were understandable. When he and his wife were first married his kinky locks were long and tightly curled. This was in the late 70's when long hair on men was "the in thing," he fit the era like a tourist in Disney Land. By the time their son was born, his kinky hair had evolved into an Afro accompanied by a mustache and full beard. That's how the boy remembered his father when he left for basic training.

Seeing Dad for the first time in five weeks with no hair on his face and the pile of curls on top of his head being replaced with near baldness was probably a little like seeing a shaved cat after a bath. So, his reaction should have been of no surprise. Still, it was a dream buster.

But then the man spoke, "Son, it's me, Dad."

The young boy looked puzzled. This strange man's voice sounded very familiar.

"Don't you remember me?"

It didn't look like him, but it sure sounded like him.

“Awe, come on, ‘Son Shine!’”

That did it! Only Dad had ever called him that. With his arms out-stretched he melted into the arms of his father. He may not have recognized him, but his voice was all the identity the boy needed and the father’s imagined reunion became reality.

Jesus must have felt alone and out of place in this world. Yes, He had been birthed and had grown up just like any other Jewish boy, but back in the recesses of His mind were the memories of where He had originated. The first few verses tell us that nothing was created without Him, that He was there with God Almighty and was, in fact, God in flesh!

And now, He was here - but no one really knew who He was. The Old Testament was full of prophecies that referred to His arrival on this Earth but it seemed that everyone had formed their own opinion of just how He would come, what He would look like, and how He would be received. While the Jewish world strained their necks looking for a grand, rich, and powerful king to emerge as their long-awaited Messiah, He was walking the streets, already with them. But because of their preconceived imaginations of who He would be, they could not see Him.

As we move through this challenging gospel, we will continue to see that, even when He told them who He was, they wouldn’t believe Him. It was as if blinders had been placed over their eyes. He would work a miraculous healing and instead of witnessing the power behind the great wonder the Jewish leaders would accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath or worse, working by the power of His own arch enemy, the devil.

By the end of His short ministry of only three years, a handful of followers really believed Him to be the Messiah, and some of those secretly because of their fear of public exposure and renunciation by the Jewish leaders. Most aspiring men and women of today would feel wasted, used up and like total and complete failures if faced with the same rejection.

Does the Church of today established in the name of this man, Jesus, really know who He is? Are we any different than the Pharisees and Sadducees of yesterday? Certainly, we confess allegiance to Him and we sing praises to Him on Sunday morning, but do we really know Him?

KNOW HIM AS THE WORD

To actually be a part of the Church we must believe in the Word. In the story at the beginning of this chapter the son could not trust what he could not see with his eyes. He didn’t believe this strange looking man to be his daddy because it didn’t look like him. It took hearing his voice to convince the boy the truth. We must hear the voice of the Word through our spirit.

In the first few verses of John 1, we read that God's word had life. It was with God from the beginning and it was utilized to create all that God made. Then in verse 14, the Bible tells us that this word became flesh and lived with men. This is, of course, referring to Jesus Christ.

A strange but wonderful sequence of events took place in the coming of Christ. He has always been the bodily form of the triune God. Now it was time for Him to make a profound appearance to men. God had dealt with man for several thousand years, slowly showing him how he could never hope to be like God or even good enough to be close to God as he had been. Man was unworthy. Because he had caused the sin brought into this world, he couldn't help but sin. He would try and try to be holy, to be worthy, of this perfect God but could never come close. Regardless his efforts, there would always come a time when he'd lose his temper and seem out of control in his rage. During that time, he would commit destructive acts to others, property or himself, and then afterwards, realize he had blown it with God. Our emotions and feelings always get in the way. But we can't help it. We were made with emotions and feelings, it's just that they are more controlling of us since that day Adam and Eve turned against God in Eden.

It was time to pay the penalty for man's sin. Man would now be able to grasp what God was going to do for him, even if only a few understood at first. So, God, through His angel, Gabriel, appeared and spoke life into a teenage girl who was soon to be married. He told her that she was to be the one to give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. He told her that she would be with child without ever having sexual relations with a man, and His word came alive. Does it sound so wild? Must it be only a fairy tale?

It's not so strange, if we really contemplate it. Man's own living existence began with God's word and breath. In Genesis we read that after God formed man's body from the dust of the Earth, He breathed His breath into man and man became a living soul. Why must we think it so strange that God could speak and a woman would instantly be with child?

People would like for us to think that it is a fabricated story to influence the weak minds of the masses, but that's only because we can't do that. In man's fallen state he still wants to be greater than God so if we can't do something then we believe that it is impossible, improbable, and only a tale thought up in the recesses of an idle mind. But whether we choose to believe the truth or not, it does not detract from the truth. Just because we don't believe in something doesn't make it unreal. We want to be right so if we aren't then we make ourselves right by teaching and believing lies. It happens every day in this world.

Jesus Christ came into this world by the word of God and so He was the Word. He was the living, talking, breathing, Word of God in flesh. He echoed this throughout the Gospel of John by saying things like, "I'm only saying what my Father told me to say," and "I'm only acting on what I've seen my Father do." Even though He was "God in the flesh" His words indicated that He was merely mimicking what God had instructed and what He had seen from His Father.

We must believe in Jesus as the Word. If He is not the Word that tells us the Good News then His life was in vain. If His life does not speak of truth, freedom from sin and death, and salvation from a doomed existence, then all is for naught.

This belief must be imbedded deep inside of us. If we don't believe then how can we ever hope to hear Him? We will doubt from time to time frankly because the enemy – The devil will whisper words of doubt in your ear. When things go wrong, he will grab every opportunity to sway you away from your belief. During these times always turn to what you know in your heart.

There will be times you don't feel it inside. Our feelings can cause doubt. But know that we cannot always trust our feelings. God has placed our emotions in our lives but we must never forget that they are affected by our flesh and how the flesh perceives things that go on around us. Sometimes the emotions go wild. They can't always be trusted because they are being affected by the sin-state of man in this world. But you can always trust what God has taught you in your heart. When times of doubt occur, we must learn to turn to what we know in our hearts. No one can ever take that away from us. It is there like a love note carved on a stone.

RECOGNIZE HIS VOICE

When we know that He is the Word – the final truth in any circumstances, then we can learn to hear His voice. This takes practice and time spent with Him. Otherwise, we might not recognize it. How do we hear His voice? For the believer it is rarely an audible thing. Most of us live our entire Christian experience without ever hearing an audible voice. It is not impossible, but God wants us to learn to hear with our heart, again because our natural hearing is a physical thing and we can't always trust it.

I don't always hear correctly because of a number of reasons. Sometimes my mind is preoccupied and without giving my undivided attention I don't always hear what I am being told. Oh, I heard the sound of the other person's voice. But what they said did the proverbial ear trick, went in one ear and out the other. I heard the sound but I didn't let it store in my brain cells so even though I heard a sound, I didn't get the information. Sometimes I hear things incorrectly. I haven't quite understood what the other person was saying and because it can be embarrassing, instead of asking them to repeat themselves I carelessly take what I thought I heard as the truth. That's dangerous because I have recorded wrong information. It can also get you into a lot of trouble with other people who thought you understood what time you were supposed to meet or what day a special occasion was on.

Probably the most dangerous way of hearing is an erroneous interpretation of what has been said. When we hear offensively or we are trying to "read between the words" we can become offended, angry, or hurt when the other person never for a moment meant it the way we took it. It causes us to react in defensive ways that can hurt others and ourselves. It can destroy friendships all over nothing.

The devil wants us to hear wrong. He wants us to have conflict with other people, for during conflict we can't really concentrate on our relationship with the Lord. We must guard against that, and I am learning that correct physical hearing is important in maintaining relationships with other people.

For these reasons God chooses mostly to speak to our hearts. When we have established our hearts with God then it becomes the main source of hearing from Him. He will speak inside of us. But we must remember that the devil is constantly whispering in our ear and if we aren't in tune with the Word inside of us then we can get those voices confused.

Jesus said that His sheep hear his voice and know that it is Him. When we are identified as "His" and we have gotten to know Him, we will soon realize it is Him just by the sound of His voice. Sheep are that way. Most animals are. When they have been around an individual long enough, they recognize them simply by their voice.

We had a dog at one time, a little dachshund named Casey. We had gotten him for our son, as a puppy, only five weeks old. He was a part of our family for nearly fifteen years. Towards the end of his life his eyesight wasn't what it had been. Casey was on his leash out in the front yard and I came around the house toward him. He started "cutting a rusty." You need to know that Casey was fine with strangers when he was indoors, but he was very hostile toward them when he was outdoors. As I approached him, all he saw of was a form coming at him, and he prepared to fight. I wondered why he was acting so rough with me and I yelled out his name, "Casey!" Instantly he recognized my voice and bowed his head low, wagging his tail. He couldn't tell it was me by sight, but he knew my voice.

We must learn to recognize the voice of the Word like that. We can't always see but we can hear. When we know we are hearing Him, then that is sufficient.

BE OBEDIENT TO WHAT HE IS SAYING TO US

It is one thing to know that Jesus is the Word and recognize His voice, but it is another to be obedient to it. Jesus told a story about two sons who were asked to go to their father's vineyard to work (see Matthew 21:27-31). The first son flatly refused, bordering disrespect for his father, whereas the second son immediately agreed to do the job. Yet, when it came right down to it, the first son repented of his words to his father and went to the vineyard to do the job. The second son, who had accepted the challenge, never showed up. Jesus asked the question, "Which of the two did what his father had asked?" The obvious answer was the first son.

Many hear the word of God. It is spoken on the airwaves of great radio and television stations. It is bouncing all over the internet. Thousands upon thousands of books have been written about His word. In our great country, though there may yet be some who haven't, most have heard the word of God from a church service or by one of

these other means at some point in their life. The word is being preached and proclaimed and many are hearing with their ear.

Some are even hearing with a spiritual ear. They take the word to heart and have believed it. Yet, they do nothing about it. A word spoken but not acted upon might as well hadn't been said in the first place.

You can own a library of thousands of volumes but if they are never opened then they are just wasting space. I have some books in my meager library that I have owned for years, yet I have never read them. Are they doing me any good? Have I gleaned from their pages the truths that they are waiting to teach me? Have I experienced the story of the great novel that waits to be unfolded? I have not. Until I take that particular book off the shelf, open it up and begin to let my mind take in the information found there I will never know it, never experience it, and never have the privilege of occupying my mind with the wonderful story to be found there.

And what if I do get the book down, read it, understand the teaching, but then never apply it to my life? If I know all the knowledge that is to be found there, perhaps something that will change my life, and have done nothing with it, then I might as well not have read it to begin with. What if it were about how to balance my budget? It told me exactly what I needed to do to straighten out all my finances and get completely out of debt. It perhaps outlined a way that I could be debt free and financially secure in say, five years. It sounds great and I see the plan and know what to do, but never act on that. Will my budget ever get balanced? Will I ever crawl out from under the mountain of debt? I think not. Why? Because I wasn't obedient to its teaching.

The same holds true with Jesus, our living Word. He has plainly told us what to do. He has given us prescribed ways for our hearts to be free. Yet we continue, even after salvation, to go on living the way the world tells us we must live. We never seem to be happy. We are always under the thumb of depression. How many Christians today live like being accepted by God requires us to be plunged in despair all the time? I know there are trials and hardships. That's part of it and our Lord plainly told us that these things would be. But He also taught us how to have joy, happiness and security even in the midst of these things.

If we don't apply the Word to our lives, if we live one way in church and with our Christian friends, knowing the right words to say, all the catch phrases and so forth, yet we live like we have not been redeemed by the blood of Christ away from this setting, then what have we accomplished in our lives? The challenge of the Word requires action. It must be lived out. It must become a part of our everyday life if we are ever to be free from this world. We can be free from this world even while we occupy it. But this freedom only comes in recognizing the word and applying it to our lives. We must be obedient to what our Lord is saying, living, and showing us every day if we'll only take the time to see it.

THE WORD IS LIGHT AND LIFE

I know a man who is a pleasure to be around. He has a charisma about him that draws people. He makes people laugh and he is not always just talking about himself. He displays a genuine desire to meet the needs of those in his presence. When you are with him you get a distinct feeling of safety and security. He is full of life and it spills over on whoever he is around.

This man is but a small example of what Jesus wants to do for us in His role as "The Word." John 1:4 tells us that "In Him was life . . ." We must first realize what this life is. We know that without Christ we are the walking dead. We breath, we move, we speak, we work, and we play. But there is no real life. People have been without life so long they don't even know that they are dead. Their spiritual deadness has become the only life they know and so they reason that this must be life. Anything that can't be explained in relation to the only known life must not be truth. Facts have been defined as only being realized through our spiritual senses. But how can we trust our senses if we are really dead? We have started a religion of factualism that is based on our spiritual death.

The truth of the matter is that the real facts lie in the spiritual. Do I sound like a crazy man? Perhaps. But only because we are thinking from what we have been taught while in spiritual death.

We can only realize the truth when we can see it and we can't see without light. Now, we can't really see truth with our natural eye. Truth is an abstract. We can see the results of truth. We can see how it affects the outcome. But we cannot physically see the meat of truth, not with our natural eye. But with the spiritual eye we can see truth. Just as light is required for our physical eye to work, so light is required for our spiritual eye to work. However, the light is not from the sun or a manmade source, but only from the Son of God.

Let's put this all together now. He is real, abundant life. When we are around Him, even in merely a spiritual sense, (for in this physical life very few are around Him physically) we feel His security, safety and life. He is full of life. The life that our souls long for can only be found in Him. His life becomes the light that our souls require to see the truth, and that is what we need in order to be set free. His life inside us becomes light to our souls illuminating the spiritual truth that we require and need.

However, the world cannot comprehend this truth. It never will because it is cursed and doomed to destruction. Our manmade systems and devices will perish and fail. Because we have been trained to perceive by our physically-dead state, when the light of the truth of God shines upon this dark world it can't understand it; it can't perceive it; it is not understood and so it is shunned, feared, and hated. The world only wants it to go away. That's why the word is suppressed in the world. That's why it is mocked and made fun of and that's why those who come into the light of the word are hated, persecuted and killed. It's not understood, nor will it ever be until Christ sets up His literal kingdom.

The challenge of the word is this: To come to know the Word, recognizing His voice, being obedient to that voice, and letting Him become life in us that brings light. As we reflect that light others will come. Many won't, but some will. Can we get the word inside of us? Can we do these things? In the natural the answer is "no." But because of His grace and salvation we can do it. We must do it. Will you do it?

CHAPTER 2

The Challenge of the Wilderness

John 1:19-29

*“He said: ‘I am
‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’
As the prophet Isaiah said.”*

(John 1:23)

*A*gentle but welcomed breeze lightly kissed the face of the man at the river.

He wiped the sweat from his brow looking up and taking the time to offer thanks to his wonderful Jehovah-God, for the wind.

For several days now he had been baptizing converts here at Jordan's edge. Many had come to hear the plainly spoken words God had placed in his heart. But some came just out of curiosity. What would drive the son of a priest to the life he now lived? He could have been dressed in clean, bright clothing right now instead of shaking mud off his feet from another trip into the river. He could be enjoying fresh steak instead of living on a diet of locust and wild honey.

Some time back God had driven him into the wilderness. He wasn't sure why but he could not be satisfied until he had gone. Here God had talked to him. God had shown him his purpose in life, which, even though poverty stricken by most standards, gave him something that most did not have.

Dressed in a crude garment he had fashioned from camel's hair, his own long locks matted and wet from trips in and out of the river, he looked the part of a wild man from the wilderness. He had raised a lot of eyebrows over the last few days by his appearance, his words, and his actions. He had told people that they must "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." He had even told a group of underpaid, dissatisfied temple soldiers who had come to him that they should be content with their wages.

As he gazed down the road leading to the river, he saw several more men coming toward him. But these were not in the same class as those whom he had been baptizing. These men were finely dressed. They were Pharisees and he had been expecting them. He knew that eventually what he was doing would draw their attention and they would want to know just what was going on.

“Who are you?” were the first words from their mouths. But they had asked in such a way that emphasized, “Are you the Christ, the Messiah?” Many had come forward in recent years claiming to be this Messiah – The Chosen One of God who would become the Savior of Israel. Most of those had been executed for treason or at least committed to long prison terms. He knew they would be coming and he was ready for them.

“I am not the Christ,” he said, “but merely one crying in the wilderness, make plain and straight the way of the Lord.” He further said of the Messiah, “He is coming after me and I am not even worthy to loosen His shoe.”

He was John the Baptist. The Book of Luke tells us that his mother, Elisabeth, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were cousins. John, the son of the priest, Zacharias, had been a miracle baby, born to his parents by Divine intent in their old age. God had plans for him and great honor in being the forerunner, the enunciator, of Messiah Himself!

It was a few days later that he was once again baptizing converts when he saw a new figure coming in the distance. The Bible doesn't tell us how much contact these second cousins had during their childhood. It doesn't even hint that they had seen each other after Mary had left when John was born. But whether he was just seeing Jesus for the first time or whether a new revelation had been given him by God regarding his cousin, he felt an overwhelming desire to make yet another announcement. This was the hour he had been born for. This was the time he would fulfill the purpose of his entire life.

John gazed at Jesus as He came toward him, and plainly said for all to hear, “Look, it's Him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” What a profound statement! What better news could ever grace the human ear? John was saying that this was the Christ. This was the Messiah. Every Jewish child had heard stories of this day for centuries, and in that one simple moment, His arrival had been officially announced.

It wasn't done as it might have been for a great and powerful king. He had not been greeted with a red carpet and royal trumpeters. Only by one human instrument, but what profound music he played, for John announced Him in a single sentence as being the sacrificial lamb that would finally rid mankind of the plague of sin that had cursed this race since the time of Adam and Eve.

STILL FRESH

Today, that announcement is as fresh and priceless as it was the very first time. The wilderness voice still cries out. To a lost and dying world the Good News rings forth loud and clear.

It still comes from the wilderness. Oh, it is being proclaimed in various settings all over the world; in cities, towns, villages, and country sides. But the wilderness always remains in the endless ocean of humanity. Although nearly 2000 years have passed, still a large portion of the Earth's population has not heard. When they do, and I mean hear

so as to understand just who Jesus is, it is always like a cool, cold drink in a dry, parched desert.

The voice has only changed in that it comes from multitudes of believers in Christ instead of one man. We have become the forerunners now. Though some of us have been blessed with finer clothing and finer food, to this world, the message we bear is just as strange sounding as it was when it was uttered from the mouth of that wild looking preacher by the Jordan.

We try to dress it up. We clothe it in garments we think will be appealing to the masses but when it comes right down to it, the simple message first proclaimed by John can never be replaced.

There is nothing wrong with using every tool we can to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself was the master at presenting His message in ways that the average person would understand. How can we be converted unless we hear? We don't really hear unless we know clearly what is being told to us. And so, we should use every means morally possible to spread the gospel.

KEEPING THE MESSAGE RIGHT

But can we go too far? Today we have congregations advertising instant services, - "quickies" to get people in and out of service fast. This is designed to allow people to attend church without obligation and without inconveniencing them. "After all, they've got better things to do with their time," or do they? Can we afford the shortcut?

What about the quality of our service? We have rehearsed the music, dances, and programmed it all with just the right sequence and timing but have we left room for God to speak to hearts? Have we allowed our service to be flexible enough so that a soul who wants to be saved can be properly introduced to the "King of kings?"

In Acts 10 Peter had been called to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, to speak to them. An angel had appeared to Cornelius and told him to send men to bring Peter to them. As Peter stood before his household and other guests that had been invited, he began to speak his heart. I believe that Peter had prayed about what he was going to say. I believe that Peter had in mind what he was going to tell them about. But while he was yet in mid-sentence the Holy Spirit fell on all in attendance. How rude! It was not in the words that Peter had planned to say. It was not in the fact that a great church leader had graced their presence. It was only in their complete obedience that a great movement of God was birthed amongst the Gentiles. It was because Peter knew who was really in control and he was not offended that the Master took over but was instead grateful and humbled that the Person of the message would show up and change the lives of those in the wilderness.

What would have happened if Peter had become insulted because they didn't hear his message? What if they had insisted on order of service instead of letting the Holy Spirit fall on them?

I believe we can use many tools to further the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that good quality music, whether in the form of hymns, Country-Gospel, Blue Grass Gospel, Southern Gospel, traditional music, or contemporary music, will reach people where they are. I believe we can worship God in dance. I believe we can use the arts to reach people for Christ. But when the form is more important than the work of the Holy Spirit then we are in grave danger of being "Pharisees."

TODAY'S WILDERNESS VOICE

We are a voice crying in the wilderness, "Get prepared for the way of the Lord!" We can cry out in many ways, but let us cry out. The *challenge of the wilderness* is issued to every believer. It is not just the job of ministers, Sunday School teachers, and others who have dedicated their lives to service for the Master. It is the job of every born-again believer in Christ. We are all ambassadors of Him.

We still announce the coming of the Messiah, not just in relating the history of His first one but the one to come. Our announcement is just as important as that of John the Baptist. Messiah is surely coming again and though John was severely persecuted, even to the point of giving his life for his message, the proclamation given to us to bring to the wilderness of mankind is just as critical, maybe even more so.

John had the great privilege of introducing this Messiah at the beginning. He announced the great sacrifice He was going to make to pave the road leading out of the wilderness. Since then, many other roads have tried to invade the space of the right one. They have been disguised, made more appealing with less bumps and curves. They are easier paths and many wilderness souls have headed down their appealing, broad passages. But they lead to nowhere. They stop at pain and disappointment. They dead-end leaving the soul traveler once again in the midst of the wilderness.

It is our job to direct them down the right road. It is the narrow, less appealing road that may have curves and bumps along the way. It will lead away from the exciting cities of life that bring more comfort to the weary traveler. But it does lead out of the wilderness of the perplexity of humankind. It does end at the feet of the long-awaited Messiah who is now coming to claim those who have been redeemed by His sacrifice.

The scrapes and bruises encountered along the way will seem insignificant when compared to the reward of the journey. We must take up the call of the wilderness voice. We must plant ourselves as lonely markers showing the direction of the right road. We must stand as warning signs against taking the broader, easier way. It is our job as forerunners of Christ the King.

Is the responsibility too great? Is it too difficult and impossible to do? It may seem so. No one promised that the wilderness was an easy place to live. The wilderness is cruel and harsh to those residing in it. There may be times when food and water is scarce. There will be days when it seems we can't take the brutal sun in its skies ever again. It is full of dangers and life-threatening creatures. The pay may seem meager and inadequate.

But the final reward is greater than we can ever imagine. We are His voice crying out in the wilderness. We boldly tell those trapped in the wilderness that there is a way out and it is found in Christ the Lord. He brings refreshment to the parched desert. He inspires life in the deadness that haunts men's souls. We have nothing to be ashamed of because we hold the message that turns the wilderness of man's heart into a beautiful oasis. Let us cry loud!

CHAPTER 3

The Challenge of the Light

John 1:35-51

“Again, the next day John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’”

(John 1:35)

“We’ve got to do something about those mosquitoes!” my wife exclaimed.

She was right. It was steamy hot even at night and the Southern Indiana humidity was at its peak. We didn’t run the air conditioner after bedtime so as to cut down on expenses but it wouldn’t have done any good. Our infant son’s room wouldn’t have received much of the cool air from our one and only window air conditioner anyway. So, we raised the windows to try to keep some of what little breeze there was in the house (which was really a mobile home). Even though the window had a screen on it, the mosquitoes still poured into his room and the little fellow awoke every morning with new wounds.

We decided it was time to spring for one of those “bug-zapper light things.” The light would draw the mosquitoes to it and when they touched it, ZAP! They would be toast. And so, we bought it.

In our minds it seemed reasonable to place it right next to his window so as to yield “maximum kill” of the pesky critters before they had the chance to enter his room. All night you could hear the “psszzt” sound of mosquitoes and other various species of bugs as they chose to be drawn to the light. We were sure that it was working. But the next morning our son had even more bites on his body. What went wrong? Did this thing work on every kind of bug except mosquitoes?

We consulted others whom we considered to be “back-yard experts.” One of them told us that the idea was to draw the blood-sucking creatures to the light and away from the window. In order to do this, it was best to place the contraption a distance opposite the area you wanted to protect. We had put it right under his window and even though it was doing its job, as many mosquitoes as it “fried” were also deciding to go through the screen instead of to the “bug-zapper.” When we took his advice and moved it away from the window it worked the way it was supposed to. Imagine that!

In the opening verses of the first chapter of John, we read that Jesus had life in Him. This life was so radiant that it became light to men. I guess we are not much

different than bugs. What do I mean by that? When it comes to light, we are drawn to it. Think about it.

As a young, teenage boy we went on a cave trip with our church youth class. Once inside the cave, the only light to be seen was coming from our own flashlights. Our leaders had all the boys stand still and then turn off their lights. In that brief demonstration we experienced what it must be like to be blind, because you literally could not even see your hand in front of your face. It was scary and we were glad when they told us to turn our lights back on. So, if we are in a totally dark place, we will be drawn to what light source we can find, if for no other reason than the terror of lights absence. The only thing that would not have made us glad to turn on our flashlights again would have been if we were totally blind. Unless we are blind, when in darkness, it only takes a glimmer of it to get our attention.

In military basic training we were taught that when in the field during actual night combat a campfire, flashlight, and smoking are absolutely forbidden. Why? Because in the darkness even the lit end of a cigarette can be visible for miles. It would have been a dead give-away as to one's location.

Light is very important to us. Just so, spiritual light in Jesus is even more important.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

When John saw Jesus coming down the road the second time, He once again proclaimed in the hearing of his own followers, "Look, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!" This raised curiosity in some of his disciples. Just the day before John had told them of how he had baptized Jesus and saw the witness of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove lighting upon Him.

Two of John's disciples began to follow Jesus. Jesus saw them and asked, "What are you looking for?" They responded, "Master, where do You live?" Jesus gave them the invitation that their curious hearts had desired for He told them to, "Come and see." One of these two was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother and he went first and found his own brother, telling him, "We have found the Messiah, the Christ!" Peter was a rough character but he had heard all the stories of the Messiah just like all Jewish boys had as children. He looked for Messiah's coming just as much as anyone else in Israel, so he went with Andrew.

The next day Jesus found Philip and simply told him, "Follow Me." Philip was no fool. He wasn't going to just up and start following a stranger, but there was something about Him that he couldn't quite put his finger on. He felt compelled to stop what he was doing and follow this guy. But first he had to go find his brother, Nathanael because this was worth sharing. When Philip told him that he had found Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth,

Nathanael responded by saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He’d soon find out.

And so, the ministry of the King of kings began. Later on, according to the other Gospels, Jesus would hand pick twelve men to be His disciples from the large group that had begun following Him around.

SEEING THE LIGHT

Why were these men so quick to stop what they were doing to start following Him? It was because of life radiating a light of truth that issued forth from Jesus. It couldn’t be seen with the natural eye, but it was there. It drew men to come to Him just like a 5000-watt bulb cutting through darkness draws multitudes of “night life.” In Him is found what every man, woman, boy, and girl is looking for. In Jesus is the fulfillment of what is missing in our lives.

We see light with our natural eye and as it bends, we distinguish colors. As it twists and turns in various shades and intensities, we see shapes. As these two properties work together the light reveals to us the size, shape and color of objects.

So, it is with the light of Christ. As we are drawn into His light, we begin to see the various “colors,” “shapes,” and “properties” of a life beyond what we know by our five physical senses. We begin to “see” a spiritual life that most people fantasize about. They make movies about the supernatural that, frankly, will scare the socks off of you. But they don’t realize that they haven’t even touched the surface of the unseen. We are afraid of what we don’t know.

In Christ we begin to “see” that the spiritual is more good than bad. Only in God is the truth of the supernatural revealed. We tend to look at this unseen force from the evil side, and there is an evil side to it. But the good side, the side of God, is so much stronger than the evil side ever could hope to be.

When we catch but a glimpse of this light, we are drawn to it, more out of curiosity than anything else at first. But as we begin to understand, and know how much we can trust it, then we start to swarm into it, flittering about, basking in its warmth and intensity. The longer we stay in it the less we want to leave it. The more used to it we become the more we feel saddened and estranged when we go away from it.

EXPOSED TO THE LIGHT

The light of Christ is none other than the glory of God. We mere humans can only take a miniscule portion of it. More than a glimmer could blow us into smithereens. Our mortal flesh just can’t take it. But our spirits long for it like a man who has not eaten for several days craves nourishment.

We see it when we are gathered together in groups, praising and worshipping Him. We are bathed in it when we read the Bible and pray as we digest its words, allowing the Holy Spirit to bring fresh revelation to our very souls. It begins to mold, shape, and change our lives like nothing we have ever before experienced.

And then we discover something new happening. We start taking on the life of Christ. He begins to be formed in us. We are made new creations from within (Gal. 4:19; 2 Cor. 5:17). The desires we used to have, begin to be replaced with new ones. We find our lifestyles forming around the light we have seen in Him. Our language and our tastes change, and we have different expectations in people. In short, the spiritual light we have seen within ourselves begins to spill out to our physical man. It's not a requirement of being in His light, but a byproduct of the process.

Now we are different. Others begin to notice change in us. We don't do the things we used to. We don't talk the same as we used to, and we don't live like we used to. People see things that are out of the ordinary and out of character. Perhaps they just can't quite put their finger on it but there's definitely something different. The light is coming out. If we allow it to run its course people will know that we have been with Jesus.

When Moses was atop Mount Sinai with God and saw just a glimpse of the hinder parts of His glory, his face was so radiant for a long period of time that whenever he went out from his tent into the crowd of people, he had to wear a veil over his face. Otherwise, the people couldn't bear to look at him.

It is similar with us. As we are in the presence of God His light begins to shine out from our very spirit and others will notice it. I believe that there will even be a different feeling in the air when we are around because of the presence of Christ illuminating from within us.

As we go to our places of business, whether that is working in a factory, an office, or as a service technician of some sort, God will so bless our presence in those places that the business will be more successful. It happened with Jacob in the Old Testament. Read it for yourself. As Jacob worked for his uncle, Laban, God began to make Laban more prosperous because Jacob was there. God does this for His children yet today.

This isn't meant to give us "bragging rights" by any means. If that happens then we have taken on a spirit of pride and the light of Christ shining from within us will begin to fade. When we begin to be lifted up in pride because of our relationship with Christ, then we begin to lose part of that illumination. Why? Because lifting ourselves up in pride is sin. When we start allowing sin to enter the picture then we begin suppressing the light of God.

STRONG BUT FRAGILE

It's a strong thing, but it's also very fragile. God is strong and as we allow Him to take the prominent place in our lives then we will also be strong. But man is fragile. As

we allow the human side of us to take the prominent place then we will be fragile Christians. It's as simple as that.

As we allow Christ's light to grow stronger within us then something wonderful happens. People begin to see the light in us. As they "look" at the light coming from our lives, it begins to draw them to the light as well. We become a little like a neon sign pointing the way to the true light source. The light in us draws people to the light of Christ and that is our mission. Let us draw others to the light of Christ!

CONSUMED BY THE LIGHT

As we do, they will be completely consumed in the light of Jesus Christ. In my story about the mosquitoes, when the creatures hit the light, they were consumed by the sheer electricity. Just so, we will be consumed in the glory of God.

It sounds a little like a possession thing we might see in a horror movie. You know, the evil force enters into the bodies of others and changes them. I said before that there is an evil side that is very real. But you will not find the evil in Christ. When He takes possession, He also leaves control up to us. We can choose to not bask in His light, and, even though we may continue to be saved believers, we will not have the illumination in our lives that He longs for and, in ignorance, so do we.

His possession is dependent on us. It is a good thing. It is a life-changing event that will bring us hope, joy and peace even when we shouldn't have it. The more we live in His glory the greater peace is established in our lives.

WHY THEN DOESN'T MORE COME INTO THE LIGHT?

A question remains unanswered. If the light is so wonderful and so glorious, why doesn't everyone enter into it? It's a good question and the answer is simple yet horrific. We have afore mentioned that the absence of light causes blindness. That is true with the spiritual light as well. We must be very careful here so as not to misinterpret scripture, but the fact is that we can never hope to see the light unless we are beckoned to do so by God through His Holy Spirit. We are all born in spiritual blindness. We have no hope of ever seeing the light in ourselves.

It is not God's will that anyone be deprived of seeing the light (John 1:12; John 3:16-17; 2 Peter 3:9). Because of His provision all in this world are given the choice of seeing the light. But, as I said, His Holy Spirit must draw them. They've got to catch that first, faint glimmer to see it.

"What was that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't see it?"

“You’re nuts! We can’t see anything! We’re in total darkness!”

“No! It was there. It hit my eyes for only an instant. I must go! I have to know!”

“Suit yourself, but I’m not going after a figment of your imagination! Seen a light! Man, if that doesn’t take the cake!”

It is much like this conversation. We can choose to follow the light that smote our blinded eyes, or we can continue to live in the darkness. The choice is ours to make. As we come into the light and continue to follow Him, it only gets stronger and stronger. But we must make the choice. We have to purposely look for the light. We cannot find it accidentally.

Just as the two disciples of John went to get others, they knew to share this newly discovered truth – this light they had seen, so we must be praying that the Holy Spirit will deal with the hearts of others and then make an effort to get them to go with us. We must share the truth of this great light we have witnessed. We must help others to see. Many will refuse. It’s a difficult thing. It can even be a scary thing. But some will come to the light with us.

It is a challenge to our souls. But it is one that is met with great reward. If you are in the light, choose to continue in it. Choose to be consumed in it. If you are not in the light, I pray that God will let you see that glimmer and you will follow it until you have found it.

CHAPTER 4

The Challenge of the Obedience

John 2:1-11

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine.’”

(John 2:1-3)

“You’ve got the best kids in church!” My Mom got this kind of compliment regarding her children often. We were raised in church just as Mom had been. It was Mom who took us to church. Dad went the typical services, namely, Easter and Christmas and most times on Father’s Day until I was well into my teens. He received Christ and then he too was in church every Sunday.

We hardly ever missed a Sunday. We went to Sunday School, morning worship and Sunday night service. We attended revivals and were missed when we weren’t there. What was Mom’s secret? How did she get four twisty, fidgety kids to sit still and at least pretend to listen to what was going on? How did she keep us from whining to go to the rest room every five minutes or so?

Mom had a secret weapon. The rest of the people in church knew nothing about it. Today it would probably be considered a concealed weapon but non-the-less it was there. Hidden in her purse was a very effective tree branch called a switch and she wasn’t afraid to use it. If one of us got out of line it meant a trip to the rest room with her and when the ordeal was over you stayed in there with her until your crying was “dried up.”

She didn’t have to pull it out and wave it around during the service, nor did she have to speak to us in that whispered yell that a lot of parents do today. There was no way she was going to disturb the service or bring undue attention on us.

There was usually only one, maybe two warnings in the form of a look. We knew what that look meant. We also knew that we might get away with two looks but that was it; then she got serious.

I don’t think she ever had to use the switch on any of us more than twice over the years. Just knowing it was there and that she’d put it to use if she had too was enough. I didn’t like it very much. I’d see some of the other kids my age sitting in the back whispering and having a good time during service and I envied them. But I’ll always love

and thank my mom for her discipline. I didn't understand then, but now, as an adult I see the value in it.

Even in adulthood we continue to have a great respect for "Mom." Before she passed from this life, if she would have called me and told me that she wanted me to do something, I'd be "busting my butt" to make sure it got done. When Mothers are what God intended them to be, that's what usually happens. It makes a better adult out of the kid and instills in the child the respect due to parents that God intended for us to have.

Jesus had respect for His mother. In the scripture reading, Mary and Jesus, along with His disciples, had been invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and so they went. Remember that this was before He began His public ministry and so He hadn't had time to be popular or unpopular, at this point. He was merely a curiosity.

During the course of the wedding feast the wine ran out. This would not do. By Jewish tradition it indicated that the host had not properly prepared, and so those in charge of the feast were frantic. For now, the main host had not been informed but for some reason they shared this with Mary (perhaps she helped to serve and prepare the food). Mary had pondered on all the things that had happened in the life of her son from early childhood up to this time (see Luke 2:19). Just like a mother, she didn't ask Jesus to do anything. She just went to Him and told Him, "They have run out of wine."

Jesus knew right away that she wanted Him to do something about it. When Jesus said, "Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come." (Verse 4), He wasn't being disrespectful to His mother like it sounds (we've got to remember that our phrases and Jewish phrases aren't the same). Jesus used this same phrase in John 19:26 when He was being crucified and He appointed John to take care of His mother. Addressing her as "woman" was not meant in disrespect but by not using "mother" He was showing that her authority over Him had expired.

Many think that perhaps she may have been nervous about the situation and so when He asked, "What do I have to do with you?" He really may have been trying to calm her down. Whatever the case, He never said He wouldn't do it, just that His time had not yet come.

Don't we get anxious about things? It seems like God is going to be late. It seems that we need to hurry Him up. But His timing is impeccable. He will not let us down.

"Mom" had faith in her son. She knew who He was. She simply told the servants, "Whatever He tells you to do, trust Him and do it." That isn't always easy. Jesus has a way of telling us to do things that are either embarrassing or very difficult. He goes against our nature and He gets directly to the heart of the matter.

THE TASK OF THE SERVANTS

True to the above statement, Jesus gave them a very difficult task. First of all, it was hard work. The six water pots they were to fill contained approximately 20 gallons each. That was 120 gallons of water they had to carry and pour into those pots – Not an easy chore in those days. Secondly, these water pots were for washing of hands – not considered the cleanest containers to be used for drinking.

The tasks Jesus will give us to do always require faith and trust. An old hymn says, “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

These large water pots were to be filled up to the brim. By doing this it left no room for any other ingredient. There could be no doubt of the miracle. He is still the same. He wants no doubt regarding the witness of His work.

Probably the hardest task He gave the servants was to take it out and serve it. He didn’t even give them the choice of tasting it for themselves to make sure, or the option of serving a lesser guest first as a trial run. They were to take it straight to the master of the feast. There were no long prayers, no incantations, no magical words or waving of hands. Only, “fill them up and take it to the master of the party and serve it.” This required a great act of faith. Only a miracle could save their “hides” if not the lives of these servants. Had they dipped out water to the master of the wedding feast, they would risk harsh punishment and maybe even death. Jesus was asking them to put their reputations, their sanity, and their very lives into their faith. He asks no less today.

THE CHALLENGE OF FAITH

If we want to see miracles, then we’ve got to be willing to exercise faith. If we want a true move of God then we must be willing to do what He asks of us. All too many Christians today want the miracles but not what comes first. They want a move of God but they want it to come while they sit in their easy chairs. It will not happen that way.

The master of the feast took the cup of the contents of those water pots, and tasted it. I just know that the servants were holding their breath. But as soon as he tasted it, he went to find the bridegroom and complemented him on saving the best wine until last! The Bible says that the master of the feast had no idea where the wine had come from, but adds in parenthesis, “but the servants knew.” Boy did they ever! Others may have no idea where provision and miracles from the Lord come from, but “the servants know.”

And that is the most important point of the matter. Giving glory and honor to God for meeting our needs, even in the simplest of miracles, is a vital part of the transference of our control to Him. If we want to see miracles in our lives, we must be quick to give God the glory instead of taking it for ourselves, or passing it off as “luck.” This is very important to Christians in this country.

JUST THE BEGINNING

This was just the beginning of the miracles of Jesus. Why did He turn water into wine? And why wine anyway? Why couldn't it have been Coca Cola, or Kool-Aid? Didn't He know what kind of problems He made for church leaders today who teach abstinence from strong drink? We try to get people to stay away from drink, then there goes Jesus turning water into wine!

We could dwell on whether this was fermented wine or just grape juice. But that is a waste of time. We know that the Bible teaches that those in leadership positions should abstain from strong drink, but it does not insist that church members refrain as long as they don't get drunk. However, this takes away from the subject at hand. Let it suffice to say that Jesus knew what He was doing.

THE PURPOSE OF THE MIRACLE

He didn't perform this miracle because He was a special friend of the bridegroom or the master of the feast. He didn't do it for His mother. The Bible says that He did it to reveal His glory to His disciples. They were just beginning to follow Him. Up to this point they were going on the word of John the Baptist. But now, they had witnessed it for themselves. Their faith, for the moment, was sealed. They knew He was Messiah!

When Christ performs miracles for us today, it is not just as special favors to bail us out of a spot or to save embarrassment. On the contrary, He may embarrass us and put us on the spot in the process of receiving the miracle. He certainly did to those servants at the wedding feast. He does it as a witness of Himself. It should leave no doubt to us or to those who witness as to who He is. But even if those who witness still doubt, the servants know.

TRUE FAITH

We make a great deal out of faith. We teach the "how's", the "do's," and the "don'ts" and in doing this we make it a complicated process that only comes to those who follow the rules. Man has always had to add complication to simplicity. The Pharisees are a classic example of this. Man thinks that he has to define everything. We see it in our own laws. We make a law then come up with different ways to define it.

I'm glad God doesn't work this way. What He says is what He means. True faith isn't a complicated thing at all. True faith simply means we believe it and act on it. It requires obedience. The miracle never would have happened at Cana if the servants had not been willing to be obedient to what Jesus told them to do.

That doesn't make it easy by any means. It is really very difficult. The challenge of obedience is to act on what God says in His word, and in our hearts and that is faith.

Faith is not reserved for those who have special gifting from God. No, faith is available to any born-again child of God and is actually a requirement. We have to have faith to accept Christ as our Savior. From that point on most people magnify faith. But our salvation experience is only the beginning of our faith.

If you are obedient to what the Bible teaches then you are exercising faith. Those orders will get harder and harder as we continue in our walk with Christ. But the good thing is that as we exercise our faith, even though the orders may get harder, we find it easier to be obedient. Why? Because we have witnessed the results before. Each time after that it becomes a little less difficult to do.

“And His disciples believed on Him.” Let His disciples believe on Him. Let us trust Him. Let us want to grow closer to Him. Let us want to know Him more each day.

CHAPTER 5

The Challenge of the House of God

John 2:13-25

“And He said to those who sold doves, ‘Take these things away! Do not make My Father’s house a house of merchandise!’ then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.’”

(John 2:16-17)

The holidays are special days. When we think of them, we normally think of time spent with family, food out the “wazoos,” football games, or whatever sport is going on that day, and just plain good old conversation. It doesn’t matter if it is really relevant, or who agrees or disagrees, but just that it is taking place between family members who normally don’t have time to even make a phone call to each other.

There’s another thing about holidays that I don’t like - All the sales that are going on. They begin weeks before, sometimes overlapping and at the end of the year when Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year are so close together, the sales just get all “mushed” together! Everything imaginable goes on sale. If it’s going to be a while before the next one comes and so they just make one up like, “Christmas in July” or some other such fictitious holiday. Don’t you just love (to hate) how each and every holiday is marketed to the max?

Today’s world is a “dog eat dog,” to coin a phrase, and it seems that in order to survive a successful business is the one that gets the most people’s attention. In our country people are going to buy, so advertising is all about swaying people to focus on a certain product manufactured by your company. The commercials get plumb outrageous in this attempt to gain the focus. It gets to the place where you wonder if the holidays were made for enjoyment, time away from work and family, or to help the bottom line of big business.

By the time Jesus arrived in this world the Jewish holidays had already become the forerunners of our modern techniques.

THE TEMPLE VISIT

Jesus had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When He entered the temple, He saw those selling clean animals of all types, as well as the moneychangers. These businesses had come into existence as a convenience to those

Jews traveling from other countries to do sacrifice at the temple. They provided sheep, oxen, and doves so that they didn't have to be laden down with bringing their own. It became a common and expected practice to buy the animals at the temple. I can imagine the livestock merchants advertising to the people to buy their brand of sacrificial bull or lamb because they were "cleaner."

The moneychangers further complicated the situation. Remember that Israel was under Roman control at this time. This meant that all sorts of currencies were freely flowing in a city like Jerusalem. Someone got the bright idea to require only Jewish money at the temple and so currency conversion became a necessity if you wanted to give an offering or buy one of the "house" sacrificial animals. Of course, a "small" fee was charged for this service.

The Bible doesn't say this, but it could have attracted some other merchants, especially at the Passover when the crowd was bigger (kind of like a modern-day shopping mall – anyone want lunch while waiting your turn at the money changers?). Temple worship had become big business. It's a good thing God had required only one temple or Jerusalem might have had one on every corner. "Come worship at our temple where the sacrificial animals are fatter and the priests burn them with special care! More worship for your hard-earned dollar!" (Is any of this beginning to sound familiar?) What a deal these priests had anyway! They got paid to convert the money, then they got paid for the animals, and, if I remember my Hebrew Law correctly, they got to keep the best portions of meat from the animals at sacrifice time (depending on what the sacrifice was for). What a deal! I suppose I should say, "What a way to cheat people!"

Many things have been compared to this today, from selling records, tapes (oops, I told my age here, I should have said digital music), and books in the church to charges for all kinds of things that have to do with God and worship. Much could be said, pro and con, but let it suffice to say that if Christianity is being used to make a profit, then I believe God has a problem with that. If it is coincidental to leading in the worship of God and spreading the gospel, then the Bible makes provision for those who spend their life in kingdom work.

Jesus immediately knew what was going on and how the worship of God was being used for financial gain. He became righteously indignant, made a whip of cords and began to drive out the people and the animals. He then turned over the money tables. In the record found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus added that they had made the temple a "den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). Jesus was speaking the truth of the matter. The temple rulers were concentrating more on profit than on actual worship.

THE TRUE TEMPLE

We must realize today that a building is a building. Yes, we should have respect for the place in which we gather to worship God. But, to my knowledge, God hasn't lived in a building since Solomon's Temple. Regardless how elaborate our building of worship

may be, God doesn't live there. His presence is there for His presence is everywhere. Now, if that's the case, and it is, then when the Bible talks about the Church and the House of God, just what is it talking about?

To answer these questions let's first go back to the story. His disciples remembered that the scripture said, "the zeal of your house has eaten me up." Literally the scripture was saying, "The compassion and desire for Your house has consumed me." It was a quotation from Psalm 69:9 (Read Psalm 69:1-9). David was speaking about how his enemies had persecuted and attacked him. David was in deep depression about how he had been treated. Much of that attack had come from those of his own household. He had gone so far as to make restoration when he really didn't need to. Still, his enemies attacked him.

In this deep remorse he always turned to his worship of God. He admitted that he had done some things wrong and that he had sinned. He never justified his sin nor did he try to hide it. He had been rejected by those of his own house and made to feel like a stranger. Folks, we are not immune to this treatment. Even though we may do some things wrong, and we may sin, we must be quick to confess that sin and ask forgiveness for it. But even when God has forgiven us, and He does through the grace of Christ, people don't always forgive and they don't easily forget! It's like someone accused of child molestation. Even if you're innocent you get stuck with a label for life.

TRUE WORSHIP

In these times and situations, we can always turn to our worship of God and our zeal for Him. David said that the passion he had for God and His house had entirely consumed him. This was what he desired and this was what he longed for.

When Jesus walked into the outer court of the temple and saw all that was going on, the reality of what they had turned worship into, cut His soul like a knife. It angered Him to see how His people were being lied to and cheated all in the name of the God of Heaven!

However, He was still in control and another lesson for His followers was about to occur. He wasn't defending the building as much as He was the worship of God. Yes, once again, He was commanding a respect for the place where this worship was to occur, but He was also attacking the lack of respect for worship of God. We must seek this same passion and desire today.

The Jewish leaders asked Him for a sign to prove that He had the authority to chase out the temple merchants (after all, He was now getting into their pockets). They could have just had Him arrested but they knew that there were so many people who thought Jesus was at least a great prophet, if not the Messiah Himself, that they had to use tact.

Jesus gave them a sign in parable form. “Destroy this temple and I will restore it in 3 days.” This was absurd! What audacity He had. It had taken 46 years just to build it. How could one man build it in only three days? However, Jesus wasn’t talking about the physical building, but the building of His own body. This is, in fact, exactly what happened. They had Him crucified and within three days He was back.

I believe that this goes even further than the physical temple and the physical body of Jesus. I believe that the rebuilding and reconstruction went further than His holy and wonderful resurrected. The very day of His resurrection He began building another body – a spiritual body – the Body of Christ. This was the temple that He had such a compassion for. This was the “building” for which His zeal ate up and consumed Him - The Church – The Body of Christ. He always has and always will have such a compassion for His Body of Believers.

CONSUMED

Let’s put it all together. Driving out the merchants, the passion that consumes us, and the body rebuilt all tell us that Christ’s ultimate desire for us as believers is to drive out that mammon – that natural, lustful, prideful desire found in us and to reconstruct us into the Body of Christ.

He desires for us to have such a passion for the Body of Christ that we also are utterly consumed in it. In other words, we are not just content with a shallow Christian life and experience. We must go deeper despite others who may turn on us unjustly. We must become so fascinated with the flame that we aren’t satisfied until we are a part of it and swallowed up in it.

We must have such a passion for Christ that we aren’t content with going to church once or twice a week. Our waking moments should be concentrated upon Him and we should have a passion for His work. We must be filled and consumed with His Spirit and baptized in Him to such a degree that it surpasses any shallow experience that a dunk under the water can bring. We must be lost in His Spirit and fully submerged in Him.

The word says that many believed on Him after this encounter with the temple merchants and the Jewish leaders. They were impressed with His authority and with the fact that He got away with it. They loved His passion for the worship of God. But they didn’t understand it. Later on, many of them stopped believing and left Him when His teaching demanded deeper things. I’m afraid the multitudes have not changed from His day to this. The multitudes are fascinated with the miraculous until it begins to demand something from them.

Christ most definitely demands something from us and that is to be passionate about His Body and the worship of God and to be utterly consumed in this desire and in Him.

The challenge of the House of God is to be consumed in His body. It is to be passionate about our worship of Him. It requires us to lay aside our own desires, ambitions, and goals and be eaten up in our desire for Christ. Does this sound fanatical? Is it too hard? Or is it the truth? What about it? Has the zeal for His house eaten you up yet?

CHAPTER 6

The Challenge of Soul Victory

John 3:1-21

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’”

(John 3:1-2)

Things had gone from bad to worse. All my life I had dreamed of owning a Volkswagen. Call me crazy but there was something about this little German vehicle that really appealed to me. I had envisioned a “Bug” but when the opportunity came for us to buy a van, we jumped at it. The two-toned orange and white Volkswagen “box” had been a “one-owner” and from the records kept in the back of the manual we decided then and there to keep it up just as the previous owner had done.

This was in the late seventies mind you, so there weren’t a lot of Volkswagen experts in our small-town area. Good maintenance, we determined, would be essential. We drove the vehicle proudly and it actually performed quite well. Then the day came for the first regularly scheduled tune up and oil change. It was still running just fine, but we were going to do everything we could to keep it in “mint” condition.

According to the record in the back of the manual the previous owners always had it serviced at the same place and so we figured it would be best to continue having it serviced there. I made an appointment and drove it over one evening after work. There I waited for what seemed to be an endless amount of time (how long could it take to drain and refill four quarts of oil and remove and replace four spark plugs anyway?). When the service technician finally emerged from the garage (where I hadn’t been allowed to go) I was relieved. All I wanted to do at that point was pay for the work and go home.

But as I drove away, I discovered that the van no longer performed smoothly. It spit, sputtered and jerked as I made my way back home. I knew I should have turned around then and there and demanded that they at least fix it the way it had been before. But I wanted to get home.

During the following week it became very clear that they had done something to our precious Volkswagen. I felt sick in the pit of my stomach because I knew we had been ripped off. We did the only thing we could do and made an appointment to take it back.

This time I was informed that the vehicle needed an overhaul. “An overhaul?” I responded, “Look, when I brought this vehicle to you for a simple tune-up and oil change it was running great. But on the way home it performed like a goose on a dance floor! I just want you to fix it back like it was!” But they insisted that an expensive overhaul was the only thing that could be done. I “sputtered” back home. Surely someone else could help me with this problem. But no one could be found.

To complicate this scenario further, we were due to go on vacation in one week. This left us with only one choice. We couldn’t afford to pay for an expensive overhaul. But the dealership had offered to take the van in trade of another vehicle. We still felt like we had been “hoodooed” but money was the factor and this was the cheapest way out of this mess! If only I could do this over, I would have turned back that very night or taken it somewhere else. But it was too late for any of that.

How many times have we found ourselves in situations that could have turned out better if only we had made the right decision? If we could just turn the clock back with the knowledge that we have now and do it again, things would surely be different. The problem is that we can’t turn the clock back and if we were to somehow accomplish such a feat, most likely we wouldn’t retain our current knowledge and, guess what, we’d probably do the same thing again.

THE VISIT OF NICODEMUS

Under the cloak of night Nicodemus paid a visit to Jesus. The Bible doesn’t actually say what I am about to share with you, but entertain this thought for a moment if you will. Why did Jesus use the phrase “born again” with Nicodemus? Studying the motives of Jesus in the accounts of the gospels will reveal that He sometimes spoke bluntly, and with plain words that, on the surface, may have seemed cruel or even biased. But in the end, they always spoke directly to the heart of the individual He was addressing. I wonder what happened in Nicodemus’ life that had caused him to be thinking the very words so many of us have spoken from time to time? I believe something had happened in his life that he wished he could do over - perhaps a sin. Maybe he had just come out of an affair, or an underhanded deal in the Jewish religious/political system. We don’t know. We are not told. But whatever was going on in Nicodemus’ life caused Jesus to tell him, “You must be reborn.”

Jesus had been in Jerusalem for the Passover (see the end of Chapter 2) and sometime during that period Nicodemus had heard Him speak. This man didn’t speak like all the other “campaigners” he had heard in the streets. This fellow wasn’t promoting himself or even trying to rally a following amongst the people. For sure a great crowd had gathered but something had drawn them other than a well-worded speech. What Jesus said seemed to bring life to those who heard – a life like a fresh breeze to the very soul.

Maybe Nicodemus had witnessed a miracle wrought by the hand of Jesus. This type of miraculous power hadn’t been witnessed in Israel for at least 400 years. Not since

the age of the prophets had the power of God been displayed, or at least as we know of, until this Man. Who was He? What was His angle? Somehow Nicodemus sensed the innocence of Jesus. He really didn't seem to be trying to gain political control. He didn't talk about overthrowing the Roman Government like many had previously done. He seemed truly dedicated to helping the poor surrounding Him.

Because of his position in the illustrious Sanhedrin, the Jewish Governmental council, he could not afford a public audience with Jesus. There was just too much controversy surrounding Him. Still, something drew him to this man. He couldn't get him out of his mind. When he would hear the crowds gathered around Jesus his curiosity drove him to find an excuse to be lost in that crowd. He had to talk with Jesus. And so, he discovered where Jesus was staying and planned his secret meeting.

How would he approach Jesus? He gave a great deal of thought to it and when Jesus answered the door he spoke his carefully planned opening, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." That would do it. It was humble yet complimentary. Surely this, along with his position, would gain him audience with Jesus.

Jesus responded by saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." See what I mean? What did that have to do with Nicodemus' introduction? I feel sure that Jesus was only listening to the flowery words of Nicodemus politely waiting for him to finish so He could reveal what He had seen in the depths of his heart.

Nicodemus stood there in awe of what Jesus had said. How could He have known what was going on in his life? He recovered, regained his composure, and came back with what seemed to be a reasonable response to the words of this strange teacher, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he re-enter his mother's womb and have the birth experience again?" It was a ridiculous statement on the surface. But secretly he had thought these very words, "If I could just be born all over knowing what I know now, how differently things would be. But there's no way that could ever happen." And now Jesus echoed his very thoughts. It was the only way he could change things. But it was impossible.

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus could not reasonably understand what Jesus was saying. Strangely the words filled his heart with hope but his analytical mind could not fathom their possibility.

IF I ONLY KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW

How many of us would jump at this chance if we could? There may be some who would say that they had lived so perfectly that they had no regrets of anything they had ever done or said, but I don't know anyone like that. Of course, we would like to do some things over. Decisions we made in the past that affected the outcome of our lives, our careers, and relationships would be made differently if given the chance.

It's not likely that we'll ever be given this chance by the world and in this life. But Jesus offers that very chance. That is the exact thing that salvation is all about – Second chances!

VICTORY OF THE PEOPLE

Nicodemus' name means "Victory of the People." How significant because the thing Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus would bring more victory to the people of this world than anything ever introduced. Jesus was making the way for us to change our lives to the point that we could become new and so have a second chance at real life with the very God we are so unworthy to face.

It was the victory of mankind over our original sin of rebellion and disobedience to God. But how? When we think of being born again, we think of physical birth. If we are female, we think of extreme pain followed by sheer love to the very one causing all the pain. The male thinks of the responsibility of providing for this new life. So, when we think of being born again depending on our life's experience, we think of pain, joy, misery, love, responsibility and a universe of other things. These are things that we'd like to change.

But even if we could re-enter our mother's womb and start our lives all over, in the flesh, in the natural we could not do this and retain our current knowledge for we'd have to become a baby and do it all again, and, as we have previously stated, more than likely we'd make all the same wrong decisions.

It has to be done differently. Jesus explained it to Nicodemus this way: Jesus said that we must be born of the water and of the spirit. Both are required to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven. That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spiritual. What did He mean by this? Think of it as the water being the birth of the flesh and the Spirit that of the soul. In other words, we must be born naturally to be reborn spiritually.

Nicodemus still didn't get it. "How can these things be?" he continued to question. It seemed that Jesus was mocking Nicodemus when He said, "Are you a teacher in Israel yet you don't know about these things?" But once again, Jesus was stripping any pride away from the man so He could get to the heart of the matter. He spoke some words alluding to His real identity as the Messiah, yet never coming right out and saying it. Then He gave the immortal words that nearly every child in Sunday School has learned to recite. Actually, this next verse has become the very pivotal point in the entire Bible. Jesus said, "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." (John 3:16). Wonderful words of life! The next verse is almost as important. Jesus said, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." (John 3:17).

The reason I say that these verses are the pivotal point of the entire Bible is shown in the very mission of Jesus. The Old Testament, in a nutshell, shows the justice of God. My daughter spoke her opinion the other day when she said, "God sure seemed mean in the Old Testament but it was like He mellowed out when His Son came on the scene." In a way she is right. But we have to understand the purpose of the entire Bible to really know the significance of what Jesus did. Now while I encourage you to read the whole Bible, we can hardly cover everything in this chapter. So, as I said, in a nutshell, God seemed cruel and mean in the Old Testament because He was showing man just how unworthy his sin had made him and how he could never be worthy of being restored to God on his own. Man had to be perfect to be able to return to a right relationship with God. But man couldn't be perfect. In his sin man was only worthy of death.

Christ came on the scene with the answer to man's problem. By the sacrifice He was going to perform, man could be restored to a correct relationship with God. But only by His sacrifice could man ever have hope in this. That's why He described His mission to Nicodemus as being a "rebirth" experience. Nicodemus had hope in being restored and "reborn" in the completed mission of Jesus Christ. And so do we.

Christ's mission was not to bring further condemnation upon the people of this world but to give them the only possible hope in fulfilling their true sole purpose in life. If we are ever to be worthy to worship our Maker then we must be perfect and in Christ we can be. What a hope we have been given! What a promise that has been fulfilled!

This is light to the world, and it is simple. It's easy to understand that when the light is off darkness is present. Just as simply those who believe in Christ are saved – Reborn (and I mean believe to the point that they are willing to accept it as a life changing experience), and those who don't are still lost just as they have always been (because of the absence of a sure way to please God). It's simple. It's basic. But so is being born again.

From this point on the Bible is about living in Christ. It tells how we can truly worship God the way we were meant to and encourages us to let others in the world in on this wonderful rebirth experience.

Christ is the victory of the people. I'm glad Nicodemus came to Jesus. His conversation gave Jesus the opportunity to explain how He was going to give us all a chance to start over, to be made new from the inside out. It can only happen in Him but we can have victory over our unchangeable fate of destitution by becoming a new person all over again.

CHAPTER 7

The Challenge of Increasing and Decreasing

John 3:22-36

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

(John 3:30)

Emotionally she was on a roller coaster with no end in sight. Jill had been called a year ago today to pastor the small congregation in this town of only 1800 people. It was not what she had imagined for her life. When an individual first comes out of college they feel they are ready to tackle the world and take on a great assignment. Jill had been no different.

But when she arrived in this little village of Appleton Junction she was, to say the least, disappointed. She had not expected her first assignment to be easy. After all, it had been a struggle just for a woman to get as far as she had in her denomination. But with much determination and prayer, she had made it through the scrutiny of men in the educational process, then had stood for her right by their own bylaws to be assigned to a congregation.

Of course, she hadn't expected to be handed a large congregation who would accept her with open arms on her first assignment. It hadn't been a cake walk so far, so why should she expect it to be any different now? But when she arrived at Appleton Junction, even with the experience she had already been through she was not prepared for her welcome. One elderly gentleman met her at the bus station holding a sign with her name on it. She immediately gave him her biggest and warmest smile accompanied by a very friendly, "Hi, my name is Jill. How are you today?" She was in turn greeted with a grunt that would have embarrassed most pigs. He turned and she had followed him to an old pickup truck and was escorted to the parsonage without so much as a single word from the "gentleman."

When they got there, he handed her a key to the house, allowed her to get her bags from the back of the truck, and then sped away like an individual who had just completed a long, hard day's work in a factory just wanting to get home for the evening. She was left alone.

She spent the week setting up housekeeping in her new quarters then preparing for her first service that Sunday. She had spent time at the church getting familiar with its layout and making plans for the service, but not one member had contacted her that week.

Sunday morning arrived and an hour before the service was to begin, she got a call from a deacon who quickly and without feeling ran her through their morning schedule. It was a cold conversation but she was a determined woman who knew what God had put in her heart and so she was there, on time and took her place in the service.

The few parishioners who showed up that first Sunday met her with frost in their voices and ice in their hands, so to speak. She knew she was in for a struggle, but what else was new? It took only a couple of services to discover that her denomination had assigned her here purposely to discourage her out of the ministry. But she didn't turn tail and run that easily. So, she dug into her assignment with vigor and hard work and within a couple of months had won over most of the congregation. The congregation actually began to grow.

One of the things that God had put most on her heart was ministry to children. Securing permission from the board of deacons, she began a children's program and soon children in the congregation outnumbered the adults two to one. Things were really beginning to happen now, and it seemed that she had conquered her impossible assignment until she had received a summons by the board of deacons. She had been called to a special meeting. There they expressed to her their disapproval of all the changes that were occurring. She tried to explain that some changes were necessary in order to hold the attention of the growing number of children now a part of their congregation. Surely, they would understand and be excited about all the new possibilities for this once "death-bound" congregation.

But there was no changing their minds. Sure, they wanted the children to be a part of their congregation. They weren't so blind to not realize that if young blood was not introduced the day would arrive when most of the congregation would be gone and the church would be closed. But why couldn't the children just fit in with the way they had always done things? She tried to explain, tried to make them understand, but they would not allow it.

Then the final blow came. In the heat of argument one of them had blurted out that they had not wanted her there anyway. They didn't believe in women-preachers and it had been a source of conflict all along. She, of course, had figured this out long ago, but to hear the words, especially now after she had proven what God wanted to do through her, sent a blow that almost literally knocked her off her feet.

She knew that if the congregation were to ever be successful in winning people to Christ it had to embrace some change. She knew that kids of today would never be impressed by the old, formal ways of worship. She also realized that too much change was not good either. But she dared believe the Bible's teaching about increasing and decreasing. They had to decrease and overlook some of their staunch rules and

regulations allowing God to increase in their service and so draw the attention of the many un-churched children in their tiny community. How could she get them to realize this? How could she ever make it work?

FUSING BELIEVERS

Don't you get tired of all the "Christian arguing" that is done to decide who's right and wrong regarding a doctrine? I know that I do. I don't believe that I'm right about everything (well, I like to think I'm right until proven wrong – But don't we all?). What we need in today's Church are those individuals who are willing to look past belief differences and continue to really love their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the Church of America, we are divided first by denominational boundaries, then by divisions within the denominations, and finally by "cliques" of members in the local congregation. It becomes governmental and each group has its own set of values within the limitations of the word of God. The most dangerous of these divisions becomes the "cliques" in the local body. In many churches across our country, these groups of people become controlling and manipulating to get things done their way. They set the boundaries on decisions within the church to include everything from the budget to what the pastor can and cannot preach about. This is wrong. It's wrong first of all because any time a group of people decides what is okay for a minister to speak about and what is taboo, they are leaving God completely out of the picture. Secondly, when a handful of people limit the entire church body from expanding and growing simply because they don't want to change, or they don't want things done another way, they are attempting to limit God. No man has this power and God will not allow it. Eventually it will cause the congregation to die or to split. Good seldom comes from such a situation and people are always hurt.

The only good congregational split occurs when the body has grown to such a size that the need for a second congregation arises and by mutual agreement a group leaves the main body to start another work. When all understand what is happening and those leaving to start another group depart with the blessing of the mother church then the Kingdom of God can be glorified and both bodies will continue to grow.

THE DISCIPLES OF JOHN

Christian's disagreeing with each other is nothing new however. John's disciples had just come from having a disagreement with the Jews (referring to the Jewish leaders) concerning the purification. This covered a lot of ground. They had purification laws about everything from how to wash your dishes and hands, to the purification of the sacrifice on the altar. It is not indicated here just which details of the laws of purification they were discussing.

Jesus and His disciples had come into Judea and were baptizing converts as well as John. It seems to me that John's disciples were still hurt and angry from their confrontation with the Jewish leaders and they took it out on Jesus and His disciples.

Whatever the case, they came to John and let him know that there was competition in Jesus just down the river. The subject of their concern was that “all people” were going to Him instead of coming to them.

NEVER ENDING DISUPUTE

Today, the dispute continues. However, it is found within the structure of the great Church that Christ came to establish. First of all, we need to acknowledge that denominations and divisions in the Church are manmade and not from God. We appear to the world to be in competition with each other (and in reality, we are).

I have thought often of a statement made by a man at one of our community services (which involves five different denominations and six different church bodies). He said, “It seems weird to see all you guys together (referring to the group of pastors).” When questioned as to why it was weird, the man responded, “Well, aren’t you all competitors?” Of course, we responded right away that we weren’t, but in a sense, yes, we were. We all wanted our church to be the biggest, the most Biblically correct, and the one accredited with doing the most in outreach.

We have to get over this competitive spirit that is inspired by the devil himself. The devil wants us to spend our time doing “religious” and competitive things rather than doing what is in the best interest of our Lord, namely spending our time meeting needs of others and seeing souls won to the kingdom.

INCREASING AND DECREASING

John’s answers to the questions of his disciples were not at all what they expected. The world wants to see us compete. It is the way things are done. We have tried to pattern our congregations by the same guidelines as a successful business in the world. Fight, kick, scratch, climb over the heads of others and you will be successful. But Christ had way different plans for His Church.

First of all, John said, “A man can’t receive anything unless it is given to him by Heaven.” In other words, everything we get, whether personally or as a collection of the body of believers, comes from God in Heaven. John was telling his disciples that Jesus was drawing more people because it was God’s plan for Him. Without saying it, John was suggesting that we not pattern ourselves after other ministries but seek God for what He wants us to do and then let Him give us those gifts that we need to accomplish our mission for Him.

John then reminded his disciples that he had told them all along that he was not the Christ, but merely the enunciator of the Messiah. The bridegroom was the one who had the bride. If Jesus was attracting the bride, then He must be the bridegroom. But the friend of the bridegroom was to be happy for him. John then said, “So my joy is fulfilled.” He was acknowledging that he was secure with the fact that Jesus was now taking the spotlight. He was the Messiah, the Christ. It was right and proper for Him to

begin to be more popular and for John to begin to fade in the limelight. Because he knew where he stood in the will of God, he could be happy for Jesus and not jealous of Him.

So, the individual groups of believers need to recognize their place in the Body of Christ and be happy for each other. We should not be jealous because one congregation has more people but instead find our place in the Body and do what God has commissioned us to do. When we become secure in this then our joy can be fulfilled.

It was then that John said those famous words, "He must increase and I must decrease." John was telling his disciples that it was time for him to fade into history, for it was now Jesus' time and He must become greater and greater. It was rightly so for Jesus was the Christ.

This holds true yet today for each of us. Personally, to allow Christ to be great and powerful in our lives, we must push ourselves down and let Christ become more and more prominent in us. It is the same for our local bodies: We must let our group become smaller and Christ within us LARGER. When we are secure in this, we can begin to take our place in the body of Christ.

You see, each group has its own function in Christ's Church. As we give in to Him and allow Him to become greater, then, even though we begin to disappear, His ministry is fulfilled. I suppose the question put to us is, are we really comfortable in our disappearance and being absorbed into the Body of Christ, letting Him be glorified instead of us? The obvious answer is "yes," but do we really mean it? Our honesty with this issue is the key to success in the Kingdom realm. God knows if our answer is really what is in our hearts.

Ultimately, John concluded his discussion with his disciples by giving them the gospel. It is simple but it is powerful and true. He who believes on the Son gains eternal life. But if we don't believe, then we shall not see life. He was referring to true, more abundant life. All things have been given into the hands of Jesus. Let's not look to our group or denomination but to the Son of God. Everything we need, personally and to function in His ministry is in His hands. Let's look to His hands. Let's seek those outstretched, nail-scarred hands for our needs, and our ministry plans.

He will give us what we need and will lead us in the paths that fit His plans for us. Isn't that where we want to be anyway?

CHAPTER 8

The Challenge of the Well

John 4:1-42

*“A woman of Samaria came to draw water.
Jesus said to her, ‘Give Me a drink.’”*

(John 4:7)

Did you ever play that game where a group of people sit in a circle and someone whispers a secret in the ear of the person next to them? That person then whispers to the individual next to them and so on until it gets to the last person. It's amazing how the original secret changes as it goes around the circle. For instance, "It's a wonderful day," could turn out to be "What's so good about this day?"

Rumors and talk spread fast. People like to have someone or some group to talk about. The problem with rumors is that they are almost always told from the negative point of view. The fact of the matter is that we like to compare ourselves with others when it makes us look better than someone else. That's what makes gossip wrong.

It was no different in Jesus' day. The word had gotten around. First, John's disciples had noticed and now the Jewish leaders recognized that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing more converts than John. In chapter 3 we saw how John counseled his own disciples about the competition between them. We see from Jesus' example the other side of dealing with the competition thing. When Jesus heard this news, to stop the gossip He just simply moved back up into Galilee.

During their trip Jesus chose to go through Samaria. The Samaritan people were considered to be defiled people by the rest of the Jews. They were descendants of the Israelites who had been left behind by the Assyrians during the captivity and the people sent from other conquered lands to repopulate. The Samaritans still considered themselves to be Jews even though the rest of the Jewish people despised them.

Also, Samaria had been the capital city of the divided kingdom of Israel especially during the regime of Ahab. He and his wife, Jezebel had brought much wickedness to their people and so Samaria was also a shameful memory to the Jewish people. Most Jews journeying to the Northern parts of Israel chose to go the long way around just to keep from traveling through Samaria. But Jesus had a challenge to issue.

He picked the well of Jacob for a reason. The Samaritans were proud to have this historic landmark in their region. It represented their connection with and right to be Jews. They used it to get their water, but they also esteemed it as being holy. Jesus always went to the direct source of the problem.

THE CHURCH AT THE WELL

A wonderful, yet challenging scenario develops around this well experience. It is one that extends far beyond the woman Jesus met there and the Samaritan people. It even goes beyond the salvation message to those who are lost not yet accepting Christ as their person Savior. You see, the woman also represents the Church. We hold and cling to our religious articles. Even though God has more for us and we may even know it, still we tend to hold to our “religious things.” Our ceremonies and “the way that we’ve always done it” carry a lot of weight. He waited at the well for the woman to come to Him. When the Church gets thirsty, she has no choice but to come to the well and Christ is waiting for us there. He is waiting to challenge us with revelations that may be tough and hard to face, but at the same time will change our lives for the good forever if we will listen and yield to His message.

But the woman would have never noticed Jesus if He had not asked something of her first. He asked for a drink from the well. Now He had her attention. Today, we meet together week after week in our buildings, but we don’t pay attention that Jesus is there. He is speaking to His Church, but He also wants to use us to allow Him to speak to our local assemblies.

She was curious as to why Jesus, a Jew, was breaking the long-employed tradition which forbade Jews to speak to Samaritans. Jesus answered her question by directing attention upon Himself instead of the tradition. “If you knew who it was speaking to you then you would recognize the gift of God and ask Him for living water.” Today He speaks to the Church saying, “I am here. I am the gift of God and if you recognized Me you would look past your tradition and ceremony and ask for the living water.”

THE ARGUMENT

Then the argument came. Change is always hard. Even though the Church may say that she wants to be all that God wants her to be, when the change part comes, giving up our old ways is always difficult and painful. She basically said to Jesus, “how can you be offering water? You don’t even have a vessel to draw with. You don’t fit into my tradition and religion. You don’t have the ‘things’ or the ‘certificate of authorization.’ How can you even give this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob who dug this well?”

Jesus told the woman that drinking from Jacob’s well would only quench one’s thirst temporarily. But drinking of the living water He had spoken of would quench one’s thirst forever. Of course, we know that He was telling us that the natural water only quenched one’s thirst for the moment but the spiritual, Living Water fulfilled our spiritual

man forever. The message to the Church, however goes something like this: “Your religion and your ceremonies will only quench your thirst temporarily, but the deepness of the Holy Spirit that I am offering will change you completely and forever. It will be like a well within you that continues to satisfy time after time and always.”

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

It sounded good. The woman surrendered, it seemed, and said, “Okay. Give me this water.” But the root of her problem had not yet come to light. It is as simple as accepting but only after the true root of the problem has been realized. The Church may have caught a glimpse of what Christ is offering, but it will not be fully realized until the root of the problem has come to light and been dealt with.

As simple as it may sound, it’s really not. Jesus now asked something of her, “Go and get your husband.” This presented an awkward moment, for she had to admit that she really didn’t have a husband. As a matter of fact, Jesus told her that she had been the wife of five husbands and was just living with the man she had now.

As the Church struggles to find what is missing, Christ is telling us to go and get our husband. The Bible tells us that our husband is God (Isaiah 54:5). But the Church, in effort to increase and try what is new has switched husbands many times. She hesitates for she doesn’t really know who her husband is. God wants to be our husband. He wants to be that One upon whom we can depend and trust.

Of course, the woman tried to sidestep the issue. “I perceive that You must be a prophet.” Then she got theological with Jesus. “We say that this mountain is the place to worship God. But you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place.” Jesus told her that the time was coming when we could only worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

The Church tries to justify and excuse herself. This group says we’ve got to worship this way, and that group over there says that we’ve got to worship their way. But we’ve got to worship in Spirit and in Truth and we cannot even do that until we go and get our Husband.

Still, she tried to change the subject. Now she would trip Him up. “I know that the Messiah is coming and when He comes, He will tell us the truth.” This seemed to be a safe escape. Everyone looked for the Messiah to come. It had almost become a by word. All looked for Him and all had their opinion of Him, but since he apparently hadn’t come yet (and maybe he’d never come) she felt safe. This would dismiss the issue at hand and take the pressure off. But Jesus told her, “I AM the Messiah.” This was said with such authority and power that she could bring no more argument.

The Church can argue of which is right and which is wrong all they want, but when they truly come into the presence of Messiah it is with such authority and power that no argument can stand and we cannot resist. If and when we enter into that realm of our Christian experience our petty arguments no longer hold a candle to the truth.

The woman immediately left, returning to the city and telling everyone she met, "Come and see the man who revealed to me all that I have done. Is he not the Christ?" She left her water pot. There was no need of it now, for she had found that well of water springing up to everlasting life! When we realize who He really is and go deeper than just a repentance experience, we must tell everyone and share with everyone. We will leave behind our religiosity and look for that true worship of God.

The disciples had left earlier to go and buy food (verse 8). At the end of the conversation with the woman, they returned. They marveled that Jesus was speaking to the woman but they didn't say anything. The Bible doesn't say this but I believe that they were pondering why He would break the tradition and speak to this woman. Again, we see the Church wondering and questioning why they must leave their tradition. But we must if we want that true relationship with Christ.

YA' GOTTA EAT

Then they tried to get Him to eat something. Jesus wasn't putting them down here, but simply seizing the moment for another lesson. He told them, "I've got food that you know nothing about." Of course, their immediate response was, "Did someone already bring Him something to eat?" Just like mankind, they were always thinking in the natural. When will man ever learn that we cannot explain God and His ways in our own natural finite way of thinking? In order to understand anything about God we've got to look past our thought process and see things His way.

Jesus explained that the meat of which He was speaking was to do the will of God and finish the mission He had assigned. When we are doing the will of God and completing the job that He has given us to do it is just as fulfilling, if not more so, than eating a good meal. He gives us the spiritual nourishment that we need and we realize it in doing service for Him. We don't want to just stay busy, but we must be seeking what God wants us to do and begin to fulfill that. There is so much here to do. We must look past what we think we are interested in and get a hold on what God is doing. We will be fulfilled.

Then Jesus spoke of the harvest. "Lift up your eyes and look at the fields for their color tells us that they are ripe and ready for harvest." If we truly want to be in God's will, we must look at the fields. We've got to quit looking at our present situations and go to the window and look out at the fields. They are white, and ready to harvest. In the midst of the threats of tragedy that are happening all around us, the fields are white. Even though it may seem that no one wants anything to do with God, we must go work the fields for they are ripe!

We might be in the sowing stage right now. We look around and we don't see the numbers that suggest that we are reaping. Someone else may reap our crop. But thanks be to God, we must continue to be Sowers. Sow, sow, and sow. We can't stop. Yes, the reapers may seem to get all the glory of men, but I tell you today that if it were not for the

Sowers nothing would be reaped. We've got to look past the glory of who gets the credit because ultimately God gets the increase, right? The important thing is that we know and God knows. Sow, sow, and sow some more!

A revival broke out. It began with one woman. Jesus could have passed her off. But from His witness to her, many came to Him. They testified that they had seen the Christ for themselves. Not only that, but they insisted that He stay longer and so He stayed for two more days. Many believed. It all began from the one woman.

We must first get ourselves in a right relationship and standing with Christ. Are we really doing the will of the Father? Have we really sought Him for what we are to do? Have we taken a hold on the ministry to which He has called us? We must be the example. We must see the vision, plant the seed, and get things moving for the Lord. As we do, other groups will follow. Yes, there is going to be opposition. There will be those who hate us and falsely accuse us. But we must grow tough hides and thick skins so we can shake it off and continue to move forward.

God wants to bring the revival of the well to His Church, beginning with our local assemblies. God is reaching out to all groups within His enormous Church and He wants more for each local community. He has called us to be instruments used to bring this about. Will we heed the call? Will we go through the door that is now cracked open? God will give us favor. We must recognize it for what it is. It is not something for us to boast about or to sit back and brag about, but it is for the purpose of introducing His will.

We must pray, say, and obey. Pray that we will be open to God. Say that we will be used of Him. Obey when He gives us opportunity. Pray that we will head the challenge of the well. Say that we will look past our traditions and leave them behind if necessary. Obey when He leads us into the deeper truths that will bring spiritual life back into our souls. Pray that He will open our life and reveal those hidden things within that hinder us from a wonderful relationship with Him. Say that we will forsake those things if necessary and cut off those traditions that bind us from spiritual freedom. Obey what He has given in His word and has spoken in our hearts. Then we can not only worship Him in spirit and in truth but we can be the guide and beacon that leads others from the dark passages of this religious world into the brilliant light of His truth.

CHAPTER 9

The Challenge of Distance

John 4:43-54

“The nobleman said to Him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’

Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’ So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way...”

(John 4:49-50)

What a mess I was in now! My son, Jeremy, who was only six years old at the time, had contracted pneumonia. There he lay in the hospital, my wife, at his side. I was watching our infant daughter, Megan at home. The plan was that I would get up the next morning, take Megan to my mother's and go on to work. That was the plan. What actually happened was not in the plan. That morning, when I got up, I was hot with the flu. I called my mother and she came over and got Megan. I was so sick I couldn't take her myself.

However, after a couple of hours with plenty of over-the-counter medicine down me, I was feeling better and decided to go on to work. But that didn't last long. I left work after only about an hour and a half feeling extremely sick. I thought I would be strong enough to stop by the hospital and see Jeremy and my wife for a few minutes but while I was there, I got so sick that she had to take me home. I was off work the rest of the week but what was even more torture was that there lay our son even sicker, in the hospital and I couldn't even go visit him. It wasn't a very good feeling I can tell you that.

The flu can be tough on an individual and certain kinds are extremely deadly, especially to children. It weakens the body to the point that you don't have the energy for anything. You feel hot and cold at the same time, piling covers over you to knock the chill, while sweating underneath them feeling like you are being roasted alive.

Jesus had returned to Cana (remember that this is where He had turned water into wine). While there He was visited by a man, a nobleman from Capernaum, whose son was so sick with fever that the nobleman feared for his life. Somewhere, somehow, he had heard about Jesus and that He was even then in Cana. He had to visit Him. This Man could be his son's last and only chance. If he could just get Him to come to Capernaum perhaps this man could heal his son. It was worth a shot.

I get the impression from the way the Bible reads that this nobleman didn't know if Jesus could heal his son or not. It reads as if he thought he'd just give Jesus a try. Once

again Jesus dug down into the very depth of this man's soul. We read words that seemed on the surface to be accusing and degrading. When the nobleman asked Jesus to come and heal his son the Bible records Jesus' as saying, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe!" It sounded as if he was accusing this man of not really believing, doesn't it?

Still the man insisted and begged Jesus to go with him. I know that Jesus saw the desperation in this man. I know that He had compassion on him. This became yet another opportunity to prove just who He was and to reveal more of the power of God. Jesus could have dropped everything and went with the nobleman. After all, he was a man of influence. Had He gone, the opportunity might have arisen to spread His fame and following into a more influential group of people. But Jesus was more interested in this single man than in what He could gain from the situation. It lets me know that Jesus wasn't out to establish a famous ministry or to necessarily attract a large following. He was only concerned about single individuals.

He had put His holy microscope over the man's chest and looked closely at what was going on inside of him. He saw a desire to believe. He was this man's last resort and even though there was doubt in his heart he desperately loved his son and needed a miracle. Jesus wanted to give him more than the miracle for his son. God wanted to give him a miracle for his entire family beginning with the man himself. Jesus was going to impart a new faith into the heart of this nobleman.

WHERE IS OUR FAITH?

The other day we went to a restaurant where an individual told me that she was scheduled for heart surgery within the next few days. She had asked for prayer. I was glad to put her on my prayer list but I also knew that there were many others praying for her. A few days later I was speaking on the phone to another individual who knew the lady well, and I asked them how the surgery had gone. The answer was that she didn't have to have surgery. This individual then proceeded to say that the doctor should have given more tests and possibly they would have discovered this and saved her all that worry and concern. I found myself agreeing with this logic until the next morning. As I got ready for the day, I was spending some time talking to the Lord and out of the blue it hit me. "Why can't you just believe that a miracle happened for this lady?" I was stunned for a moment. "Of course," I thought. I wanted to blame the other party but I had gone along with them. I had doubted in His power as well. Isn't it crazy how we want to believe the natural more than the spiritual? But it's true.

I related that story because at first we may look down on this nobleman and in judgment say, "Why can't you just believe?" But do we? Do we really? It is easy to say the words. Words can be very cheap and easy. But to put our action and faith in the same place as our words is quite another thing.

As the nobleman continued insisting that Jesus follow him home, Jesus told him, "Go your way, your son lives." No magic incantations, no dropping everything and running

to his son's bedside to plead and beg God in prayer. Just a simple, "Go on about your business. Your son's okay." Wouldn't it have been much easier to believe if Jesus had done something to stir the man's faith?

We need to realize that our faith believes when all the odds are against us. It is trusting when it seems there is nothing to trust in. It is stepping out on thin air when it appears that nothing is there. That's what Jesus saw that this man needed and that's why He gave him no choice but to extend his faith as far as he could.

The man began his journey back to Capernaum. I'm sure he was somewhat confused and let down. Why hadn't Jesus just come with him? But he was trying very hard to believe. It was then that he saw one of his own servants coming down the road to meet him. The servant told him that all was okay. His son's fever had broken and he was going to make it after all. The nobleman was now filled with anticipation. Had Jesus really done this? Could it be true? So, he asked when his son had recovered. "Yesterday about 1:00 in the afternoon," his servant told him. The nobleman immediately knew that this was the very hour Jesus had told him to go his way for his son would live. There had been no distance in His power. He didn't have to touch the boy or speak incantations or special words. He didn't have to perform rituals or dances to make God move. He had just spoken the word.

NO DISTANCE IN FAITH

Still today there is no distance in faith. We don't have to have more faith for someone who is far away. We can pray in Indiana and see miracles happen in California. We can be a prayer warrior in the United States and see great power in China or Afghanistan, or even Iraq! With God there is no distance too great, no mountain too high, and no valley too low. His power is the same everywhere.

We need to take a lesson in this man's faith. "What faith? He doubted, didn't he?" Yes, but Jesus believed. Jesus knew. He had faith for the nobleman. We need to be seeking God for that same kind of faith. The faith that spans distances and believes even when all the signs say "No!" We need to trust our Lord and Savior for what He says more than we need to trust our own two eyes. There is no distance in faith. Faith can reach farther than any man-made satellite. It bridges great gulfs. It is knowing that our prayer leaves this Earth, travels the great expanse of any distance between here and Heaven, and touches the very heart of God concerning what we are trusting Him to do. Can we have that kind of faith? If we don't but we are true in our desire to go beyond a shallow experience with the Maker of all things, then He will make sure that we have the opportunity for distant faith to arise. He will look directly into our very hearts and float to the surface that which might hinder our faith. He will challenge us beyond what we think we are capable of seeing and experiencing in order to instill within us this distant faith. Yes, we can have this degree of faith. But it only comes through knowing and trusting completely in Christ.

With God there is no distance. It is as if each prayer was immediately in His presence. And in a way, it is. The reason there is no distance with God is because of one of His wonderful characteristics called omnipresence. It simply means that He is everywhere at every time. His presence extends to every location in every time. The length of the expanse is limited or extended only by our own faith. This is why it is so important to grow in our relationship with God. I've always heard it described as being close to God; "Grow closer to God," we hear it said. It is more than a cliché statement. As we spend time with Him, we do grow closer. As time goes by there seems to be no distance at all.

Our prayers to Him bridge great gulfs when we realize that we don't just worship a God residing in a far-off place called Heaven, but that He is ever beside us. He is constantly with us but we don't know it unless we make ourselves aware of His presence. Our act of growing close to God never means that we attract Him to us, but rather that we have now become aware that He was always there.

God cares for each of us so much that no distance can separate us. Only our own lack of faith can separate us from God and His love. Today, look to Him. Trust in Him. Know that He is near and distance means nothing. All will be well. You'll see.

CHAPTER 10

The Challenge of the Troubled Pool

John 5:1-9

“For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water, then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.”

(John 5:4)

While in the US Army, stationed at Ft. Myer, VA, I worked for a Chaplain who also became a good friend. He and his wife were about the same age as I was and there were times that they would have me over for dinner. As it turned out they were also members of an athletic club in the city of Arlington and so the chaplain invited me to go swimming with them. That would be a problem because I didn't know how to swim.

This chaplain could have just shrugged it off, but he identified with me because he had just learned to swim himself. He said, "I'll teach you." And so, he took me to the club by himself at a time when only a few people were there so as to save me embarrassment, and taught me how to swim. He was very patient with me and in just two easy lessons I was swimming on my own. To me, God had granted a miracle because I thought I would never learn to swim. But I must say that I really "troubled the water."

In Jerusalem there was a pool close to the sheep market called "Bethesda" meaning "House of Mercy" or "Flowing Water." At one time this pool had probably been used to wash the animals in preparation of their sacrifice. For reasons unknown to us, God had chosen to send an angel periodically to "trouble" or move the water. People came to know, that as soon as this water became troubled, the first one into the pool was instantly healed of whatever disease or sickness they had. Soon sick and impotent folks were constantly around this pool. They never knew when the "troubling" would take place and so they basically camped out there (much like people today who stand in line for hours waiting for a ticket to a good game or concert).

Can you even imagine the pushing, shoving, and splashing when the "troubling" of the water took place? I can imagine people being trampled and maybe even killed trying to be the first one in the pool. Of course, we know that God could have chosen to just heal anyone who stepped into that pool. He is God and can do anything He wants too. I can't explain to you why God chose to do it this way, except that perhaps it was done for this very instant recorded in the scripture.

THE MAN BY THE POOL

There was a certain unnamed man at this pool who had been sick for 38 years. That's a long time. The Bible doesn't say that he spent all 38 years by the pool of Bethesda, but the indication is that he had spent a long time there waiting for the day when he could be first.

But that day never came. I can imagine this man hoping, expecting, scheming, and planning just how the next time he would make his way to the pool and be the first one in. Then he could be productive like he had been before. He would be able to walk again. His strength would return to him and he could go back to work and make a living like others his age were doing.

It never happened. Each time the water was "troubled" anew it turned out to be another depressing disappointment. The man was probably ready to give up and just accept that he would die in his condition. How could he ever hope to be first into the pool?

Others had friends or relatives waiting with them. When the water was "troubled" they would help them into the pool. Someone always got there first. He was alone. The Bible doesn't tell us where his family was or why he had no friends. Without explanation, this man was by himself.

But everything was about to change for this man. Just when we need Him most, Jesus will show up on the scene. And He did. Jesus could have picked anyone out of the crowded five porches of the Pool of Bethesda. I'm sure hundreds were there, waiting, hoping, and expecting. But His eyes fell on this man. You see, Jesus discerned that the man had been there a long time. I believe He also discerned the man's heart and felt the hopelessness that the man felt. In compassion and just in time, Jesus went to this man.

Thanks be to God that He is always right on time! We may be at our wits end. There may be those who are reading this that have already tied several knots in the end of their life's rope and have hung on for everything they were worth but have finally realized that it is hopeless and utterly useless to continue hanging on.

THE MEAL BARREL

In 1 Kings 17, we read of a widow woman in Israel to whom God sent the prophet Elijah. A famine had been brought upon the land because of Israel's disobedience. This woman had no husband to care for her. She was by herself except for her son. It had come to the point that there was only enough meal in their barrel to make one little flat cake of bread for each of them. She had come to the end of the line. She determined in her heart that she was going to prepare these last two cakes. She and her son would enjoy their last meal together and then they would starve to death. Not a very pleasant plan, but it seemed to be her only recourse. Then God sent Elijah.

Elijah approached the woman and asked her to fix him something to eat. With every muscle strained at the audacity of this man who would ask her for something when they were down to their last handful of meal, she attempted to explain the situation. Surely, he would understand her predicament. Most certainly after she explained it, he would just move on and let her be. But he didn't. Instead, after hearing her story in essence he said to her, "Okay, go ahead and do that. But first fix me a cake of bread from that meal. Then fix for you and your son."

Most people would have thrown him out for his boldness and seeming unconcern for their condition. But the woman saw something in Elijah that she hadn't seen in anyone else. It was the anointing of God. The man had further said, "If you do this in obedience to God, He has said that your barrel will never be empty until this famine is over." So, she trusted his word, fixed him a cake, then went back to look in the barrel. Had she missed it? She remembered scraping the last grain of the meal from the barrel, but now, there was another handful deep down in the bottom of it. She removed it, fixed a cake for her and her son. Then the next day she looked again. Once more a handful of meal was there in the barrel.

Praise God! He will not let us down. He will be there in the nick of time just when we really need our miracle the most. Notice that God didn't fill the barrel up for the woman. He could have. But He simply supplied their daily need. That's where we mess up today. We want God to bless us with abundance. We want barrels of meal. But God has promised daily provision. When the abundance doesn't come, we fail to recognize the daily miracle and pass it off. Many people miss out on the blessings of God because they are ungrateful for daily provision. They want a barrel full!

DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WHOLE?

In compassion and just in time, Jesus went to this man. He asked Him a simple question, "Do you want to be made whole?" What a ridiculous question! Of course, he wanted to be healed of his now 38-year infirmity. He answered Jesus by saying, "Sir, I don't have anyone to help me into the pool. I'm all alone out here. Others have relatives waiting with them and when the "troubling" of the water begins, they always get into the pool before I can ever reach it." His words between his words spoke of hopelessness and helplessness. It was no use. For him, it would never happen.

Jesus ignored his helpless plea. The man thought his only way was to convince someone to stay with him and help him to be first in the pool. Was Jesus this man? Would He stay and help him? He would, but in a way far beyond what this poor, sick man had even wildly imagined. Jesus simple spoke to the man and told him, "Stand up. Pack up your bedroll and walk."

Could this Guy be serious? Didn't He think that he had tried many times to stand on his own? It hurt so much he had dismissed the idea years ago. "Stand up He says! Who does He think He is?" And then the man looked into the eyes of Jesus. What was that he saw there? It was a look like he had never seen before. It was a look of

confidence. It was a look of strength that said, “Just trust Me.” It was a look that almost lifted him off his feet. So, he rode with the feeling and then looked down in disbelief. He was standing for perhaps the first time in 38 years!

He had said to take up his bedroll and walk. Well, he was on his feet so he might as well try bending over. As his unsure muscles stretched, he felt even more of a surge in his body and before he realized what he had done, he had taken up his bedroll and was walking . . . walking! Walking for the first time in 38 years! He walked right away from the pool that had occupied his thoughts for so long and had seemed to be his only hope. He had now met the Sender of the angel. He had been engaged in conversation with the Maker of the water in the pool. What a miracle that had happened for this man!

I tell you today, that Jesus still wants to gaze at you with those same eyes of compassion. He wants us to look into His eyes and see the trust and feel the confidence we can have in Him. He wants to make us whole even today, spiritually, physically, and in every way possible.

Look into His face and know that He is the answer to your every need. It may not come in the way you expected. You may have waited many years by your “Pool of Bethesda.” You may be on the brink of giving up. It seems your miracle will never come. But I tell you that He wants to give you good things. He asks you to look away from your “pool” and look to Him. Give up all that you have hoped in before Him. See that your “pool” is not your answer but only the Master Who stands before you asking you, “Will you be made whole?”

I can’t tell you how your answer will come or when it will come. I am only a human being just like you. But I know this: That Jesus Christ wants us to really put our full trust in Him. When we do, and when we see that gaze of compassion, He will cause us to stand again. He will strengthen us to pick up our bedroll on which we have spent so much time. We will take it up and walk again.

He took up his bedroll and walked. That is important. He not only stood in faith, locked in the gaze of the Master, but he was obedient to His word. He moved his bedroll – the place most like home for so long. But it meant much to his faith because it showed he was ready to move on. Moving on makes sense. We can never receive complete healing by staying in the place that has represented so much pain. Moving on is important. It shows that we are ready for the next phase in our spiritual life. Whether that healing be physical, emotional, or financial, it is important that we move on in the purpose of God.

It’s time to take up new residence. We can no longer stay in the same place that we have occupied for so long. Growth means change. We must accept that change as we grow in our relationship with the Master. Take up your bedroll and walk.

Perhaps you need physical healing. Perhaps you are in a financial pit you think you will never be able to scale. Perhaps you are in a marital relationship that you think is

hopelessly lost. I tell you to look upon Jesus. He is truly your answer. He will make the way. He will make you whole. Just trust Him today.

CHAPTER 11

The Challenge of Leftovers

John 6:1-13

“Phillip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.’”

(John 6:7)

What would happen if a man entered your town began praying for sick and needy people as he met them in the street and they were instantly healed and changed? I guess we don't know for a fact, but I would be willing to say that a large crowd would begin to follow him around, each hoping to receive something personally or for a loved one. There would probably be skeptics who wouldn't show themselves, but I'd be willing to say that a large majority would venture out to see this man.

That is exactly what happened to Jesus at this point in His ministry. Because of the great and wonderful miracles that had happened, a large crowd now seemed to be following Him wherever He went. It had become extremely difficult for Him to get alone with His disciples.

This was one of those occasions. Jesus and His disciples had gone up into a mountain. Sure enough, people began to show up and before long a great multitude had gathered. It was springtime because the Bible mentions that it was near the Passover Holy Day. As the sun shone brightly upon hopeful faces, Jesus had compassion and began to minister to them. Miracle after miracle began to unfold and the words He spoke were like cool streams in an otherwise parched land.

But the day wore on and evening would soon be upon them. These people would be hungry and it was a long trip back down the mountain and to the nearest town or village.

Jesus knew what He was about to do, but He desired for His disciples to ponder the situation. He had not been able to be alone with them that day, but a lesson was forthcoming anyway. He asked His disciples, "Where will we buy food to feed all these people?" That was enough to get the gears of their minds turning. It was Philip who answered as he gazed over the vast crowd of people and began to figure in his mind. He knew that they didn't have money to buy that much food and he said, "Two hundred days wages won't be enough to buy food for all these people." Note that a penny, or denarius,

represented an average day's wage at that time. The situation looked hopeless. It seemed that all these people were just going to have to try to make the trip back down the mountain and get home before they could eat. That wouldn't be so bad in today's world for we'd just hop in the car and drive home, but for some of these people it could have been well into the night before they arrived and the trip was all by foot. Without something to eat there could have been casualties. What kind of witness would that be?

It was Andrew, Peter's brother, who spoke words that showed a little hope. He had noticed a boy in the crowd who had been thoughtful enough to bring lunch. I'll never forget, as a child, the fond memories of the Bible story of the boy who brought lunch. He had brought five barley cakes (loaves) and two small fish – A pretty good meal for a boy but hardly enough to even give a taste to such a large crowd. Andrew, after reporting the food supply, was quick to add, "But what is that to such a large crowd?"

THE MODERN CHALLENGE

Situations abound for each of us and the modern challenges come daily. Some are financial, some are health related, and still others involve people. Whatever the case, the need is the same. We find ourselves overwhelmed by the multitude in front of us. It seems a great host has gathered and the need is more than we can fathom. We take inventory and weigh the minuteness of the supply against the greatness of the need and we feel helpless. How can we possibly accomplish what must be done? How can we even hope to find an answer to such an enormous problem?

But Jesus knew what He was going to do. It was stated before and now He simply ignored the doubt and hopelessness of the situation. He simply said, "Have them sit down." They did so in an organized fashion as recorded in the other Gospels and found out that there were 5000 men, besides women and children - Very likely a host of possibly 12,000-15,000 people. Remember, five barley cakes and two small fish.

THE ACTION OF FAITH

He took the cakes and blessed them, then began breaking them into small pieces. He did the same with the fish. The disciples began taking the small pieces out to the crowd. Jesus continued breaking the food. After a while it was obvious to all and especially to the disciples that a great miracle was once again taking place right before their eyes. Jesus continued dividing the food and the disciples continued passing it out. In my mind I can see the look on their faces turn from doubt and concern to smiling and laughing as they realized that the need would soon be met. I can see the disciples, as they passed out the food, now taking the liberty to eat some of the pieces themselves as they passed it out.

But this was not the end of this mighty miracle – No! After everyone had eaten to their fill, Jesus commanded them to begin to take up the leftovers! Remember the five barley cakes and two fish? The disciples took up baskets (apparently 1 each) and began to go through the crowd. The people began to drop what they could not eat into the

baskets and when all had been collected and the tired disciples returned to Jesus, 12 basketfuls of leftovers had been taken up! Not only had the need been met and all had been filled, but there was food left over besides! What a mighty, mighty miracle!

THAT'S GREAT FOR THEN BUT WHAT ABOUT NOW?

In the face of our hopeless and helpless situations Jesus has not forgotten us. In fact, just as in this situation, He already knows what He is going to do to meet our needs. We think we know the best way. We may even have a plan but it doesn't seem to be working. What we need to learn to do is to take what we have, and give it to Jesus. I'm not saying you take your supply and give it all away. You listen to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit within you and obey His direction. Don't listen to man. If the Holy Spirit tells you to give it away then do it but only if it is the Holy Spirit. We can get into serious trouble by listening to man.

Jesus already knows what the best solution is. He will listen to our prayers and our concerns. He will allow us to speak out in our doubt and confusion. But then, if we will allow Him, He will quietly begin His work in our lives. Remember that the disciples were obedient to Him. When He told them to have the people sit down and then began giving them fragments of food to pass out, they had to be submissive to that plan even though it sounded like the worst thing to do. They took the risk of having a mob of hungry people trample them underfoot for a small, pitiful amount of food. We must also be submissive to His plan, no matter how ridiculous it may seem to us.

Then they came to the point where they realized that they were well down the road of having the need met. As we listen to the Holy Spirit, and obey the plan of God, there will come a time when our concern and even panic will turn to joy, comfort, and relief as we realize that God's plan is always the best and we see the light at the end of the tunnel. We see that we are going to get there and the need will be met.

This is God's plan. When we are in tune with Him and listening to Him through His word and through the voice of the Holy Spirit within us, then our simple obedience will result in great miracles. They may not seem so great to others, but we know their impact and magnitude. We know how He has fulfilled the impossible. We have seen the need and the answer. It makes our faith to soar because of God's greatness.

He wants to do this for you. I believe with everything in me that God wants to meet your need. He wants to do great things for you because He loves you. But you must meet Him where He is. You must trust Him to multiply your supply. You must obey what He is telling you to do and I promise that you won't be sorry. If you follow the instruction of the voice of the Holy Spirit within you, the best is coming. It may not be in the way that you feel you need, but I guarantee it will be in the way that is the best solution for you and your loved ones.

REMEMBER THE PASSOVER

Remember that the Bible specifically pointed out that the Passover was soon coming. The Passover was the celebration feast of the Hebrew people being liberated from slavery in Egypt. This feeding of the multitude at Passover time is significant. It represents God's desire to meet our need. You see, the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery was the result of 400 years of prayer. God had an impeccable timing in this situation. He waited until the people had grown in multitude. He allowed them to be slaves to give them strength and stamina for the hard journey ahead.

I'm sure there were many times the people doubted over the span of years. Yet overall, they remained hopeful. Overall, they trusted God and prayed for deliverance. When the timing was right God sent Moses and the rest is history. The Passover feast represented not only their deliverance from the death angel that night, but also marked their time of departing from their predicament.

God has a Passover just for you. It may seem that it has been a long time coming. There have been times of doubting, times of praying, times of crying out in desperation. But when the timing is right, God is going to bring us out of our situations. God is going to meet the needs and He will give us a time of Passover. Expect that time. Look for that time. Trust God and wait. It may seem impossible but hang in there. God is going to turn your handful into leftovers.

ABOUT THE LEFTOVERS

Remember that 12 basketfuls of leftovers were taken up. That's significant because God not only wants to meet our needs but give us something leftover to share with others. The Bible doesn't tell us what Jesus and His disciples did with the leftovers. Twelve basketfuls of food would have spoiled very quickly in the hot sun so I can't imagine that they just kept it for themselves. This is my thought on the situation. I think He gave it to the people to take back to their homes to share it with those they knew. What a witness it would have been to return home with a basketful of food and tell everyone where it came from!

This may not be the way it happened but regardless, they had a lot to talk about that day. It is important that we take our leftovers to others. Whether it is in sharing of a financial miracle with people we know, telling and showing proof of a healing we received, or showing up arm in arm with a bitter enemy that has now been made a brother or sister in Christ, the result is the same. The witness gives opportunity for others to come to Christ as well. Because of this, spiritual leftovers are very important. Getting to that point is a challenge but one that, when met, is always fruitful.

CHAPTER 12

The Challenge of Crossing Seas

John 6:15-21

*“But He said to them, ‘It is I; do not be
afraid.’”*

(John 6:20)

I've never been much of a sailor and I'm sure not good at rowing a boat. I could probably manage to row enough to get myself to where I needed to go if I had plenty of time and the current was with me, but boat races are definitely out.

I read the book, "Endurance" by Alfred Lansing. It is the true story of Sir Ernest Shackleton and his men who set sail from England to journey to Antarctica with intentions of being the first men to walk across that foreboding Continent. This was in the early 1900's mind you and they didn't have all the modern equipment we have today. They never made it to the actual Continent. What did happen was that they got stuck in the icy sea before they ever got to shore and he and his crew spent a year and a half trying to get rescued. It is an astounding story and it is only the grace of God that kept the men alive for that long in those frigid and very dangerous conditions. Not one man died and though they endured much hardship, they were all eventually rescued.

Jesus had just finished the miracle of the loaves and fish. Remember, He had miraculously fed 5000 men plus women and children on five barley cakes and two fish. The people immediately recognized that they had a "good thing" in Jesus (but they were only thinking with their stomachs at that time) and so they thought it a good idea to proclaim Him "king." Jesus realized in His spirit that they were going to take Him by force and make Him king (see John 6:15), and so He slipped away to another mountain all by Himself. What would have been so wrong in making Him "king?" First of all, it would have meant a terrible revolt against the current Government and against the Roman Empire. How could these people even think that there were enough of them to withstand such a force? It would have meant many deaths and unimaginable trouble. But more importantly they would have been making Him "king" before His time. He had to go to Calvary and be crucified; else all people of the Earth would have been eternally lost. The people just had no idea what they were instigating.

His disciples, I suppose following Jesus' instructions, got in a boat and began to row across the sea on their way to Capernaum. Jesus had not yet come down from the

mountain, but apparently had instructed them to go on and He would meet them later. If they'd only known at the time what He meant by that!

So, they began to row across the sea. Just to give you a few facts here, The Sea of Galilee is approximately 6 miles wide and 16-18 miles long. Six miles was quite a distance to row, but remember that most of these guys had once been fishermen. They were used to hard work and long hours, stretching into the night. I'm sure they thought that they had seen it all.

Darkness had set in and Jesus had still not come to them and so they set out to cross the sea. As they rowed, the wind began to blow and after a while it was blowing so hard that the waves began to swell. Soon they found themselves in the midst of a great storm. They rowed fiercely against the storm. The elements pounded their craft as they literally pushed through the rain, the waves, and the wind. Now exhausted they had made it about three and a half miles across. It had taken all their strength to push this far but even though they were now more than half way, it seemed an eternity to the other side.

WE CAN IDENTIFY

Most of us can identify with those disciples. We've braved the elements of life. We think we have seen it all and we can handle anything life throws at us. We keep pushing against the oars and struggling as we go. We get fatigued but then someone tells us that we can't make it and suddenly we row life's boat harder with a fresh burst of strength. But there will come a time when we are exhausted. There will come a day when we just can't push against those oars one more time.

The time comes when we know we are not going to make it. We have no other natural recourse but to stop rowing and hope the boat doesn't break apart in the storm. We hang on for all we are worth as our life's boat is dashed against the mountainous waves. They come crashing into our "craft" and begin to fill it with water. We bail for all we are worth and pray that it won't sink. "Surely the storm will be over soon . . . It can't last forever!" As it rages on, we hope for the day. Just a sliver over the horizon would give us the hope we needed. We look for it; we long for it. But it does not seem to be coming.

Life can be like that. Life can be good, but when it is bad it becomes overwhelming. Many feel that they have come to the end of the line and so contemplate ending the ordeal early by taking their own life. Some begin to lash out at life and lose their trust in anything or anyone.

AT ALL COSTS WE MUST HANG ON

I'm here to tell you today to hang on. I can't even imagine how severe your storm is raging. I can only deal with my own storm. I identify with you but I can't possibly know what you are feeling as you cannot possibly know what I am feeling. So, we hope with

each other yet we are alone. But help is on the way. The storm WILL NOT last forever. They day will surely BREAK!

It was at this point that they looked out over the waves and spotted a lone, silent figure on the water. In the other Gospels we are told that in the midst of their fatigue and at their lowest point of physical strength, their problem was magnified when they saw the figure for not only were they in danger of drowning but now a spirit was out on the water advancing their way. They were afraid of the storm; they were exhausted in physical strength and now they were also terrified of the unknown. Fear gripped their hearts and suddenly that positive "I can do it" attitude was replaced with "we are going to die!"

We can also identify with that aspect of the story. When the end of the tunnel of our trouble comes into sight the unknown blocks it. I believe that is why Jesus told us to only be concerned about today because we don't have any idea for sure about tomorrow (see Matthew 6:34). The unknowns of tomorrow can overcome us with fear.

Then Jesus spoke. He was close enough now that they could hear Him. Their fears began to diminish at the familiar sound of their Master. Still there was an element of fear because He was not in a boat. He hadn't rowed out with reinforcements to bring them to shore. He was walking, literally on the water. But at least He was there.

To some of us, the situation in which we find ourselves is so overwhelming that even the familiar sound of the Master doesn't take it from us. We go to church, sing praises to God and pray fervently, but still the nagging fear of the unknown is with us. "What if?" we question.

THE WAY ACROSS THE SEA

Then they understood His words, "It is I, be not afraid!" Jesus extends those words to us now. He comes to us in those worst of the worst of moments. We may seem to recognize Him but He seems distant in the surrounding situation. How can one lone figure make a difference? We must force ourselves to stop placing all our thoughts and concerns on our present situation, however, and take time to listen to His voice.

He is telling us, "I am here, don't be afraid!" When we really grasp those words suddenly, He looks bigger than the storm life is throwing at us. The one lone figure in the dead of night, blurry from the pounding rain and the furious waves, now seems to focus in larger than any of our surrounding circumstances. It is Jesus - Our Lord and Master saying, "I am here, don't be afraid." Anything that would swallow us up now seems to pale in His presence. His voice is suddenly louder to us than the pouring rain and the thunderous waves. The sounds of the sea begin to drown out as He speaks, "I am here, don't be afraid."

The disciples stuck out their hands and received Him into their boat. That is important. You see we can hear Him all we want. His voice is sweet music to the ears in the midst of our storm, but if we don't receive Him into our boat we will perish. His

presence calms us. The hopelessness of our situation fades from our minds. It doesn't matter now because the Master is in our boat. We must take Him into our boat. Jesus wants to be with us in our situation. He's not standing off somewhere saying, "I'll come to you as soon as you get rid of your problems and your storm." No, He awaits you to take Him aboard.

When we welcome Him aboard then we have accepted Him in the midst of our storm. It still rages all around us. The danger of sinking in the natural is still ever present. But suddenly it does not matter for we have taken Jesus into our boat. He now resides in our situation. He is in our boat. We must receive Jesus into our lives if we ever want our situation to change. He wants change for us. But all too many times we cry out for change and relief but we don't want to take Him into our boat - into our life.

The Bible tells us in verse 21 that the disciples gladly received Him into the boat. They welcomed Him aboard. They may have been weak in faith but they had seen enough to know that when Jesus was present things changed. People were healed, and even the dead were raised!

When we receive Jesus into our situation, we must not do it just as a last resort. He will change things. We must see Him as the complete and total answer to our problem. Receive Him gladly.

In another instance Jesus was with the disciples on the sea in the middle of a storm but He was asleep in the boat. In that case He rose up, rebuked the storm and all became calm. On this occasion things happened differently. He didn't calm the storm. He didn't utter those famous words, "Peace, be still." In this case He chose to let the storm rage on. He climbed into the boat with the disciples and the rain still pounded. The waves still crashed all around them. The wind still howled. Yet, something miraculous happened. The Bible says that after they received Him into the boat, immediately they were at the shore. Remember, at the point they saw Jesus they still had about two and a half miles to row before they would get to land. But somehow Jesus made short work of that.

Christ wants to take you to land. He wants your need met. He wants you healed and whole. I can't even begin to explain why some have great faith and still struggle and are surrounded with problems. One thing that I have learned in all of my Biblical research and hours of study is that I don't have all the answers. But I know this, whether He chooses to calm the storm or let it continue to rage, whether our prayer is answered the way we feel it should be or not, regardless if we are healed or not, it is important to have Jesus in our boat. I am learning not to question the Master. He really knows best. We may not understand in this lifetime. But one day whether here on Earth or whether in our eternal home of promise, we will know and we will understand. Know that. Trust Him. Let Him in your boat. He will get us safely to land whether in storm or calm.

CHAPTER 13

The Challenge of Eating and Drinking Christ

John 6:22-71

“This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. 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.”

(John 6:50-51)

People do follow for the wrong reasons. Stop and think about it for a moment. We are constantly preaching from our pulpits how that when we come to the Lord everything is going to change. If you are poor, you are suddenly going to become rich. If you have been broken hearted, suddenly, as you walk down the path of life, flowers are going to spring up as you go and blue birds will be flying around your head. A butterfly may land on your finger as you sing a melodious tune of joy. All your problems will be over and from now on everyone will like you and you'll have no more worries.

That's pretty far-fetched and over-stated, I'll admit. But we do give off some of those impressions don't you think? The problem is that when people do come to the Lord some of those things may happen but more often than not our problems may even get worse.

Jesus, being the Son of God, had a deep perception about what was going on inside of individuals. When those who had tasted the miracle loaves and fishes got up the next morning (for it seems that some hadn't gone home but had just camped out on the hillside) they discovered that Jesus and His twelve disciples were gone. Apparently, someone had seen them leave to go to the other side of the lake. As many as could get into the remaining boats did so and soon, they found Jesus. It probably wasn't hard for He wasn't in a place very long before a large crowd had gathered.

They started the conversation with, what on the surface, seemed like an innocent question, "Teacher, when did you come over here?" You would think that a reasonable response would have been, "Last night," but Jesus looked past their innocent sounding words right into the truer words of their heart, "Without doubt you have followed me here not because of the signs you saw but because of the free food you ate." Where did that come from? Directly from the hearts of those selfish individuals! Jesus then said, "Don't work for the food that perishes but for that which will endure right through to eternal life which the Son of God will give you because God has sealed Him for that purpose."

This group of people had followed Jesus like a bunch of groupies following a rock band. It puts me in mind of the seagulls on the recent Disney movie "Finding Nemo." Whenever they saw something to eat each one of them would begin to chant, "Mine, mine, mine." "What's in it for me?"

FOLLOWING CHRIST FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

I tell you that we must be followers of Christ for the right reason. That reason can only be that we have seen the wickedness and lack of love in our own lives and have witnessed that the only way to change our self is to be absorbed and lost in the love of Christ. Only He can wash away the filth that we have stored in our hearts and bring us into a life that will fill us with love for God, others, and ourselves.

Even though we might live in the greatest country on the face of this planet, still, when we come to Christ it must not be for what we can get out of the relationship but only because we see our own desperation and horrid helplessness and see Him as the only way of freeing us from our sin and its punishment. When we truly know what Christ will do in our lives then we come to Him in love, not in selfishness.

Others follow Christ because they are afraid of going to Hell. Now I agree that Hell is a place to keep away from, if we can at all. But the fear of going to that place will eventually wear off. We have a tendency to harden ourselves to fear.

A few years ago, a certain man made what he claimed to be prophetic statements saying that research had revealed that Jesus was coming back to rapture His Church on such and such a date. Many people were deceived by this so-called prophecy. I know one particular young lady who fell for this man's words. She was so convinced about what he was saying that she told all her friends about it and actually brought many into the church because of it.

But then that date came and went and nothing happened – Not one major tragedy, no signs from Heaven, not even a hint that something this wonderful was going to happen. In fact, it was a very quiet day. Christ didn't come back as this man had promised. This young lady fell into unbelief and the witness was that perhaps the Lord wasn't coming back after all. Let me tell you that He is coming back. But the Bible is crystal clear that no one on the face of this Earth knows exactly when.

The point is that fear will not last. Fear will make us believe for a time but one day we will become hardened to fear. What then? More often than not people turn away from God because their fear hasn't been based on the solid rock of Christ's love. Following for the wrong reasons will always fail.

WHAT ABOUT THE SIGNS?

Jesus had made mention of not believing the signs they had witnessed. Apparently, they saw that they weren't getting anywhere with Him. Maybe they could just

learn how to do this for themselves. So, they asked Jesus, “What do we have to do to work the miracles of God for ourselves?”

The answer was simple. The work of God for us is to believe on the Sent One - to believe in the Messiah, the Son of God. If we really believe in Him then we are looking for His will in our lives, not how many signs we can work to prove how holy we are or how close we are to the Lord. I believe in miracles. I have witnessed healings and I have experienced healing in my own body. I know God still works miracles by man’s standards yet today. But the gospel, though filled with miracles and signs, is not about miracles and signs. It is about bringing salvation to lost mankind.

These people heard the words of Jesus when He said that their duty was to believe in the One sent by God. But it seemed too simple. They were looking, in my estimation, for a way to gain selfish provision without having to do any work. So, they said, “What sign can you give us that what you are telling us is true?” Hello! Wake up here! Didn’t they just eat a very miraculous meal of bread and fish? What kind of sign would it take to really get their attention?

Their minds were still on food. I guess they were expecting a miracle breakfast, perhaps some egg and cheese biscuits from the leftovers of the day before? They “casually” mentioned how that God gave manna from Heaven for the Children of Israel while in route to the Promised Land.

These people were “sign seekers.” We still have them today. They are always running to the next great “miracle worker.” They will slight the true Church in a heartbeat in their tithes, offerings, and attendance. All they are looking for is the supernatural and the phenomenal. Again, I believe in miracles. I believe in signs and wonders. But when we are looking only for these things instead of what these things are supposed to accomplish for the Kingdom of God then we have the proverbial cart before the proverbial horse.

While they were on the subject of food Jesus told them that what they really needed was the true bread that came from Heaven. This sounded like a great deal so they said, “Sure Lord, give us this bread all the time!”

Jesus promptly explained that He was this bread that had come down from Heaven. He was the Bread of Life! He was this food that would cause one to never be hungry again. He was food and drink and He had come from Heaven to give it to them.

Now the Jews got really confused. Wasn’t this the son of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth? Hadn’t some of them seen Him grow up? How could He claim that He had come from Heaven? Of course, they couldn’t see past the nose on their own face. They could not understand the spiritual aspect of what Jesus was telling them.

SPIRITUAL BREAD

The bread that Jesus was providing wasn't physical food. It wouldn't sustain their physical body. But it went way beyond the physical needs of man. Jesus came to fulfill the provision that the human soul had been starving for throughout the centuries. He was going to clear their account with God. He was going to make the way to be free from the curse of sin and the sting of death. What a feast!

The next statements that Jesus made confused the thunder out of them. It has been twisted to mean extremely vulgar things especially in our own modern-day world. Jesus said that this bread was His own flesh. He further said that unless they ate His flesh and drank His blood then they had no life in them. It sounded gross. The immediate picture they saw was that of a cannibal actually feasting on His body and blood. What an awful picture!

Of course, He was referring to a deep spiritual truth. His broken body at crucifixion and His shed blood became the food we were talking about earlier. It is the food of the soul that reunites us with God. We can't eat Jesus with our mouths. We can't let His blood pass over our lips. But we can allow His grace and provision to bring nourishment to our souls that will give us our real life back! What a truth! What a miracle! What a sign and wonder – That the very Son of God would give Himself to us in such a way and give us our spiritual life back!

It was a hard saying and from that moment many who had been considered His disciples turned away from following Him. "This guy is crazy! We're getting away from Him as fast as we can!" So, they left. Many are still leaving today. If they can't see the signs and wonders then it's just not worth it to them. But there is so much more to Christ, so many more miracles that are not even considered as signs and wonders. If we are looking for a thrill ride then look somewhere else. Life can have spiritual thrill rides but not all the time. If excitement is what we want then we aren't coming to Christ for the right reasons. We'll follow for a while then get bored with it and go somewhere else. It happens every day in the Church that belongs to our Living God. They aren't following for the right reasons.

WILL WE STAY OR LEAVE?

It was then that Jesus turned to the twelve He had chosen. "Will you also leave?" He asked them. Now think about this. He was the Son of God. He already knew their hearts. As far as Jesus was concerned the question could have gone unasked. He is always teaching us. He asked the question so they could establish it in their own minds. Perhaps some of them had been contemplating that very thing so Jesus brought the issue out into the open. Know that He will always do this. If there is a question in our minds, or even the slightest doubt, as we speak with Him in prayer, He will bring that very thing to our attention. If we don't pray, watch out for He is sure to make something happen that will force us to confront the situation and the unbelief.

After a little thought it was Peter who proclaimed, “Lord where would we go? You’ve got the words of eternal life. We have come to know that You are the Messiah – The Christ – the very Son of God!” That confession settled it. If there had been any doubt, forcing that proclamation instilled the faith needed to seal their belief.

Sometimes it hurts to confront the issue and the unbelief within us. But when we do, we can know that Christ will allow us to see the truth and the issue will be settled in our hearts once and for all.

If you have had questions and doubts, let me ask you this, “Where else can you go to find the words of eternal life? Who else in this world is the very Christ needed to fulfill your life?” Only Jesus Christ!

CHAPTER 14

The Challenge of Familiarity

John 7:1-9

“You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.”

(John 7:8)

There was a commercial on television advertising a medical product; perhaps you remember it. In the commercial two boys are at a public phone and one is daring the other to lick the part you talk into. Of course, the boy being dared didn't want to lick the phone and the grimace on his face said it all. The boy doing the daring then "double dog dared him." Every young boy knows that you can't respectfully get out of a "double dog dare." It brings dishonor to any boy not yielding to the dare. And so, reluctantly the boy being dared took a long hard lick of the mouthpiece of the phone.

In the next scene, he is, of course, in bed with a bad cold or perhaps even the flu. But at the end of the commercial he got his revenge. Now he was the one doing the "double dog daring" and we see the other boy begin to pull a piece of ABC (already been chewed) gum from the bottom of a bleacher.

Who invented the "double dog dare anyway?" Maybe some of you know but I don't. However, I would suspect an older brother had a major hand in it.

Jesus' brothers issued a "double dog dare" to the King of kings. The Bible tells us that they didn't have faith in Him. They didn't believe that He was who He claimed to be. After all, they had grown up with Him. We have no official record of Jesus' childhood except for the very brief incidences described in God's word. I imagine that Jesus had a fairly normal childhood for a poor, Jewish boy. There were games, struggles, and fights. They remembered Jesus as their brother and it was very difficult for them to see Him any other way. What was going on in Jesus' life didn't seem real. They couldn't comprehend Him as anyone but their big brother. Maybe Jesus embarrassed them. Have you ever been embarrassed by a sibling? Perhaps you've been on the other end and you have embarrassed a brother or sister when they have aspired to things that seemed greater than what you thought they were capable of doing. It isn't right but it happens.

That's what was happening to Jesus. They had heard of the great and wonderful miracles that had taken place in the crowds that had gathered around Him. Maybe they

had witnessed a miracle for themselves. But they just didn't think that it could be so. After all, this was just their big brother!

It could have been that they were jealous of Him. I believe that Mary and Joseph tried to raise Him normally but they could never forget all that took place at His birth and even during the youthful years that followed. It would have been very difficult not to treat Him differently. We can only speculate about these things but they seem reasonable. Had they treated Jesus differently from the others it certainly would have been valid grounds for jealousy.

Whatever the cause, when the time came to migrate to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, they couldn't resist the opportunity to poke at their older brother. "If you are who you say you are then wouldn't this be the perfect time to make a public appearance? Everyone of influence would be in Jerusalem." It didn't make sense to them unless He just didn't really have the goods and that is what they thought.

WHEN OTHERS HAVE NO CONFIDENCE IN YOUR ABILITY

It's hard to be obedient to God in the presence of those who don't have confidence in you. They have witnessed your life before. They know and remember well the mistakes and wrongs you have done (the devil will not let them forget it either). To them you are always brother or sister, or good ole' Joe. It becomes a temptation to escape, to go elsewhere to fulfill what God is telling you. That is exactly what God has planned for some. But for others the challenge is to fulfill God's plan in the midst of the confusion, accusation, and ridicule of those we think should understand the most about what is happening in our lives.

The devil knows this and he is purpose-driven to thwart any effectiveness God has planned for you in the lives of those who know you best. The devil works both sides. He tempts friends and relatives to doubt your experience and calling while making you feel like an outcast in what should be a very comfortable place amongst those you know best. What do you do? What can you do? At risk of sounding cliché, all we can do is to stand in that which God has given and promised to us.

Was Jesus a coward? Was He afraid? He was well aware of the danger that awaited Him in Jerusalem. He knew that many influential people in Jerusalem wanted Him dead and out of the way. Most of us would never have returned to the capitol city knowing the situation. On the surface it seemed that Jesus felt the same way. His brothers knew this as well. That's what makes us to know that their prodding was in ridicule of him.

THE IMPRESSIVE ANSWER OF JESUS

Jesus' answer is very impressive. He simply said that it wasn't yet His time. What did He mean by that? He could have said, "Hey guys! Give me a break! It's dangerous for me there. What? Do you guys want to see me dead?" He didn't say those things. He

realized that God has a plan. He will not allow our natural lives to be over until He is ready. Isn't that comforting and reassuring? But wait a minute. We're talking about the Son of God here. Of course, His time wouldn't be up until God's plan was fulfilled. So, what makes us think that He will do the same for us? The simple answer is that God also has a plan for each of our lives. As long as we are pursuing His plan He will guide and pilot our lives until the day He has appointed. We can be careless or decide to end our own lives and so end God's plan. He won't interrupt that reckless decision because of the free will He has given us. But as long as we are operating in Him, He will fulfill His plan.

Jesus said, "It is not yet My time." He then explained that His brothers had nothing to worry about. The world didn't hate them, but it did hate Him because He testified against it. He was saying that the one behind the world system, the devil, was doing everything he could to stop Him for He stood against all the evil that came from that system.

We must be careful because Christ in us still stands against that system. For that reason, the devil is constantly looking for ways to destroy us. But don't lose hope – Don't despair! Do not fear for the Bible tells us that, "He that is in us is greater than he that is in this world." (1 John 4:4).

Then Jesus spoke directly to the challenge. He simply told His brothers, "You go on to the feast. I'm not going yet." This was the challenge of familiarity. He withstood the "double dog dare." He just said, "I'm not going yet."

A GROWING PROBLEM

A growing problem in the U.S. Church is the resistance of those we are familiar with to those called to minister. We have learned much about God's word. Our free-enterprise economy has bled over into the Church and denominations are springing up all over the country.

The increasing number of priests, pastors, and church leaders that have been caught up in sexual scandals further fuels this situation. Some have been guilty and some have been innocent. I don't believe that anyone who is guilty should be allowed to get away with crime and sin. However, the publicity of these situations has caused a suspicious eye to be raised toward those who claim a call from God. Some of this is justified and some is an outright attack from the enemy.

To those of you who are under attack unjustly I remind you to take refuge in Christ Jesus. While the world may lose respect, if we are operating in the will of God and are patiently walking in His command and promise, He will be glorified in the end. We need to develop "thick skins" over our feelings and be willing to realize that it isn't so much of a physical battle as it is a spiritual battle. Instead of justifying and spending valuable time defending ourselves let us simply say with Christ, "My time has not yet come."

This becomes more complicated when it comes from those we know. We can be strong enough to resist when it comes from those who aren't close to us. But when it comes from family members, friends or acquaintances, then it becomes a completely different matter. Now temptations toward anger and hurt enter into the picture.

In these times if we can only remember the answer of Jesus, "It's not yet my time," we can put the strife and stress in a bag and rest in knowing that following His will is the right thing to do. We continue in the ministry in which He has placed us in His time. His time is always the right time. If we are doing what He has placed in our hearts according to the word of God, then regardless the opposition and objection, even from those we know, we are in the right.

It isn't easy. It requires us to swallow some pride to resist the "double dog dare" of the world. But if we are operating truly in Christ, then He will get glory and justification will emerge when the dust clears. That's why we remain in Him - We want to be on the right side of the dust.

CHAPTER 15

The Challenge of Bold Wisdom

John 7:10-36

“But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, ‘Where is He?’”

(John 7:10-11)

There are those who know how to hold their tongues but aren't very good at expressing themselves when the time comes, and there are those who hold nothing back but have a problem with not saying anything when it would be wise to refrain from speaking. Words expressed in true wisdom, whether they are words of accolade or words of rebuke, are like precious gems to the soul of man. But there are very few people in this world who can do both well.

By and large the Church has taught us that it is better to keep silent when people bring insult and offense to us. We are told that this is the "Christian" thing to do. However, a careful examination of the scripture will reveal that many of our Christian leaders and examples such as Paul, Peter, and even Jesus Himself, spoke some very harsh words to others. A closer look at these same passages will show us that even though they spoke some harsh words, they were always backed up with scripture and spoken in such a way as to improve the quality of life on behalf of the subject rather than just bring defense to self.

Jesus spoke in such a way in this chapter. After His brothers had left to go to the feast at Jerusalem, the Bible tells us that Jesus also went, but secretly. His wisdom was remarkable. Just as He knew it would happen, the people were looking for Him. Whispers made full circles amongst the crowd and no one spoke their true opinion openly because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. The wrong opinion about this sensitive subject could find them expelled from the Synagogue and considered an outcast in the community. Some believed Jesus to be the Messiah, while others considered Him to be a deceiver. You know how it is when a hot subject becomes the National sensation. Everybody has an opinion.

It was during the middle of the feast that Jesus showed up teaching in the temple. The people, as well as the Jewish leaders, were amazed at how much He knew about the scriptures. What amazed them was that He knew as much as they did but had

supposedly never gone to school. You don't have to go to school if you wrote the book, right?

Knowing the very thoughts of their hearts, Jesus proceeded to justify His knowledge. His teaching was directly from the One who had sent Him. He was relaying the message. No one could argue with that. We are to be messengers to this lost world. It is our job not to determine who is right and who is wrong about a teaching, but to deliver the message God has allowed us to understand to those He has sent us to tell. If we'd all get that straight in our heads I, for one, believe we'd see a whole lot more people won to God.

THE HONEST ANSWER OF JESUS

Then Jesus said something that sounded like it had a death wish tied to it. He said, "Didn't Moses give you the law, but not one of you obeys it? So why do you seek to kill Me?" To my knowledge there had been no contracts taken out on His life as of yet. The Jews had talked about how they could capture Jesus and execute Him behind closed doors. But we all know that somehow, no matter how closely safeguarded, rumors get started and spread like wildfire.

It may have seemed insane but the bold wisdom of Jesus did its job. Now they couldn't say anything without giving away their true intent. Those who favored Jesus could start a rebellion. So, they denied it, "You're possessed with a devil. Who's seeking to take your life?" But they knew the truth in their hearts. This bold wisdom caught them up in their own plan. They couldn't just go amongst the people and arrest Him now. Had he come to the feast like everyone else they could have arrested Him at the city gates but He had come secretly.

Jesus' wisdom always left people thinking and wondering. Yes, He could have just come out and spoken plainly, but then, it would have left nothing to motivate others to search their hearts. Way too many don't want to do any heart searching for it requires us to examine ourselves, look at our own motives, and expose things within us which may represent unbelief or even things that may make us look bad in the eyes of others. What Christian leader wants to look less than perfect? But the truth of the matter is, we are less than perfect. Sometimes we don't "practice what we preach." We need that self-examination. When we examine ourselves, even when we do find things inside us that don't reflect Christ, we allow ourselves to grow. If those things aren't pointed out, how will we ever know they are there?

HEART SEARCHING QUESTIONS

The words Jesus spoke to this crowd like, "Why is it wrong to make a man completely well on the Sabbath but it's okay to circumcise on the Sabbath because it is the eighth day?" or, "You might think that you know where I came from but I actually came from the One Who sent Me," or "You will look for Me but not be able to find me because where I go you can't come," left the people wondering what He meant. But that was

Jesus' purpose. It is still His purpose. Sometimes He lets plans fall into chaos on purpose. Sometimes He allows bad things to happen to us. Sometimes He gives us "bad hair days." It is all to make us think. It may seem like "cruel and unusual" punishment but it will accomplish its intended purpose.

Jesus really only wants the very best for us. It would be best for us, or so we think, if everything would just fall into place. "Haven't I done what He asked me to do? I'm sure I was obedient in what I gave. Why then would He still let this thing happen?" We question, but then, that's the whole plan.

Debbie and I had been dating for a few months. We had planned all week to go out that Friday evening and get a bite to eat. Now I know that what I'm about to tell you sounds stupid but I must tell you that I had gotten used to speaking and assuming that others understood what I meant. No one had told me that, at times, the things I said sounded rude, or cruel. I just thought they knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't really mean things like that. Okay, I know I'm starting to ramble here so I'll just tell you the story. We got to the restaurant, sat down at our table and began looking at our menus. I chose what I wanted to eat then looked at Debbie and asked, "Are you going to get anything?" What a stupid question. We came to the restaurant to eat, right? So why would I even question whether she wanted anything or not? Of course, not knowing me but a few months she became offended very quickly. She looked at me and her response was, "No, Jerry, I don't want anything." I could tell she was angry but why? Man was I hard headed or what? "What's wrong?" I asked, but she wouldn't respond.

Now what I had meant to say was, "What would you like to eat?" In my crazy assuming mind, that's what I meant when I said, "Do you want anything?" Over the years I have said many stupid things like that, and miraculously Debbie put up with them, but not without letting me know how I sounded. I still come up with some stupid things sometimes but I'm getting better. I couldn't understand in those instances why God allowed her to get angry with me, but God was using her to bring to my attention a problem that I hadn't gotten under control, and at times didn't even realize it was there. Assuming people know what you mean, is a dangerous thing. We need to say what we mean and I have learned that the hard way, let me tell you (I'm sure Debbie wished that I had learned the lessons a different way too).

GOD WILL GET OUR ATTENTION

This is but a small example but it does illustrate why God will let things happen that seem bad and maybe are bad, but He got our attention didn't He? How can we ever grow if we don't know we need to? God lets us know, whether it is by easy means or a slap in the face because He loves us that much.

It is bold wisdom when a friend let's another friend know that he or she has something on their face, or that their shoe is untied or their fly is open. Why? Because it shows that they care about how we appear to others. Jesus cares because He loves us and wants to use us as His witnesses.

In the military you get some pretty stern and downright seemingly mean lessons. Why would a drill sergeant waste his time getting his trainees up at 3:00 AM? If it was just to be cruel, then that means he had to get up at 2:00 AM in order to be ready to get me up at 3:00 AM. Why would anyone do something as insane as that? You see it made me ask a question. But what if I had been in a combat situation? It would be a good thing if my leader had thought enough to take time to warn me of coming danger in time to be prepared for it. It was part of training. So, it is with the kingdom of God. A lot of unpleasantness comes to us because in His Divine wisdom He knows that we'll need that lesson later.

THE LORD WANTS US TO HAVE BOLD WISDOM

I believe that the Lord wants us to have that type of bold wisdom as well. We correct other Christians because we love them. We critique them but not to make them do like we do, instead because we know it is for their best. We have to be careful with this one because it's easy to take advantage and actually get into manipulation instead of loving and helping. That's why it's not just being bold, but being bold with wisdom.

On the other side of the coin, we have to learn to accept bold wisdom from others. It requires a diet of "crow" sometimes. It means that there are times we need to get used to having a foot dangling from our mouths. Sometimes it's a whole lot easier being on the giving end of this bold wisdom thing rather than on the receiving end. But we all have "stupid" things in our lives that require people with bold wisdom to help us with. I know that I do. Thank God for my wife, Debbie, whom God used to show me this. It hurts sometimes, but so does pulling out a black head, or a splinter from one's finger. It's for our own good, right?

CHAPTER 16

The Challenge of a Life Change

John 7:37-53

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”

(John 7:38)

In case anyone has ever thought differently, marriage will change your life forever. I was so in love with her and I knew that she was the one God had picked for me. I couldn't even imagine anyone else as my wife. But there were many changes in store, not just for me but for her also. Just before we were married both of us were living at home. We were used to having our own rooms, our own beds, and as much freedom as a 21- and 22-year-old could have while still living at home.

Once we were married and the first few days had past, settling in was next on the agenda. Each of us had little idiosyncrasies that we were not used to. I was always organized and not very spontaneous. I had a plan and was very comfortable sticking with it. She, on the other hand, loved spontaneity. I normally had a very even temper. It took a lot to make me mad and even then, I seldom lost my temper. But she, in her spontaneity, believed in saying what was on her mind and getting it over with. To say the least, even though we loved each other very much, it took a lot of time to get used to each other. Who am I kidding? After 39 years of marriage before she passed from this life, I don't know if we ever mastered the art.

Change can be very good, however. religion doesn't offer much change. While there are good things about form, ceremony, and tradition, being a Christian is all about change. Christ came into the world right in the middle of staunch ritualistic worship. Actually, there was very little real worship involved. If you sinned you showed up at the temple with the appropriate sacrifice to make amends for that sin. You observed the holy days and gave your tithe to the priests and everything was okay.

But there was no question as to who was in control. It was more important to keep the priests and religious leaders happy than it was to worship God. I know that sounds sacrilegious but it was reality.

Along came Jesus proclaiming a personal relationship with God. It was fresh to the people. It wasn't about form and it didn't require a further monetary sacrifice on their

behalf. As a matter of fact, it was completely free as far as money was concerned. It did require a commitment of one's life and possibly a drastic change in lifestyle but there was freedom involved - Freedom from the slavery of being controlled by man, religious or not.

After confronting the secret mission of attempting to arrest Jesus, He looked at the people in the temple and exclaimed, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me for refreshment. Those who believe in me, as the scriptures have said, from his very soul will flow rivers of living, refreshing water!" This was not simply a suggestion of change, but a radical exclamation of change. It was not just ritual and form but a true reclamation and rebirth into life.

It was exciting. Think about it, all the Jewish people had to look forward to was ritualistic poverty. Unless you had been fortunate enough to be born into the right family, that was life. Then along comes this man who says you can be reborn into life and backed up His authority with signs and wonders. He healed the sick, cast out demons, cleansed lepers and did many things that couldn't be explained any other way except with the word "miracle."

The crowd began to echo things like, "Surely this is the great Prophet the scripture talks about." Others bypassed the padded words and just came out and said, "He must be the Messiah!" It was a promise worth holding on to.

WE STILL NEED THIS LIFE CHANGE

Today we still need this life change, perhaps more than ever. In this day of instant everything, the need and even requirement for hundreds of dollars each and every week just to keep up the American necessities of life, we have become slaves to ritual and form. Every day we encounter those who are playing the game but are obviously unhappy in their lives. The majority of American people are living for another time besides now. We look to the future for peace, security and better times. But more often than not, by the time we reach those hopeful days our health, mainly maimed from overwork, pressure and worry, will not allow us to enjoy them because we don't feel like it.

Now, living for Christ won't change the fact that we've got to work in order to stay warm in the winter, cool in the summer, watch TV, and take a bath. If we have no loans at all, we still must pay the growing costs of water, sewer, electric, gas, telephone, cable or satellite, and Internet costs. Unless we are independently wealthy or have chosen to live on a mountain away from society this is going to be a reality for all of us. There's got to be something different.

THERE IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT

And there is. Jesus was talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit after His death and resurrection. His final sacrifice for sin and resurrection from death not only paid for that sin but also defeated the curse of death. Our belief in Christ applies this wonderful victory to us. But then the Holy Spirit comes to live in our lives and we experience a life-

changing event. Our lives are made new and we now can live for today and have hope in today because of Christ.

THE CHALLENGE OF A LIFE CHANGE

As glorious as this life change may sound, it is also extremely challenging. Christ, by His sacrifice for sin, and the Holy Spirit, by His entering into our lives, takes care of the change that must happen inside. But they leave us in control. Perhaps we would be a whole lot better off if they took control. Maybe this new lifestyle would be simpler if they just made us do what the Bible tells us to do. But they don't work that way.

As we grow in our new life, we read of things in the Bible that seem contradictory in our lives. The Bible says that we should be full of love for our fellow man but we find ourselves harboring hatred. The Bible tells us that we are to be content with what we have, but we are constantly wanting more and more "stuff." The Bible tells us to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves yet in our American culture many of us don't have any idea what our neighbor's last name is.

It is most definitely a challenge. When we realize those shortcomings in our lives then we determine that we are going to change those things. For a while we do well. We begin feeling very good about ourselves for overcoming these things in our lives that don't measure up. But as surely as I am writing this there will come a day when out of nowhere that same old problem once again rears its ugly head and we find ourselves yielding to it. Why? We can't imagine the reason we have to go through this thing again. It seems beyond reasoning.

Paul understood about the battle between human nature and doing what is right. Read Romans Chapter 7 and you will see that Paul understood our human predicament quite well. He was basically saying that we want to do the right thing but we find our flesh doing the completely opposite. What's with that?! It is the war of the flesh and the Spirit. It is one that is taken battle after battle, one at a time. Christ has already won the final war, but the enemy refuses to give up.

It's kind of like the American Civil War. For months after the war had been officially declared "over," both sides were fighting. It took a while for the news to reach them, so until they got official word the killing continued, battles still raged and men still died, even though it was already won.

We still have a fight on our hands even though the final result has been decided. That fight will include victories and failures. We love the victories but we despise the failures because they portray us as weak. We don't like that. But even the lost battles become victories when we realize that the losses become lessons. God uses even our failure to teach how much more we need to depend on Him.

This doesn't mean we don't have work to do. It is a battle, often a constant one and it isn't easy. But it does mean that we can take joy in what we do because of what

Christ has done for us. We can give up worry. We can give up the pressure and live for now, being the best we can be in our witness for Christ.

He does change us forever. His Spirit coming into our lives will cause rivers of life-giving water to flow from within us spilling over to those we come into contact with. This is our greatest witness. This is the victory for the great Church, the gathering which belongs to Christ. He is hope for the world. He has the answers we are all looking for.

CHAPTER 17

The Challenge of Being Caught

John 8:1-11

“Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act.’”

(John 8:3)

As a teenager I worked part-time at a Coca-Cola Warehouse. My job was to stack the cases of canned soda on the delivery trucks the night before so they'd be ready to go early the next morning. Occasionally some of the cases would get dented or a can or two punctured. Since they couldn't sell these cases to their customers they would be set aside and sold to employees at a greatly reduced price.

I knew it was wrong, but for some reason the idea popped into my head that all I had to do was to dent a few cases of my favorite flavors and I could purchase them later and save a lot of money. Of course, this was stealing but I just couldn't seem to help myself. I got away with this on the first few cases, but a day or two later, while in process of damaging a case, the warehouse supervisor rounded the corner and caught me in the act. "What do you think you're doing young man?"

"I – I – I'm sorry, sir. I won't do it again."

"See that you don't. Now get back to work!"

"Yes sir." I felt so guilty inside. I should have realized that anything you have to hide from others is probably wrong, unless it is a surprise gift or something like that. To make a long story short, as a Christian I had to first repent to God for my act and then go to my supervisor and confess what I had done. To my relief he thanked me for confessing and told me not to do it again. I didn't, but it hadn't felt good to be caught in the act.

The woman in the scripture passage was caught in the very act of adultery, which tells us that either she or the man involved, was married. This is a very serious sin. The world we live in today would wonder, "What's the big deal?" Aside from the risk of diseases, the sin of sexual promiscuity is wrong because of the "spiritual" exchange that is experienced between a man and a woman during the physical action. A bonding takes place that is intended only for a husband and wife and regardless what people might say,

that very healthy exchange is lost when the intended commitment of marriage is bypassed.

They brought the woman who had just been caught in the very act and stood her before Jesus. They looked at Him and demanded, "This woman was taken in the act of adultery. The Law says that she is to be stoned, but because everyone thinks you to be such a great teacher from God, what do you say about it?" They knew what Jesus had been teaching about love and forgiveness. If He agreed with the Law then it would defame His teaching. On the other hand, if He said that they should forgive the woman then He was going against the Law given by God, His Father, or so He had claimed. They would then be justified in taking Him into custody thus eliminating the threat He brought against their regime. They thought they had it all figured out.

A PAWN IN THE GAME OF LIFE

The point is that this woman faced death for her sin in this life-game of the Pharisees. She was merely a pawn in the struggle for grace. The devil views each of us in the very same way. He ever accuses each of us for our sin. If you could see him, you would see his glee when he succeeds in stealing away a soul from the Creator. It is a game of life and death, with us as the playing pieces. The devil doesn't want us to succeed. He doesn't really have any love or hope for our success. He only dangles attractive things in front of us to lure us to his side. This may sound a little old fashioned but the picture painted is true to life. To the devil we are only expendable "bullet catchers" in this unending spiritual war between him and God.

As the Pharisees flung their accusations of the woman in the face of Jesus, the Bible tells us that He stooped and began to write in the dirt. We aren't told what He wrote though many have speculated about it. Perhaps they are right. Maybe He was writing things like "hate," "lust," "not forgiving," "lying," or "stealing." He could have written things that reminded the Pharisees of instances of forgiveness by God in the Old Testament like when David committed adultery with Bathsheba.

When they finished making their case against the woman to Jesus, He looked at them and simply said, "The one among you who has no sin in their life, feel free to throw the first stone at her." Jesus then returned to writing in the dirt.

The woman braced herself for the pain she knew would soon be coming. Her only hope was that one of them would strike a fatal blow to the head early in the process. Otherwise, she was in for a very painful, slow death. What would her parents think of her? What would be the memory people would share of her life? She must have thought of all those she loved and in the same second remembered all the unrealized hopes and dreams that now would never happen.

But no rocks were hurled her way. Instead, her accusers began to disappear one by one. A ray of hope cut through the bleakness of her soul. Could it be? Had she escaped the gripping fear of death? Soon she found herself alone with Jesus.

WE ARE THE SAME AS THE WOMAN

We find ourselves standing in the woman's place. Satan accuses us of our sin. There is no doubt that we are guilty. We deserve death. The rocks that we expect to come hurtling through the air at any moment all have our name on them. The Bible says that all have sinned and missed the mark with God (Romans 3:23). Without a question we are in the wrong.

The enemies of our soul stand poised with rocks in hand. All that stops them is their wait for Jesus to speak the words, "Yes, he is guilty" and the rocks would be flying at us. Instead, Jesus stands in our defense, not with words but with action. He reminds that we are under His grace. He has paid the penalty for our sin. Because of Him we escape the Law that says we must die because we are unworthy of God. By His grace we stand not guilty.

WHERE ARE THE ACCUSERS?

Jesus asked the woman, "Where are your accusers." She stammered, "They have all left." There remain none to accuse – none to throw stones. They cannot stand against us for they are guilty as well. The Lawyer of lawyers has pled our case. The Judge of judges has heard the verdict of "not guilty" based on His grace. The sentence of death has not been issued because of Him – ALL because of Him.

He told her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." It sounded wonderful. She was forgiven. Now all she had to do was not commit any more sins. It seemed all was well. But I believe the story goes farther. No more is recorded of this woman. But if I were a betting man, I'd say she was unable to fulfill that command. "Go and sin no more."

I'm sure she had no problem with adultery. After the near-death experience she had, I feel confident that she didn't commit adultery ever again, but what about all those other things? What about telling an untruth to protect herself? What about not forgiving those whom had unfairly put her on trial before Jesus? What about envying those whom had more than she did? You see, regardless how hard we may try, we find ourselves in a situation in which we fail. Now what do we do? He said, "Go and sin no more."

HOW CAN WE GO AND SIN NO MORE?

He knew that this would happen. He knew that when we came to Him in our salvation experience that we would greatly desire to "go and sin no more." Perhaps we are strong and safe from the "big" sins. We wouldn't even think about doing those things. But then that "small" temptation is thrown our way. In a moment of weakness, we yield and once again we are found "guilty." We disobeyed our vow to Him. Now what?

Read the words found in 1 John 2:1 – *“My little children, I write these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”* What joyful words! Only our loving Savior would be so thoughtful! He knew that even after we came to Him in salvation we would still fail and so He inspired His beloved disciple to write these wonderful, sweet words. He continues to plead our case and never stops!

He has taken care of everything. He has not only chased away our accusers but He continues to protect us. He never stops caring for us. We may distance ourselves from Him but even then, He continues to care. He never leaves us – He never forsakes us! He is ever near even when we are far.

Remember what He has done for us; remember that we are all an “adulterous woman.” We have all faced the challenge of being caught. Remember and know that He is there. We should never take our sin lightly. We should always be sorry when we sin. But then repent and allow His provision to do its work. Let His love bath us.

It is a wonderful thing that He has done for us. Never abuse that, but know it is there. Now begin to fill your mind with what He has done for you. We will find that the more we fill our mind with thoughts for our Savior the less we will sin. Glory to God! He is the Master who keeps us safe as long as we continue in Him. Let us never forget from where He has taken us and let us go on in Him.

CHAPTER 18

The Challenge of My Father

John 8:12-59

“You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also.”

(John 8:19)

It was cold, even frigid. Twelve inches or better of snow covered the ground. It was a Sunday afternoon and we had no definite plans for that day after church. My brothers and sister and I were out in the back yard having a snowball fight and building snow forts. Our dad emerged from the back door and asked us if we'd like to build an igloo. Of course, we did! We spent all afternoon working on this "snow castle" and, with Dad's help, it had a crawl space and all. The only difference between our igloo and a real one was that we had put in a couple of windows. It was really cool.

What made it even more special was the fact that Dad helped us build it. He worked second shift most of the time when we were growing up and we didn't see him much except for the Saturday's he wasn't obligated to do something else and Sunday afternoons. It was seldom we had opportunity to do anything with him and in these rare moments great memories were made. I'll never forget that igloo. It lasted most of the winter and we loved it but it was the gift of his help that afternoon that made it so special.

Jesus had a very unique relationship with His Father. It was one like no other in history or future. It is somewhat complicated because we think of a father-son relationship as two different people. Jesus Christ is the Son of God but He is also God. He knew the mind of God because He was God, fathered by the Holy Spirit (Who is also God). Again, it sounds complicated but it really isn't. He is just God Who exists in three forms, with the ability of all three to be active at the same time.

Jesus loved His Father with a love we still have a hard time understanding. The Church teaches love and so we should, but do we really know what we're talking about? Not completely.

JUST WHAT IS A FATHER?

Some today have a distorted view of what a father is supposed to be. There are those who think of dad as one who deserted them leaving them to be raised by mom. There are others who remember dad as a drunken, raging, fearsome individual who

caused them to spend Friday night hiding in the closet or shivering in the bed as dad beat up mom. Some even remember dad as the individual who stole their virginity from them at a very early age. These are distorted memories of a father that the devil would like to leave us with. He does this not only to destroy the lives of individuals but also to distort our vision of God as our Father.

But when Jesus spoke about His Father in these verses, He used words like, "I am with the Father who sent Me . . . My Father who sent Me bears witness of Me . . . If you knew Me you would also know My Father . . . My Father taught Me to say these things." What a witness of a father!

God is the epitome of what a real father is supposed to be like. He is a Provider, a Warrior protecting His family, yet gentle to those He loves. He disciplines with love, teaches with love, rebukes with love, and, well, the Bible tells us that He is love!

God the Father had equipped Jesus for His complete ministry, from His moment of birth, to His death on the cross, to His final triumph on Resurrection Day. Jesus' constant communication with His Father kept Him informed as to what He needed to do to accomplish the mission.

HE WANTS TO BE OUR FATHER TOO

The wonderful news is that because of Christ's accomplished mission, God wants to be our Father too. He wants us to accomplish the mission He has outlined for each of us. Some have had missions that ended in death, others, missions that have carried them to the far ends of the Earth. The mission will be exactly what He has tailored us to do. It will match the gifts and desires He has placed in our lives.

But He won't just teach us and then go on to the next class. Our earthly experience between a father teaching a son will one day end in the son being completely on his own, whether that comes by death or growing up. Regardless the relationship we have with our earthly father it will one day be ended.

But not with God – Not with our Heavenly Father. He will never leave us. He will not only teach us but He will stay right by our side. We may not see Him. There will be times that we may not even be able to feel His presence. But know that He is always there. When it seems there is absolutely no hope of success, He is there. When it seems that all is lost, He is there. When it seems we are totally alone even then He is there.

He teaches us what we need to know. Yes, Bible colleges and institutions of higher learning can be very helpful and can be used of God to equip us. But when it comes right down to duty then it is those things He has put into our hearts and instilled inside of us by the Holy Spirit that will remind us what we must say or do.

Our Father will be there when we hurt and will always know what to do. The pain that we go through we will not go through alone, for God will be there. When others have let us down and forsaken us, our Father will never forsake us. He will be there. Regardless the physical pain, the mental anguish or the turmoil of loss, He will be there.

When we are successful, He will be there. He will encourage us in our victories and reward us for our conquering. He will hold us as we raise our sword of victory over our enemy – the devil. He will fill us with warmth when we have looked past our own needs and extended ourselves to others. He will let victory come through when failure seems the only outcome. He will turn our failures and shortcomings into victory as we hold close to Him. He will be there.

When our mission is completed and it is time to leave this Earth, He will be there. In fact, as we cross over into the glorious place of the righteous dead, He will welcome us there. There is no place that we can go where He won't be. We can be sure of that when we can't be sure of anything else.

THE CHALLENGE OF MY FATHER

He will also challenge us to fulfill His will. Even though He has put the desire and the ability in our hearts and lives, it will not be an easy thing to do. He knows that and with firm love will let us face the challenge. He will let us go so far on our own, not so that He will know our limits but that we will know our limits. He'll let us go to the cliff of failure and sometimes will let us fall over the edge because He knows that we must come to the point that we realize our need for Him and His help. But He will never let us hit the ground! He will swoop upon us even in our failure like an eagle catches her young and bear us up on His protective wings.

He'll let us fail on purpose for our own good. As our training progresses, we will know how much we need Him. We will learn our limitations and know the moment we must give the helm to Him. He allows this because He loves us and He knows that sometimes failure is the best teacher, especially for hard-headed people like us.

I am thankful for my Father, God. No matter how close our friends may be on this planet God will be closer. No matter how much our enemies hate us God will love us. When we see just a glimpse of our Heavenly Father then we see the light that Jesus spoke of in the first verses of this section. The light of God shines when we know the presence of our Heavenly Father!

CHAPTER 19

The Challenge of the Blind Man

John 9:1-41

*“And as Jesus passed by, He saw a man
which was blind from his birth.”*

(John 9:1)

“I think your son needs glasses,” my fourth-grade teacher told my mother.

This statement came as a result of several weeks of falling grades. It wasn't hard to solve the mystery of my failing grades when you took a simple look at the pattern. When a student who habitually makes "A's" and "B's" begins to slip into "C's" and "D's" one begins to wonder what is going on. My homework assignments were all okay. The "A-B" thing was still going on there. But the pop quizzes began to tell a different tale. Handout tests reflected the same "A-B" results but the daily quiz written on the blackboard was a whole different story. My seat was located in the middle of the classroom and for some strange reason, I couldn't read what was up there - it was all just a blur.

My teacher had asked me if I was having trouble seeing to which I responded, "Some." So, she moved me to the front row. I still had trouble. She sent a note home which said that she needed to talk with my parents and like any suspecting child, I knew I was probably in big trouble. It would have been different if I had quit trying, but I really wanted to do well in school. If she would just stop putting the assignments on the board, or at least learn how to write so I could read what she put up there, it would be different!

You see, I never suspected that I needed glasses. In fact, when I thought about it, all my childhood memories were recorded as blurry in my mind. I probably needed glasses long before I got them, but just never really suspected anything because I thought everyone's vision was like mine.

When I put on my first pair of glasses, I thought the floor was going to jump up and hit me in the face. I'll never forget the trip home. As I was getting used to the glasses, I could see the shape of leaves on trees and I could read road signs before we got right up to them. Even though kids at school made fun of "four-eyes" I didn't mind because a whole new world had opened up to me! For the first time in all my recollections I could see clearly!

The man that Jesus helped was born blind. Stop and think about it - He had never been able to see. He had always been in darkness. He must have heard about seeing and I'm sure his parents tried to describe things to him, but without actually ever having sight, he could not even imagine. Without any pictures in his mind there was nothing to compare it to. Why would God do such a thing? Why would God allow this to happen to anyone?

WHO SINNED?

Many people seem to think that someone has sinned against God when disease or deformity is involved. There is no doubt that these things are the result of sin in the world, what more can we expect from an imperfect world but imperfections? This train of thought actually stems from ancient times but is still a prominent way of thinking even today.

People have a tendency to believe that God is punishing them for sin they have committed or perhaps the wrong doing of their parents. Job was accused of this very thing by his so called "comforters." Following this train of thought Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" They were very sincere in their question. As a matter of fact, they may have been eager to display their knowledge of the common religious teaching. It seemed like the theological thing to say.

Jesus answered His disciples by saying, "That the works of God might be made manifest in him (*Clearly apparent to the sight or understanding; obvious*)." Neither this man nor his parents had committed sin worthy of such punishment. He was born blind just for this moment in time when he would display the power of God in a magnificent way. When the miracle this man needed was completed it would be known from the start that it was from God.

It kind of makes you think differently about deformities. Now I'm not saying that all disease, sickness, and birth defects are to bring glory to God. I don't have all the answers, and quite frankly, the teaching we addressed above regarding misfortune and sin probably got started just like this. The first thing we need to learn about God is that you can't put Him in a box and try to say that, just because one thing is true, all similar things work the same way. God has a plan and a will regarding each and every one of us and what we must learn is to seek Him and His will for our own lives. Only then will misfortune, disease, sickness and deformity make sense.

WORK WHILE IT IS DAY

Jesus said, "Work God's works while it is day." It is significant that Jesus used this choice of words. This man had never seen light (which is required for sight). Jesus was saying that He must do what God had assigned Him to do while there was time, but He was going to bring a new day – the first day with light – for this blind man. Jesus is the light of the world! He is the One who brings true sight. He wants to bring sight to each and every one in the world. Not just in the form of healed eyes, but also in the form of renewed spiritual eyes. Jesus wants to bring spiritual light so that we may truly see.

First, Jesus made mud with His own saliva and anointed the blind man's eyes. This seemed a strange thing to do. Why make one, as this blind man who seemed to have suffered so much, endure more by walking around with mud on his eyes? But Jesus knows what is in our hearts. He didn't do this to further humiliate this man. I'm guessing that over the years the man had formed a type of pride in his blindness. Wouldn't we have to justify begging for a living? Jesus had to break through this pride if that was the case. Jesus always does things for a purpose, not to be novel or unique, but to truly get to the heart of the problem.

WE ARE SENT

He sent the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The name "Siloam" means "sent." He was sent away to wash with mud all over his eyes. Jesus always sends us. He always asks something of our faith – not for His benefit, but for ours. The man was sent.

I can imagine this blind man stumbling around, trying to find his way to the Pool of Siloam. But this was his one chance and he seemed determined. Somehow, even though he could not see with his eyes, he saw what Jesus was doing for him and so he made every effort to do what had been asked of him.

Perhaps he remembered the story of Naaman, the captain from Assyria who had come to the prophet Elisha. Naaman didn't want to wash in the river, Jordan. After all, the river back in Assyria was clearer and closer to home. Why couldn't he just wash there? But at the urging of the men with him, he was obedient to the word of God spoken by Elisha and his leprosy was cleansed. The blind man could have thought about this on his way to the Pool of Siloam. If so, I can imagine his faith being built as he went. Jesus wants to build our faith today. Sometimes He may put some "crazy" stipulation on the answer to our need. But if He does, you can be sure that it is there to build our faith.

THE CHALLENGE IS OBEDIENCE

The man was obedient to what Jesus had asked him to do and the Bible says that he came away seeing. He was healed. After the man had accomplished in obedience what Jesus required of him, he left Siloam seeing – Think of the excitement! Imagine what it was like to see for the very first time! Now he could see the birds that he had heard singing. Now he could see the leaves he had heard rustling. He followed the will and purpose of his life – He was sent and he went. He was obedient to the word of the Lord and because of it he came away seeing.

It is difficult to see the will of the Lord from the front end. When the command to "go" comes to us, it may not make sense, and it may seem impossible. In some cases, it may seem insignificant. But when we have heard from God and we follow Him in obedience, we will see His purpose and His Divine plan comes to fruition and we will be blessed in the process.

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE TALK

Those who knew the man and had seen him daily begging, began to talk. When we step out in faith and obedience, it always generates “talk.” Their statements were, “It looks like him.” “I think it’s him.” But the greatest witness of this mighty miracle was that of the man himself for he boldly stated, “I am him.” What a testimony after Christ’s great works. If we aren’t willing to give Him the glory and witness on His behalf, we shouldn’t expect much from Him.

The former blind man boldly told what had happened. He didn’t leave out the part about the mud on his eyes. He told all. When Christ does a work for us we must be quick and willing to even bring embarrassment to ourselves if it brings glory to Christ. It was a simple testimony and most often when Jesus works, it is.

Look out, here come the skeptics! Why must we always complicate things? The people took the former blind man to the Pharisees, I suppose because they were the religious leaders and maybe they could make sense of this. They didn’t know what to do. It was great that this man could now see, but it had happened on the Sabbath Day when no work was to be done.

Standing before the Pharisees, he got to give his testimony again. It was not an elaborate oration but a simple relating, “He put clay on my eyes, told me to wash it off at Siloam, I did and now I can see.” The Pharisees wanted to know who this man thought Jesus was. Duh! What would you think of One who had opened your blind eyes for the first time? The man said that he thought He was a prophet, but the Pharisees didn’t believe him. He must be lying about being blind in the first place. Isn’t that just like the world? It’s always asking for God to prove Himself and when He does then it doesn’t believe.

The Pharisees were getting nowhere, so the man’s parents were asked to identify him. They were too scared to rejoice with their son. How often had this mother prayed to God for her boy? How many times had this father wished his son could see? But the threat of the Pharisees took any and all joy out of this great miracle.

The world will take away any joy we have in Christ if we will allow it. The devil even tries to make this happen through our fellow believers. Even if we must stand alone, as this former blind man had to do, we must do it for the sake of Christ and for our own souls.

Then the man got to share a bolder testimony to the Pharisees. They told him, “Give God the glory, for this Man (who had opened his eyes) is a sinner.” The former blind man responded, “I don’t know about that but I do know that I used to be blind but now I can see.”

So, they asked again how Jesus had done this. That was the wrong thing to ask! It opened the door and this former blind man found a boldness he didn’t know he had.

He had already told them. Why did they want to hear it again? Did they want to be one of His disciples too? He had right there identified himself with Christ. How could he not? He must. We must testify of Jesus.

The former blind man marveled at their lack of knowledge. It was very simple to him. When they said that they didn't know where Jesus was from, the astonished former blind man simply replied, "This is a remarkable thing. It is as easy as 1-2-3! He opened my blinded eyes – Eyes that hadn't seen the light of day ever. Had anyone ever done this before? He must be from God. It's simple." The testimony for Christ is always simple.

A PRICE TO PAY

He paid the price for his witness and there always seems to be one. He was "kicked out" of the Synagogue. Who wants to be in a dead, dry place that won't recognize the work of God anyway!

Now came the most exciting part. Jesus found the man after hearing that he had been put out of the Synagogue and asked him, "Do you believe on the Son of God?" It was time for the testimony of a lifetime.

When the former blind man asked who the Son of God was Jesus basically said, "You have seen Him, and He is speaking to you right now." In other words, "I'm the Man!" His eyes had been opened not only physically but also spiritually. Right then and there he saw the Son of God physically and spiritually. There was no doubt and no hesitation. The man said, "Lord, I believe."

Christ wants to open our eyes. He stands before us. Why won't we see? Why can't we see the great work He has for us? Why must we always test and question when it is at hand?

Jesus then said these words: "I have come into this world for judgment, that they who do not see might see, and that they who see might be made blind." Those who refuse to see Christ and His will are really blind and those who accept His calling and see Him are those truly restored from blindness.

Of course, the Pharisees had something to say about that. Did Jesus have the audacity to accuse them of being blind? But He simply told them that because they refused to see, their sin stayed with them.

I don't want that. I don't want to be a Pharisee. I want to see. Do you want to see? Do you want the presence of Christ? Do you want to bow before Him and say, "I believe?" You can. You just have to take the challenge of the blind man.

CHAPTER 20

The Challenge of Choices

John 10:1-42

“I am the door of the sheep.”

(John 10:7)

“I’ve got to fix that one of these days,” I said, then suddenly realized how much I sounded like Pa Kettle in his series of movies. I was referring to the door that led into our garage. It’s an old garage built of brick. It has stood the trials of time and is basically a good and sound building. But the side door has needed to be replaced for, well, longer than I care to confess. I have repaired it from time to time but it never seems to last. It has been responsible for at least one broken window in our garage door. I replaced the window post haste but not the door. I suppose the reason for this is that I don’t feel like I’m much of a carpenter and I’ve never done it before. That scares me more than I want to admit. And so, I keep repairing it. But one of these days, probably sooner than I think, I’m going to run out of places to put nails and screws and I’ll have no choice.

Doors are a necessary part of life. A door is an entrance way into a structure that we can close and lock to keep out unwanted persons and varmints. It would be nice to live in a world where doors weren’t necessary but then, that will never come to pass in world we know. Even for those who wouldn’t think of harming another, or even think about taking something that doesn’t belong to them, there is a curiosity that drives them to find out what’s in there, and most of us are very selective about who we allow to see our “stuff.”

A few years ago, our house was broken into. They didn’t do a lot of damage and the only things stolen were the tape player out of our truck and the VCR in the house. I chuckle about that now because, even though the value wasn’t enough to claim on insurance, the thieves took the VCR but left the remote laying in plain sight on the coffee table.

But the horror of that experience came from the fact that someone we didn’t want in our house while we were gone was in there snooping through our “stuff.” It made you feel violated to say the least.

In John 10 Jesus spoke about a door, a shepherd, a doorkeeper, the fold, the sheep, a hireling, and thieves. These representations all have great significance as we look at our challenge of choices and the door to the Kingdom.

THE DOOR, THE SHEPHERD, AND THE DOORKEEPER

The door, the shepherd, and the doorkeeper all are apparent offices of Christ in this scenario. It is obvious as we read the chapter. Only He is qualified to be what these three key characters represent.

As the door, Christ is the only entranceway into the Kingdom of Heaven - the Kingdom of God. A door silently tells us that a wall exists around the sheepfold not necessarily to keep the sheep in as much as it is there to keep unwanted predators of the sheep out. There is no mention that a lock is present on the door. Christ does not lock out those desiring to enter the sheepfold but it is required that one go through the door to get into the sheepfold.

Christ is also the doorkeeper. It is obvious that He watches the gate because the Bible says of the doorkeeper, "The sheep hear his voice ... "(verse 3). The doorkeeper, or gatekeeper operates the door. He personally sees each and every entrant through the door. No one is denied entry but He is there to insure He knows who is inside the sheepfold.

Christ is also the Good Shepherd. The shepherd not only watches over the sheep but the sheep belong to him. He is not just working for a wage but he has an investment that he is responsible for.

As Christians we can feel secure because Christ is all three. We can feel protected in the sheepfold because we know that there is only one way in. Many feel that Christianity is narrow-minded because we make no allowance for other religions. So many say things like, "there are many roads that lead to Heaven," thus allowing other religions in based on good works, and if entrance into the sheepfold were granted according to good works, I could certainly understand this way of thinking. Too many insist that our good works are what wins our entrance into the kingdom. Even many who readily accept salvation by grace will still impose the Old Testament laws upon us today.

The Bible does teach good works. We must not diminish their importance. However, good works are things that Christians should do as a result of salvation by grace but can never have a part in the working of grace. Good works are a result of the love of Christ working within us but have no bearing upon our salvation. Salvation can only come through Christ and that's why He is the door. When left up to man, the requirements for entrance into this prestigious fold are so numerous only by being deceptive could one ever hope to get in.

If good works had anything to do with entrance into the fold, then we would, by all rights, be obliged to equate all religions promoting good works to have equal entrance

rites there. But since all good works fall short and only Christ is the door, then entrance can only be granted by the doorkeeper. He watches closely those who ask to get in. Those whose only qualifications consist of good works cannot enter this door because passage is only granted to those accepting the provision of Christ's grace!

In the office of the doorkeeper Christ monitors those who would enter the fold. But in the office of Good Shepherd His primary focus is upon the sheep. He lovingly cares for the sheep. He sees to their needs, looks after their concerns, teaches them, loves them, comforts them, protects them, and provides for them.

I've heard a lot of stories about the shepherd's care for his sheep. Some of them have been true and some of them have been false. I'm not going to elaborate on these things. I am however going to remind us of the words of Christ. The most important truth about the Good Shepherd was given in the simple but powerful statement, "The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (Verse 11). The bottom line is that Christ, as our Good Shepherd, was willing to die for those who have become His sheep. That is more powerful than any of the other wonderful things the Shepherd does for the sheep. What security we can have in knowing that He was willing to lay His very life down for us!

In today's world we can really use a Good Shepherd. Yes, we've got more in way of conveniences, appliances, and entertainment than any other age, but in our quest for more, better, and fun we are killing ourselves. We cram so much into a day that it has become God's grace that we are limited to 24 hours in a day and 7 days in a week. It comes to the place that we desperately need a Good Shepherd.

THE SHEEP

This brings us to the sheep. Why did He use the example of sheep? Aren't sheep pretty dumb? I mean they just follow the shepherd wherever He goes, being content to be where He wants them to be. These aimless creatures never have to worry about things like, "will the grass run out?" "Where are we going to get a drink when we get thirsty?" "Sure, there's plenty today, but shouldn't we save some of this for tomorrow?" None of these thoughts seem to ever enter their minds. Instead, they just go on grazing and when it's time for a refreshing drink, the Good Shepherd leads them to the still waters.

When wolves or bears come looking for food the shepherd is there to protect them so they never give a second thought about it. If someone else they don't know comes calling them they just pay them no heed. But if the shepherd calls for them, they immediately begin to follow him.

What kind of life is that? Don't we prefer worry, concern, violence, fear, and pain? Of course, I'm being vain here. We all want these things. Don't we all want some of this life? Don't we have a need to be led like sheep by the shepherd?

We are sheep. We are being led whether we want to believe it or not. If we aren't being led by the Shepherd then we are being led by other influences. We are being led by our careers, peer pressure, and possibly the devil himself.

Some have compared being a Christian to being weak minded and inferior to those who don't profess Christ. You know, maybe they are right. I need the Shepherd in my life. I have comfort and peace in knowing that He is leading me and in control of this world and universe. If this is being weak and narrow minded then count me in.

THE HIRELING

The story also speaks of the hireling. The hireling was an employee whose main care was the reimbursement received for watching the sheep. This individual really had no feeling for the sheep. He did his job all the while wishing for his shift to end and the time to go home to finally arrive. The hireling was there until danger came. He would protect his own life and run from the wolf and the bear leaving the sheep to fend for themselves - on their own.

There are many hirelings in the world today. Anyone who claims authority over the sheep in place of the Shepherd is the same as a hireling. Our Lord does have pastors and leaders who are sheep themselves, but those who claim anything more are mere hirelings using the sheep for what they can get from them. Beware the hireling for he will mislead the sheep and will forsake them at the first hint of danger. But the Shepherd is always there despite the danger. He will always be there.

THE FOLD

The door is the entranceway into the fold. Once inside the fold the sheep are safer yet. The fold is the Kingdom. The only walls are spiritual and exist for the protection and security of the sheep. This kingdom, as proclaimed by Christ Himself to Pontius Pilate, is not of this world. You cannot see it or experience it with any of the natural senses. It can only become reality by way of the Holy Spirit. It is by revelation that we see the fold.

Inside it is more wonderful than words can describe for it is beautifully decorated by the Savior. All that we could ever need can be found inside the fold. There is strength for each trial and difficulty this life presents. There is joy that no painter could ever display on canvass. There is peace that goes beyond human understanding and words in any language. All provision is made for the sheep inside the fold.

This doesn't mean that the sheep will not be sorely persecuted. As a matter of fact, more have been martyred for their faith in the Shepherd around the world in the past century than all other centuries combined. Yet there is safety because the worst this world can inflict on the sheep is death and that has been successfully and completely conquered by the Shepherd!

The fold has been prepared. The Shepherd beckons, the doorkeeper watches, the door has been opened. All that remains is for the sheep to recognize and hear Him. He speaks the words, "Come into the fold," and all we must do is to obey. He will accept us by his own grace.

There will be those who try to keep us out of the fold and there will be some in the fold who appear to be sheep but in turn are trying to push us out of the fold. But don't fear for those thieves who have come in some other way will be exposed and expelled by the doorkeeper.

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE?

The Bible also tells us that the sheep will hear the Good Shepherd and know His voice. There are many voices speaking out in the world. I have been asked many times, "How can I be sure that Christ is speaking in my heart and that it is not one of these other voices?" The answer is simple really. First, we know the Shepherd's voice by spending time with Him. The more time we spend with someone, the more readily we recognize their voice. We also know His voice by the things He says. He will never tell us to do anything contrary to the word of God – The Bible. There will be times that the evil one will try to mimic the Good Shepherd. If we are a relatively new sheep to the fold, it could be quite confusing. That's when we need our true sheep to help us. But as we spend time in His word on our own, He will teach us the sound of His voice. Prayer, Bible study, and worship are essential in getting to know the Good Shepherd and learning the sound of His voice.

The true door, the true doorkeeper, and the true Good Shepherd will readily identify Himself to us. He will turn none away who have come in honesty and sincerely. Enter the fold by the provided door, marked by the blood of the Lamb. Be welcomed by the doorkeeper and stay in the care, teaching and admonition of the Good Shepherd!

DOOR NUMBER ONE, DOOR NUMBER TWO, AND DOOR NUMBER THREE

There is a program on TV called "Let's Make A Deal." On this show they used a lot of doors. Normally there were three doors presented. The contestant had no idea what was behind each door and they were challenged to make a choice. Behind those doors were various prizes one of which was usually very expensive and elegant, while another was considered a "booby prize." It was all about choices. We stand before three doors today. Behind one is the sheepfold and it is the coveted prize. Behind the other two are the ways of man, which will eventually let us down, and the choice of the devil. This is the "booby prize." It may even look like a sweet deal, but in the end will result in death.

The challenge today is to choose the right door. It is a challenge of choices. It may not be the prettiest door on the outside. The call of the other doors may be louder and promise more. But we must choose the correct door if we want eternal life. Life is

all about making choices. The challenge of your soul depends on your choice of doors. Listen to the beckon of the Good Shepherd and choose wisely.

CHAPTER 21

The Challenge of Coming Forth

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John 11:1-45

*“This sickness is not unto death, but for the
glory of God, that the Son of God may be
glorified through it.”*

(John 11:4)

Death is a hard thing. Most of you reading this chapter can probably think of someone you knew well, and who meant a lot to you, that has passed on. It is very difficult to let go. It hurts deep within. There is no cut, no bleeding, but perhaps the pain would be easier dealt with if there were.

I remember when my grandpa died. I was only a child around eight years old but it was one of the most painful things I had ever experienced. I wept for him like I had never wept before. I loved my grandpa and considered him one of my best buddies. I knew about Heaven but didn't really understand how it all worked then. All I knew was that my grandpa was gone and I missed him greatly.

But I also loved my grandma. I was forty-six years old when she died. I didn't weep as much because I knew what she had suffered and knew her pain was now over. I also understood where she really was. It still hurt, but because of my understanding of the working of God, it didn't seem to hurt as bad.

Many of you reading this may have just experienced a loss of a loved one. You know what I'm talking about. You feel it now. Be comforted in knowing that God understands and He is with you even at this moment.

Jesus had a friend He loved deeply. I'm not real sure just how He got acquainted with Lazarus, but scripture indicates that He had spent some time in his home (Luke 10:38-42). It was Mary who had washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her own hair (John 11:2).

Now Lazarus was sick. It was a serious thing, for Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus concerning their brother. If you read the entire 45 verses of this story, you'll realize that Jesus loved this family very deeply. You'd think that getting word that His friend was sick would have been all He needed to pack His bags immediately and go to Lazarus' side as quickly as possible. But in John 10, Jesus had just left Judea and particularly the

area in and around Jerusalem. Because He had spoken plainly about His identity and His mission on Earth, they had tried to stone Him. It was a dangerous time for Jesus to be at Bethany since it was only about a mile and a half away from Jerusalem.

Jesus decided to wait before returning to Bethany but not because He was afraid of what might happen if He returned so soon. He told His disciples that His friend Lazarus' sickness was not to death but for God's glory and so that God's Son would be glorified. This suited the disciples because they were afraid of the situation in Jerusalem. But Jesus meant something entirely different than what they thought He meant. He knew that His friend was in trouble, but He also knew that there were multitudes not yet born who would need this life-lesson that was going to come through Lazarus.

Jesus waited until the second day after being notified of Lazarus' sickness then He said to His disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." That went over like a lead balloon. His disciples were quick to remind Him that it hadn't been that long ago that the Jewish leaders were seeking His life. They would surely be watching for Him. If there were even a hint that He was in Bethany they'd be on Him like ants on gumdrops.

NOT UNTIL

What Jesus said in verses 9-10 is a phenomenal truth. I knew a man who was the pastor of a large church in Oregon by the name of Ron Mehl. Ron was a phenomenal person battling active leukemia for several years, as well as surviving a heart attack. He was the author of several inspiring books including "God Works the Night Shift," and "Surprise Endings." In a pastor's conference I heard him share a revelation given to his wife that goes something like this: "God isn't going to take us from this life until our planned mission is done." Wow! What a statement of hope and encouragement!

This was what Jesus was saying in these two verses. His day of ministry was not yet completed and so He wasn't very concerned about being killed by the Jewish leaders. We worry so much about death. But as believers in Christ, we can be assured that God is going to work His plan. He knows the future. He knows when we're going to breathe our last. We should trust in this and do what He has called us to do.

The disciples still didn't understand. Jesus told them that Lazarus was asleep and He was going to go and wake him up. Thinking in the natural, as is the trait of most people, they told Jesus that if Lazarus was sleeping that it was a good thing since he had been so sick. It forced Jesus to plainly tell them that Lazarus was now dead. This was a revelation from God, by the way. No one had arrived to tell them the bad news.

OBEDIENT TO DEATH?

It was Thomas who echoed the thoughts of the disciples. Still doubting in what Jesus had told them he said, "Guys, let's go and die with Him." Notice the irony of that statement. Thomas was loyal because he had determined that he was going with Jesus, but he also had doubt even then because he was sure that they were going to die.

We should have full trust in the word of God, but I suppose it is better to be obedient even when in doubt than to not have confidence in Him at all. Yet today we find ourselves echoing phrases similar to those of Thomas. We speak and display a pious doubt as far as God's work is concerned, when He wants us to publicly proclaim faith and trust in His word.

Jesus and His disciples arrived in Bethany discovering that Lazarus had been dead for four days. It was significant that Jesus waited until the fourth day. It would serve as proof beyond doubt that He was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, for the Jews believed that the spirit of man hovered around the body until after the third day.

Martha heard that Jesus was coming and left to meet Him. Martha was a practical person. She loved Jesus but in a more reserved way. It was Martha who had invited Jesus home for dinner the day that she blew up at all the chores to be done while her sister, Mary, sat outside listening to Jesus teach. She should have been with her, in her estimation, helping to prepare the food, or wash the dishes, or something. But Martha's heart had been in the right place.

As Martha met Jesus she said, "Lord, if You had been here Lazarus would not have died," yet trying to not be too insensitive she quickly added, "but I know whatever You ask of God, that He will do it." She wanted to believe, but she also knew that she wanted her brother back.

Jesus told her plainly, "Your brother will rise again." It was just too overwhelming for practical Martha. She so wanted it to be true but miracles just didn't happen to her. She wanted to agree and so she responded with, "Yes. I know that he will rise again in the last days in the resurrection." I wonder how many times in the last four days she had heard that? I can almost hear her thinking to herself, "I can't believe that came out of my mouth." But she just couldn't accept that Jesus was speaking about her brother rising at that moment.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Jesus reminded her that He was the resurrection and the life. He said that whoever believed in Him would never die, and though he were dead, he would live. Again, wonderful words, but Martha just couldn't make herself apply them to her present situation. Jesus asked her if she believed this. She replied with an indirect answer: "I know that You are the Christ, the Messiah."

Martha reminds me of many people today. They so want to believe in the miraculous. They want to know that Jesus cares for their every step and every breath. But they just can't seem to grasp it for themselves. They know that it is true for others, "but surely not for me." But I tell you today that it is for you. You can have hope in Christ because He loves and wants to care for the "Martha" in you. Hold to Him and know that He is close by.

Having said this, Martha left Jesus and went to find her sister, Mary. Mary was a different sort than Martha. Mary was more outspoken and compulsive, but she loved Jesus. When Martha whispered to her that Jesus was here, she immediately bolted out the door.

Jesus still had not gotten into the city limits of Bethany but was still where Martha had left Him. When the professional mourners (for so was the custom of that time, to hire those to help mourn), and other friends that were there saw Mary run out the door, they immediately assumed that she was going to the tomb once more to mourn for her brother. Being professional mourners and wanting to do a good job, they followed after her.

Mary was not so discreet as Martha had been. She just plainly fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if You had been here my brother would still be alive!" And she began to weep. Thinking it their signal, the professional mourners chimed in. Don't forget that Jesus loved Lazarus and was His friend. Even though Jesus was the Son of God, He was also the Son of man. He felt the sorrow and anguish that now flowed from Mary's spirit and it caused Him to groan within His own spirit. "Where is his grave?" He asked of anyone who was listening. And so, they took Him there.

Some of us are more like Mary than Martha. We are more emotional and we're not afraid to let it show. It isn't wrong, but just another human trait exhibited in this story. Thomas doubted but obeyed. Martha was more reserved and even though she didn't doubt, she could not accept that the Lord would do this for her. Mary just let it all out. We are all different. What is important is that we are all obedient.

JESUS WEPT

It was there that the shortest verse in the Bible was recorded. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Even though He knew that He was about to raise His friend from the dead, he still wept. Some have speculated that He wasn't weeping for Lazarus, but for the unbelief of all those around Him. That never caused Jesus to weep before. Perhaps He wept for happiness in knowing that God was about to restore His friend. Or maybe He let His human side express the emotion He felt in that moment.

The people of Jesus day are really no different than those of our day. Yes, we may have driven to the tomb in a nice vehicle, but the attitudes are basically the same. Some people saw Jesus weeping and thought, "He loved him so much." Others reacted skeptically and said, "If He can open blinded eyes, why couldn't He help His friend?" Do you see it? Do you see the division? It remains today. There will always be those who know and sympathize as well as those who will be skeptics. Today, people see a miracle and pass it off as a natural phenomenon.

I heard a story one time of someone who was trying to convince this little old Christian lady that the Israelites could not have crossed the Red Sea like it is recorded in the Bible. They argued with her that at the time of year it was supposed to have happened

and the place where it is recorded that they crossed, would have made the Red Sea only ankle-deep water. Thinking they had made a good, clear argument against the “so called” miracle, the elderly lady began to shout, “Hallelujah!” Confused, her skeptic asked what she was so excited about, to which the lady replied, “Well, if the Red Sea was only ankle-deep water where they crossed then that means God drowned the entire Egyptian army in that shallow water! It was still a miracle.”

TAKE AWAY THE STONE

Again, Jesus was attacked by human emotion and groaned within Himself. But it didn't stop Him from His appointed duty. He went up to the tomb (which was a cave), and told them to remove the stone that covered its mouth. Practical Martha reminded Him that her brother had now been dead for four days and his body would have begun to decompose and would smell. Jesus never forgets anything. He remembered how Martha had answered Him by sidestepping the issue. What she had confessed was the truth in that He was indeed the Messiah – The Christ!

Jesus prayed to God just for the people's benefit. He already knew the mind of God in this situation but so those around Him would know, He prayed out loud. Then looking straight into the tomb, He cried with a loud voice, “LAZARUS, COME FORTH!” Someone said that the power of God issued in that command would have brought forth everyone dead person on Earth if Jesus had not specifically called for Lazarus. I believe it.

He did come forth, wrapped up like a mummy in his grave clothes. He came hopping out of that dark tomb. Praise God! Lazarus was obedient to the command of Christ!

RELEASE HIM AND LET HIM GO

Jesus made one more statement that is significant to this incident. He told the people to release him from his bindings and let him go. Despite which type of person we are, whether we are doubting like Thomas, or trying to be more practical like Martha, or we just jump into things and yield on the fly with our responses and emotions like Mary, when we come to Christ the final result is the same. In the end Lazarus was raised to life, loosed, and let go.

Christ wants to do the same for each of us today. Despite our personality or our preference, He calls our name. To me He calls, “Jerry, come forth!” He calls your name and says, “Come forth!” It doesn't matter our background, or where we are right now. He says to “COME FORTH!” When we respond and come forth to Him, He then commands that we be loosed and released from those things that have bound us up. We are to be let go in the freedom of His grace.

Thanks be to God that He is still calling today for us to “Come forth.” It doesn't matter who you are or what you have done, Jesus calls for you to come forth. Then He

sets us free. If we don't feel free then perhaps we have forgotten to remove some of those grave clothes that used to bind us up. Let's identify those things and get them off of us so that we can be free to serve Christ! Let's meet the challenge of coming forth!#

CHAPTER 22

The Challenge of Having a Price on Your Head

John 11:46-57

“You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”

(John 11:49-50)

We all do you know.

Each and every man, woman, boy and girl who has ever lived and ever will live on the face of this planet has a price on their heads. It is there not because we are infamous characters but because we are made and desired by Almighty God. The devil has not only put a price on our heads but also leads the pack in hunting us down.

Behind closed doors, the Jewish counsel met with the High Priest in deep discussion about what to do with this man called Jesus. They wanted Him badly. Just as any of us can justify a way to get something we really want so they justified the reasons for arresting Jesus of Nazareth. They commented on all the miracles and signs that came from His ministry then concluded that because of these wonders the Romans would soon be sweeping down upon them to take away their government and land. Can you see the audacity in this way of thinking? First of all, having someone around that could work signs and wonders could prove to be an asset to their nation, don't you think? Secondly, it only stands to reason that they wouldn't remove them from office unless they sided with the guy, you know? The stretch would have made even a world class gymnast sore.

That was when Caiaphas, the high priest, spoke up saying something like this, "Guys, guys, you just don't understand! There is only one solution to this problem. Don't you know that it is better that one man should die for the people rather than having the entire nation fall into jeopardy?" There's an old saying that "God can do whatever He wants," and that's the truth if it has ever been told. In this evil-intended statement by Caiaphas, God hid a prophecy of the true mission of the Messiah – That He must die for all the people! That was his mission. They thought they were putting a price on the head of Jesus but they were falling right into the plan of God!

And that's the way it is 100% of the time! Whether we have realized it or not, God has a plan. Because He knows in advance what our reactions and decisions are going

to be, we always fall right into His plan. God knew that the Jewish leaders were going to reject His Son and so He set them up to not only fulfill His plan but to prophesy His word! It was necessary that Jesus Christ die for the people. Had He not, we would be in pretty pitiful shape right now, if mankind even still existed. Jesus had to die – There was no other way.

By the end of John 11, they had not only agreed to their course of action but had given instruction to their temple soldiers that if Jesus showed up for the upcoming feast or if anyone knew where He was, they were to give up their information immediately so they could take Him into custody. He not only had a price on His head but was the most wanted man in their top ten list.

WE MUST DIE

All of us who are believers in Christ have said it at one time or another: “Jesus died in our place.” That is right but that is also wrong. Physically Jesus suffered severely when it should have been us. Every beating, every stripe cut into His flesh, the nails through His hands and feet, the agony, the pain, the brokenness, all should have been given to us. Jesus took it in our place because, as the Son of God, only He could do it. No other could die in our place and have the same effect. It took the sinless sacrifice of a human being to pay the penalty for sin and only Jesus Christ fit that bill. In this sense, physically, He did die in our place. We couldn’t have done it for ourselves if we had wanted to.

But that does not take away from the fact that we still must die. This physical body will one day disappear. Our spirits will depart from our bodies. Whether that comes at the return of our Lord, Jesus Christ, or whether age, sickness, or accident take us out, we will be gone from our physical bodies.

But that’s still not what I’m talking about. We must die. We must die to our sinful nature and natural man. We must die out to self. Let me tell you, it is easier to die physically than it is to die out to self. Dying out to self requires a daily discipline that only comes through knowing Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. We must have the help, conviction, and urging of the Holy Spirit within us if we are ever to die out to self. Paul said, “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). What did he mean by that? Each and every morning when we get up, we must make ourselves conscious of the old sin nature that is just waiting to rear up its ugly head and influence us to do things that we may not have done since our salvation experience.

Several years ago, I was at my job, just minding my own business, when the production manager walked into the office and asked me a question. Out of the blue I answered him using a word considered to be a “cuss” word. I wasn’t angry that day, I wasn’t tired, and I hadn’t said that word for many years. It just jumped right out of my mouth. He looked at me like I was a two-headed, green thing from a distant galaxy because, even though he used the same word many times during the course of the day, he had never heard me say it. I quickly apologized to him explaining that I didn’t know

where that came from and I haven't said it sense. But I do know where it came from. It was my flesh sticking that two-headed green thing from another galaxy up in the air again.

It is a battle that we will fight each and every day of our lives until we receive our glorified body in the presence of the King of kings in Heaven. It is part of our daily fight and the flesh must lose. Sometimes it doesn't and we have a bad day. Sometimes we just let our guard down and sure as we do it is right there.

You may remember the movie, "Tremors." It was about terrible creatures that lived underground and were big enough to swallow a house if they wanted to. They were completely blind and couldn't see a thing, but they could feel the slightest movement on the surface of the ground. They couldn't tunnel up through rock so some of the characters of the movie had situated themselves on some big ones, waiting for the creatures to get tired and move on. They kept as still as they could and after a day and a half with no action from the creatures they decided to see if they had gone and they could get away. But the first movement made on the ground surface brought them immediately out of hiding.

That's exactly how our sin nature is. It is always there waiting for the right moment when we let our guard down and when we do, it will surface. That's why we need Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives every day. Meditating on Him (and that's not some mystic process – just simply thinking about His word and praying to Him) will help our old dead nature to release its influence and allow the new life we have in Christ to take the prominent place.

WE TOO HAVE A PRICE ON OUR HEADS

Just because we are associated with Christ causes us to be hunted people. We are hunted by the devil and all those influenced by him. He hates us and doesn't want to see us prosper in Christ. Why does he even care about us? Because he feels that the place Christ holds should be his. He tried to dethrone God sometime in time past, before we even came on the scene. His plot was discovered and stopped before it even had time to begin.

When man was created the devil's first mission was to turn this crown creation of God against his Maker, and he was successful. But God made the way for man to undo the sin that he had committed through Christ Jesus. The devil's plans were thwarted again.

All through the history of the Christian Church believers have been counted as the enemy, persecuted, prosecuted, and executed all because they believed in what Christ had done for them and their desire to see others saved by His grace. Think about that for a minute. Why would anyone hate those who only want to do them good? Why would any nation on the face of this planet want to imprison those who want to see their people healed, blessed and changed because of the Good News? It doesn't make sense!

It doesn't make sense until we add the devil into the equation. When we realize how much the influence of true Christianity changes the lives of others and builds up the Kingdom of Heaven, knowing how he feels about that, we can then begin to understand why there is so much hatred towards Christians in this world. Even in our own country we are merely tolerated today because of the freedoms we have been given. But one by one those are seeping out. I believe we will see the day when we will be put on trial because of our stand for Christ even in the United States of America all because of the influence and power of the devil.

For the believer, the devil only has as much power as we allow him to have in our lives. Because of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us, the devil can only do to us what we let him get away with. He can't touch us otherwise. Oh, he will try to influence us. He will pop those temptations into our minds with hopes that we will cling to one of them and yield to sin, and sometimes we do. But he is limited to how much we yield ourselves to God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we don't have Christ in our lives then our minds are an open playground for the devil. He will influence, control and possess people who have not turned to Christ. He will promote those individuals into prominent places of power and they will be used to persecute and suppress Christians in this world. It is being done every day and is ever increasing as time grows closer to the second coming of our Lord. In Muslim and Communist controlled countries Christians are arrested, tortured, and executed every day. These countries are passing laws making it illegal to do what we have been commanded to do by Christ – To tell the world about His love and sacrifice and make disciples in all the nations.

Yes, there is a price on our heads and it is put there by the devil himself. But also remember that he cannot destroy us before God's purpose in our lives has been realized. Even then, when death comes to us, God will get the glory and we will win by being catapulted straight into the Kingdom.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

The meaning of it all is very simple really. We are in the middle of a war and we are wanted men and women. We are on the right side if we are believers in Christ but that doesn't stop the devil from trying to destroy us. It is a challenge that we must face as Christians. Oh, we have an abundance of peace, joy, and happiness, and God is going to bless us as His children, but we must always be aware that the enemy is lurking about, seeking for an opportunity to capture our thoughts and influence us to do evil.

In the book of Nehemiah, we read the account of the returning Jews rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Each group picked their spot and began to build. But when their enemy, Sanballat, found out what they were doing he threatened to put it all to an end. Needless to say, the people were concerned. But under the direction and encouragement of Nehemiah the Bible tells us that they continued to work, holding their building tools in

one hand and a weapon of war in the other. In this manner they finished the wall (See Nehemiah 3-4).

We too are building a wall. It is one that surrounds the Kingdom of God. It is not meant to keep out other people, but to keep us from yielding to temptation and sin. Life is good in the Kingdom, but we must work with our tools in one hand and our weapons in the other, always keeping a watchful eye out for the enemy of our souls.

We will win this war. We will not be conquered unless we just give up. The Holy Spirit in our lives will be with us, leading, guiding and directing our thoughts, intents, and motives. We've got to be ready and that means meeting the challenge of a price on our heads straight on with the word of God. It is a challenge but one well worth the price.

CHAPTER 23

The Challenge of Worship

John 12:1-8

“Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of pure nard, very precious, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment.”

(John 12:3)

I like a good supper, don't you? If you ever saw me, you'd know just how true that is. But what can I say? Good food has always been my weakness. And when I was a pastor, well, you just can't afford to hurt any of those precious ladies' feelings at a church dinner by not trying some of what they brought, now can you?

It was once again time for the Passover at Jerusalem. Only a few months earlier Jesus had been to Bethany and had raised Lazarus from the dead. This had caused quite a stir amongst the Jewish leaders back in Jerusalem. According to the last few verses of the previous chapter, they had even taken council as to just how they could kill Jesus. Later on in Chapter 12, we are told that the witness of Lazarus walking around had caused so many to turn to Jesus that they were also plotting to kill him. They were desperate, weren't they? Wouldn't it have just been easier to believe in Him as well? But then, prophecy would not have been fulfilled.

They had lookouts posted in Jerusalem watching for Jesus to show up, but He stayed away as long as He could. Then, six days later He came to Bethany. According to Matthew 26:6, a dinner was held in the home of Simon the Leper. It doesn't say this, but I feel sure that Jesus had probably healed his leprosy because of all the people there that day. Remember, a leper was someone to be avoided. Is it possible be that Simon was the leper who was the only one of ten that came back to thank Jesus? I have no proof of that but it would sure make sense and also make for a good story, wouldn't it?

It was Simon's house, but Martha hosted the dinner. She had a gift of hospitality. She may have gotten tired of not having enough help from time to time, but it was in her heart to do it. Lazarus, I'm sure cherishing every breath of life he breathed, sat at the table with Jesus. It was a joyous scene.

As Jesus spoke and they enjoyed the meal, Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus, came in. Mary, as with all of us, had her own unique gifts. Her gifts consisted of showing her love in a special way. Somehow, she had managed to purchase a one-pound

container of spikenard, a very costly perfumed ointment. According to the account in Matthew, she poured some of it over Jesus' head then, in John's Gospel, she bowed at His feet, washing them with the costly ointment. She then dried them with her own hair. How she adored Her Savior and Master.

THE ART OF WORSHIP

Mary was doing more than just making His feet clean and fragrant. She was worshipping Jesus from her heart. I believe she had given a lot of thought about how she could uniquely display her worship towards Jesus. She gave Him her best.

Our worship of our Lord must be the best that can come from our heart. Worship in our Christian experience is of the utmost importance. As a matter of fact, it is how we get close to Him. Our prayer as a believer is always heard by our Master, but the prayer time of most Christians today is spent in asking things from Him. Our petitions on behalf of others are important because intercessory, unselfish prayer requires us to exercise compassion. But true worship happens when we realize our true inadequacy compared to His perfection and completeness. As we honestly humble ourselves and adore Him, we begin to climb a plateau which most modern-day American Christians seldom explore. I'm not saying that we need to make fools of ourselves, but personal time spent in the heartfelt presence of Jesus will always leave you gasping for more.

This is because we were created for the purpose of worshipping God. When we put ourselves spiritually before His throne the reality of fulfilling our purpose creates a feeling that cannot be adequately expressed with mere words.

WORSHIP WILL TRANSCEND EVERYTHING AROUND US

Mary may have been criticized for her worship, but the word of God makes no mention that it got her sidetracked from her purpose. She was wholly consumed in the pleasure of worshipping Jesus. And we should be too.

Many definitions have been placed on worship. It is not some wild emotional thing. True, as emotional creations it will be exhibited in our worship, but our emotions are a flowed response to the presence of Jesus by way of the Holy Spirit, not some display that may bring false glory to us.

Neither is worship just collectively singing a hymn in a service. It is good for us to do this, but worship only takes place when our heart is focused on Him. I don't mean to be critical but, sad to say, many of our "worship services" contain very little worship. A worship leader can be entirely tuned in to God. They may have spent time in prayer in their selection of songs or choruses designed to bring people to the throne of God, but people must yield to the Holy Spirit for the cycle to be complete.

As believers in Christ, this Sunday in your worship service, honestly focus on God and let worship in spirit and truth proceed from your heart and lips. Who knows, you might just start a revival!

RESISTANCE TO WORSHIP

The second part of this passage tells us how one of Jesus' own disciples, Judas Iscariot (the one who would betray Him), complained about the waste of the expensive perfume Mary used to wash our Lord's feet. "Why are you letting her do this? This ointment could have been donated to our ministry and sold for a tidy sum. It could have been given to the poor." It seemed like a solid, practical thing to do. Many poor people were in the land. But the scripture gives the real reason of Judas' complaint. He was the treasurer. Now, thanks be to God, most church accountants are not like Judas. You see, the scripture tells us that Judas was also a thief. He had been padding his pockets by skimming money from "the purse."

Jesus knew it. He allowed it to happen because He also knew the plan of God. He answered Judas' question by saying, "The poor will always be with you. But I will not. Mary has pre-anointed Me for my burial." As always, Jesus used this very situation to illustrate His mission. But more importantly, He defended His worshipper from being hindered from her duty.

There are those today who will complain and speak against the authentic worship of our Master. Don't let them stop you. To be fulfilled beyond measure, we must fulfill our greatest ministry of all and that is to worship God.

It is strange, but not strange, that the most resistance to real worship today comes from the pulpit and Christian leaders who, instead hindering people in worship, should be teaching them how to worship. The devil knows that as we worship God in spirit and truth, that we become closer and closer to our Lord. The devil also knows that we won't respond to critics outside the Church. So, he begins to work on individuals inside the Church and people who are close to us. I'm not saying that those individuals are not genuine Christians - They are. But if when not properly tuned in to the Lord, some of the greatest persecution we receive can come from those we have confidence and trust in – Our fellow believers!

When we are being tempted to unknowingly be used by the devil to hurt another believer, or detain them from their Christian duty, we must learn to recognize that and immediately resist those temptations. If we have already been used by the enemy and we now realize what has happened, let us repent and go to the one we have hurt and make things right. Let's not be a "Judas" without knowing it. Let's instead seek God as to how He wants us to worship Him.

THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

Now there is an order to worship. We need to learn and know that. As I have already said, worship should never be displayed in a manner that focuses attention on us but only on our Lord. And, as I have already said, public worship from a congregation is a glorious thing to be a part of. But our private worship is possibly an even better glorious and wonderful experience. When we are all alone with God and we worship Him then we know that we are not doing it because everyone else is doing it, or to be seen of men. It is worshipful communication one on ONE with the Master.

Moses, while atop Mt. Sinai the second time, desired to see God's glory. He had experienced God in the burning bush at the beginning. He had seen the power of God working in the plagues declared upon Egypt. He had held the rod as the Red Sea parted wide enough for 1 million people or more to cross on dried ground. He had witnessed the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that led them on their journey. But all of this only left a taste in his spiritual mouth for more. He wanted to witness God's glory.

Of course, no one has ever seen the full glory of God in our physical bodies because it would be so powerful that we would immediately die. But God did allow Moses to catch a glimpse of the back parts of His glory. He placed Moses under a rock that jutted out so he would be shielded, then covered him with His own hand. As God passed by, He removed His hand in a way that Moses just caught a glimpse of His glory. This short experience was so powerful that Moses had to wear a veil over his face for many days because he had such a glow emanating from him that no one could stand to look at him.

He had spent time in the presence of the very God. Most never actually see God's glory as He is worshipped. Yet, in a sense, His glory is spiritually revealed to us as we worship Him in the way He meant for us to. As we are exposed to this spiritual glory of God we begin to change in our nature. People just know by being around us that we are different. It is because of the presence of God in our lives.

Mary, sister to Lazarus, was changed forever because of her worship of Jesus. I am convinced of that. So, we will also be changed forever once we experience real, genuine worship of our God. It is a challenge to really worship God. It requires us to go beyond what we may have been taught. It might require us to let our emotions flow. But it is what we were made to do. Praise Him today. Don't just pray for selfish things, instead just tell Him how much you love Him. You will find out what I'm talking about.

CHAPTER 24

The Challenge of Killing the Witness

John 12:9-11

“Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him, many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.”

(John 12:9-11)

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had radically changed their lives. Two years ago, they had been deeply involved in parties, the bar scene and drugs. It was all done socially of course, but it had affected their family life more than they had ever dreamed. They woke up one morning both with terrible hangovers from the party the night before, had argued over nothing for about half an hour when they realized that their son hadn't come down from his room yet. After a moment of silence, they mustered the courage to go upstairs and check on him.

He had just turned sixteen a few weeks earlier and had been devastated when they found cocaine in his room. They talked to him and told him all of the dangers, forbidding him to continue, to which he had promptly reminded them of their own habits. They couldn't argue with what he was telling them but knew that responsible parents couldn't just let him get away with it, and so they told him that he had to stop just the same. His point had hit home but they were hooked and reasoned that they would have no friends or social life if they stopped.

Still the dangers of kids and drugs hung heavy on their minds. As they climbed the stairs, expecting the very worst they were pleasantly surprised that their son had simply overslept. But it made them rethink their current lifestyle and so they began to look for ways to make dramatic changes.

One of the options they explored was going to church. The first service they had attended had been out of courtesy to some friends they had made a year or so before. They had only known the Henry's for a few months when their friends dropped out of the party scene. They had heard that they had "gotten religion" and thought along with their other friends about how much of a waste it had been for the Henry's to give up all they had to become "monks." But the Henry's had kept in touch with the Johnson's and had called from time to time inviting them to go with them to a service. The Johnson's had always been able to come up with, what they thought, was a legitimate excuse.

This time, after the episode with their son, they had run out of excuses. They attended the service expecting an hour or so of boredom. But the music was not what they had thought. Instead of something from the fourteenth century, it was new and upbeat. They had been prepared to see people sleeping in the pews and had even kidded each other about taking their pillows with them, but they instead found exciting and inspiring responses to the music and what the parishioners called “worship.”

Instead of a yawning talk about the sins of living, the pastor brought a very informative and challenging sermon that seemed tailored just for them. It got their attention and they mutually agreed to “try just one more service.” They did and this time made commitments to Christ and their lives changed forever.

Over the next few months, as they learned more about their relationship with the Lord, and began to grow as a result, they became involved in outreaches of the church. They were even successful in getting their son to attend and soon he was involved with the youth group.

The Johnson’s were even thinking about entering into ministry themselves. They had made plans to get their son through college, and perhaps apply for Bible College themselves. It was exciting to talk and plan about what God was doing in their lives.

The devil is never satisfied when people are saved from destructive lives and put in a place that will reestablish marriages, families and restore life to those who are headed for destruction. If he can’t destroy from without, he will attempt to destroy from within. That is what happened in the case of the Johnson’s. Old “friends” were offended and appalled about the recovery of this family bent for destruction and so they started their own slur campaign.

It began when this vengeful couple spotted some of the Johnson’s church family at a local mall one Sunday afternoon. They asked about the Johnson’s and, after a few moments of meaningless chit-chat, said something like, “We are sure glad that they have been able to put their drug problems behind them.” “Drug problems?” queried their church friends. “Why, yes! They were both hooked on cocaine. We just don’t understand how you can take a habit like that and just stop. It normally takes years of recovery.” And with that the doubt had been planted.

At this point the right thing to do would be to realize the changing power of Jesus Christ upon the life of a human being. But being creatures born into sin, the temptation was to immediately call other members of the congregation and continue planting the doubt. By the time the story reached the ears of the fourth family, the tale had the Johnson’s using the church as a cloak for their drug-dealing business.

The next Sunday the Johnson’s were coldly but politely greeted by their fellow parishioners and, even though they couldn’t quite put their finger on what was wrong, they knew immediately something had changed during the past week. But no one was talking, at least not to the Johnson’s.

A few weeks passed by with the treatment becoming more and more icy. Finally, they could take no more and went to the pastor who had not been told the news. He encouraged them to speak with their closest friends and simply ask what was going on. They followed his advice and were told the whole sordid tale.

It was devastating to them. Of course, they had not had anything to do with drugs since they had come to the Lord. He had miraculously changed their lives. But, as with so many Christians today, instead of their friends trying to get to the bottom of the whole thing, get it sorted out and let real forgiveness do its healing work, it was swept under the rug with meaningless “I’m sorrys” and within a month the Johnson’s were no longer attending church. The devil had completed his work and the damage had been done. Their witness had been destroyed and their fellow believers had allowed it to happen oblivious to the fact that they had allowed themselves to be used by the very enemy of their souls. The witness had been killed.

The Jewish people had a larger than average turnout for the Passover that year. They had come not just for the sacred feast but also because they knew that Jesus was there. His fame had spread throughout the country and almost everyone had heard of His miracles. That alone was enough to draw the “sign seekers” out of the woodwork. Some may have even placed wagers on whether a certain blind man, cripple or leper would get healed that week.

Man can make a sin out of anything if he listens to the whispers of the devil, even something as great and good as the healing power of Christ. Some probably worshipped Him as Messiah while others were just curious doubters, looking for signs and never seeing enough. It was certain that the signs followed Jesus, but many didn’t take long enough to read them.

Some came to see Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. What a story he would have to tell and there were many ready to hear it. People had heard about this “dead man walking” and were very curious. Could you imagine the interviews that would result today from a documented account of a man who had been dead for four days suddenly restored to life by Christ? He’d probably even make the “Tonight” show.

Speculations have always existed when it comes to the power of Jesus Christ. Many today believe and many doubt. The doubters, just like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, continue to come up with excuses and explanations that seem to reveal the trickery involved. Still His power prevails. It didn’t stop Him then and it will not stop Him now.

Others seem so fascinated by His power that they try to exploit it. People try to corner the market with books and paraphernalia in attempt to “cash in” on the profits to be made on healing power. That never interested Jesus and it still doesn’t. It won’t stop Him and He will never condone such practice.

The Jewish leaders greatly needed to stop this Jesus. His teaching had been directed at their profitable practices and many of the people were beginning to believe Him. Rumor had it that some of their own number secretly believed. He had to be stopped.

The problem was that it was so difficult to catch Jesus away from the crowds. If they arrested Him while He was teaching or ministering to the sick it could be enough to start an immediate riot. But catching Him alone, well, that had proven to be an impossible task. They had even thought that they might trip Him up in His words and then they would have legitimate reason to arrest Him for blasphemy against their law – the law given by Moses directly from God. That couldn't be argued with. But Jesus was too smart for them and He always came up with a counter story or question that would trip them up instead.

Perhaps they could stop some of the rumors by killing Lazarus. If they took away the witness, possibly they could disprove His teaching. Lazarus was a walking, talking example of His handiwork. If they got him out of the way maybe people would start doubting in Jesus. Yes, that was it! Remove the witness!

WHAT IS THE WITNESS?

The witness is that which follows our lives proving that Christ has changed us. In a court of law, the witness is one who can testify that a matter is true or false. Proof is presented that is meant to support one's innocence or guilt. Our witness as a believer is not so different.

When Christ comes into our lives and changes us radically within, things will happen that will prove His handiwork. For instance, those who have had drinking problems, or drug problems that have caused them to lose control of themselves, possibly bringing pain both mentally and physically to others, have been immediately set free from those things as a result of coming to Christ. Others who have had anger management problems have been changed into gentle people filled with love and compassion for other people. Our witness is more than just our words – it is the proof and evidence that what we say Christ has done within us is true.

We all have a witness, whether it speaks of our innocence or our guilt. It is always speaking more loudly than anything we say and people believe us or call us liars based on it.

WHAT CAN KILL OUR WITNESS?

The answer, without getting theological is, almost anything. First of all, we must realize that everyone, even in the Christian realm, is not going to like us. Sometimes our personalities just rub people the wrong way, as other people's personalities rub us the wrong way. We can love each other without liking them (yes that is possible). If some of

our brothers and sisters in Christ don't like us what makes us think that we have a snowball's chance in Ecuador of being liked by everyone who isn't a Christian?

We can get past most things that would kill our witness. By standing firm in our faith in Christ and demonstrating that with our lives, most people, Christian or not, can see the witness that shows through accusation. When the world tries to kill our witness, well, that's to be expected. They tried to kill the witness of Jesus and still are. The world hasn't been very successful with that in the last 2000 years because the Church is growing every day and has ever since it started.

It is a trial and a challenge when others try to kill our witness. It hurts, make no mistake. Any challenge does. The thing is, if we keep our Christian attitude and integrity intact during that trial, we will come out of it as gold tried in the fire (see Revelation 3:18). The fire refines and purifies the gold. It only adds to its value. The trials and challenges that we face as believers make us just like this gold tried in the fire. We will be richer, more experienced, and more valuable to the Kingdom of God for it. It will cost us something, that's for sure, but it also will give us something – A stronger relationship and a stronger witness as a result.

What about when our witness is challenged by our own brothers and sisters in Christ? The same principle applies, but it hurts more. We expect understanding and support from our fellow Christians. We are taught about brotherly love and told that we must learn to trust each other, even confessing our faults to each other. When brothers and sisters in Christ take that personal information from us that can include personal sins over which we have not yet won the victory, then use that information to bring damage to us rather than lifting us up in prayer it can make us question our whole Christian experience.

The devil loves to use Christian people to bring damage to our witness most of all. When we hear of Christians taking other Christians to court for such things as slander, plagiarism or some other charge it makes us wonder. If we are guilty of those things then we need to be quick to repent and apologize because we have done our part to defame our brother or sister. The fact is, legal problems that arise between Christians should never reach a court of law. We may have to take such matters to other believers or our pastor, but never should we have to duke it out in the secular legal system. We are to be united for a mission: to show the world how Christ can change their lives and eternally save them from sin, death, and hell. When we are fighting and bickering amongst ourselves, first of all the world knows what's going on and they're going to say point blank, "I've already got enough of that going on in my life! I don't need anymore! No thanks!" They may be saying that to us but remember, in reality they are saying "NO" to God all because of our witness in front of them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The most dangerous challenge to our witness is us. We can recover when the world points fingers at us and we can heal with time and God's help when our witness is killed by an accusation by a brother or sister, but when we are our own worst enemy the situation is much more delicate. You see we lie to ourselves. We don't want to believe

that we are such a bad guy; after all, don't we know our own relationship with God? We must be careful because our self-justification can be more defaming to our witness than we realize. When others see us making excuses for being angry unjustly at another person, in the back of their heads they are thinking something like, "I thought he was a Christian!" This world has its own opinion of what a Christian should be like and the devil loves to plant the thought in a non-believer's mind like, "I'm just as good as she is. I don't need that God-stuff! If she is a Christian and can get away with it, why do I even need it?"

Sometimes it isn't fair. But being a Christian is not about getting our fair share but about giving our all for the sake of the Gospel. It's about being willing to swallow down a sharp comment, even if we're justified in making it so as to protect our witness. It doesn't mean that we have to be run over, especially by fellow Christians, but it does mean that we demonstrate to the world that we can resolve issues and still come away loving each other. That's what the world needs to see in our witness.

The Bible never records if the Jewish leaders took Lazarus' life or not. They probably didn't after getting Jesus like they thought they did. But the principle is the same. They thought they could kill the teaching of Jesus and His credibility by taking Lazarus out of the picture. So, there may be those, whether Christian or not, who believe that they can be rid of us by defaming our witness. It is a challenge to maintain it even in the face of such obstacles. But it can be done.

CHAPTER 25

The Challenge of Palm Leaves and Donkeys

John 12:12-16

*“Blessed is he who comes in the name of
the Lord ...”*

(John 12:13)

What if the President of the United States visited your hometown? I can just imagine the fuss that would be made if he decided to visit our humble “city” of Seymour, Indiana. Everyone in town would probably turn out to see him and we’d really roll out the “red carpet!”

That’s sort of what happened in this scripture passage. The Jewish leaders had posted watchmen to let them know when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Yet they never expected Him to arrive in the way He did. People from all over Israel were in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast now just a few days away. Many of them had witnessed the things that Jesus had done in other towns, villages, and cities throughout Israel. Most likely, a lot of their lives had been changed by way of miracle or His spoken word. They immediately recognized Him and were excited to see Him.

In the other Gospels we are told that Jesus sent His disciples to get a young donkey colt. He rode it into Jerusalem. When the people saw Him coming, they began to break branches off the palm trees around them and lay them in the road before the young donkey. They also laid their outer clothing down. This was very significant for it was how a newly crowned king of Israel paraded before the people during his “inauguration.”

This had been prophesied several hundred years before as quoted in the scripture in verse 15, *“Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King comes, sitting on a donkey’s colt.”* Compare this to Zechariah 9:9, *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, your King comes unto you: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon a donkey, and upon a colt the foal of a donkey.”* At that moment another wonderful prophecy of the coming of Messiah was being fulfilled before their eyes. The people didn’t realize it. The religious rulers were so preoccupied in getting rid of Jesus that they didn’t even take time to think about it. It just happened.

However, the people did realize that they were giving Jesus a kingly reception. Their very words of praise in verse 13 tell us that they were pronouncing blessing upon Him as the king. They just didn't know to what degree they were making that pronouncement. He was coming as a Spiritual King in peace.

THE PALM BRANCHES

Let's take a look at the two symbols found in this very important passage of scripture. First of all, we have the palm branches. This was a mark of triumph to a victor or king. This practice indicated that a victory had been won and consequential peace was the result. What a tremendous symbolism is shown in this case. Jesus was indeed entering Jerusalem, celebrating His victory before it happened! Can you imagine the confusion and frustration of the Jewish leaders as they saw this procession entering the city? They were expecting Jesus to somehow sneak into the city, but here He comes openly and triumphantly!

This is very significant to us. Many battles rage in the lives of Christians today. I personally believe that these battles will increase the closer we get to the time for Jesus' second appearance. The reason for this is that the devil is turning up the heat on believers to try to persuade them to give up on the Lord. But when we are deeply in love with Christ how can we ever do that? Yet, the battles rage on, one after another. I know most of you reading this can relate to what I'm saying. I don't mean to be a minister of "gloom and doom" but we must face reality. The battles are fierce at times. Those of you going through them understand and know what I'm talking about.

Yes, we have the peace of God within us. Yes, we can be joyful despite circumstance because our joy does not depend on outward happiness but inward, spiritual peace. Yet, the war is fought.

In the heat of this war, and in the face of our enemy, we can begin to hold up the palm branches that pre-celebrate our victory because we know the Victor! This battle that we are fighting has already been won by Jesus Christ when He died on Calvary and then arose the third day, triumphant over sin and death.

As we said in another chapter, In the days of the American Civil War, it was months after the surrender of General Lee before the fighting actually stopped in some areas. It took time by their communication methods of that day to get the word spread. Consequently, even though the war was over, people continued to fight and men continued to die.

The devil continues to wage war even though it has been won. We are on the right side if we have committed ourselves to Christ, and we continue to fight, even though we have been proclaimed victors in Christ. As the old hymn goes, we have "Victory in Jesus" and we can boldly proclaim it even though people are literally dying in this world because of their faith.

Then, we lay our palm branches of triumph down before our Lord and Master, because it is He Who has given us this sweet victory. We lay them down in worship and homage to Him. We acknowledge that we have no victory without Him. We honor Him as the Mighty, Victorious Warrior!

THE DONKEY

The second symbol is that of the young donkey. As we have already said, this was the way kings rode in acknowledgement of their newly appointed office. It symbolized honor.

Jesus was, once again, proclaiming Himself as king in advance. He acknowledged that He was ruler of a kingdom unknown and unfamiliar to man. His was beginning as a spiritual kingdom. He spoke these very words to Pilate later on in the book of John.

The Jews just could not grasp this concept. They wanted their king right then and there. They were ready to be delivered from the suppression of the Jewish leaders, and from the Romans who controlled their country.

Had Jesus only given the word they would have been up in arms and ready to rebel. But He wanted to bring more than just a physical kingdom. He was ushering in a kingdom made up of the very souls of men, not just Jews. He was making it possible for every man, woman, and child anywhere in the world to become a part of a kingdom that would never end.

That kingdom is alive and well today. Millions have come to Christ in true repentance and pledged their allegiance to the King of kings. Yes, there are many “want-to-be subjects” in this kingdom. But there are many that understand at least enough to know that Christ’s kingdom is the only one really worth belonging to.

This is not to say that I am not grateful to be a citizen of the United States of America. It is a great and powerful nation and has been given her authority by God alone. But she is still a physical nation that is subject to failure. The only true Kingdom that will never fail is the one that proclaims Jesus Christ as King!

As the battles before mentioned rage, let us always be reminded that Jesus proclaimed Himself King and Victor on that ride into Jerusalem. Let us always realize that it is merely a type of the day He will return and physically set up His kingdom here on Earth. One day, as the spiritual battles turn into the physical battles predicted in the Book of Revelation, Jesus Himself is going to appear in the sky mounted on a splendid white horse with all the armies of Heaven following. He is going to quickly and suddenly put an end to the physical war that has been raged spiritually for so long. He is going to conquer the ultimate enemy and cast Him into a bottomless pit reserved for the devil and his angels. Then He is going to reign on this Earth for 1000 years. What a wonderful time! What a peaceful time! It is His and it will happen just as the Bible has said.

His triumphal entry into Jerusalem that day was the fore-proclamation of that coming event. He is the Victor today and now in our lives. But He is also that soon coming King Who will also give us this physical victory.

Hold on, saints of God, hold on! Live in victory today, but know that the physical evidence of our victory is still coming. Don't ever let the devil fool you into becoming hopeless. Regardless the circumstance, or how the situation looks right now, He is the Victor. He will come through. He will work for our best! The challenge of the palm branches and donkey is that we acknowledge Him as our Victor and our victory, and that we are always willing, despite physical, mental, or emotional condition, to proclaim Him as the eternal King!

CHAPTER 26

The Challenge of Seeing the Light

John 12:17-50

*“I have come as a light into the world, that
whoever believes in Me should not abide in
darkness.”*

(John 12:46)

Caves are amazing - A hole in the ground that leads down into the depths of the earth. What is it about that dark ominous cavity that lures us into its gaping mouth? Boys are notorious about jumping headlong into that unknown darkness without giving a second thought to the dangers that may be lurking there.

When I was around fourteen, a group of men took the boys of the church youth group exploring in a cave on a Sunday afternoon. The journey began by crawling on our stomachs through a very narrow opening in a dry creek bed. With just enough ceiling to get through we crawled thirty to fifty feet. The trip seemed endless as we pushed and pulled our way with tons of rock hanging inches above our heads.

Then suddenly the vertically narrow passage opened into a large cavern. The only light now spilled from our flashlights and the room was like a beautiful sculpture of nature with its stalactites and stalagmites erupting from the floor and ceiling. A waterfall from a cavern in an opening about ten feet off the floor ended in a pond and when you shined the light on the water you could see the blind fish swimming there. We took time to have lunch in the big room.

We had many adventures that day as we explored the various passages of the cave, but what impressed me the most during my first cave adventure was what they did in that room. Before we moved on, the men had each one of us turn out our flashlights and for those few moments we were in the blackest darkness I had ever experienced in my life. We could see absolutely nothing. The leader of our expedition told us that when he was our age, he and a group of boys used to take others into that cave, turn out all the lights then leave them there to find their way out. I have never been able to figure out how you could get out of a cave in that kind of darkness without a light.

Jesus talked about a light that cannot be seen with the natural eye. Without this light we are thrown into a deeper darkness than any man can imagine. It is the darkness of the lost soul. Without Christ we are all in that darkness, we just don't realize it. Jesus

told His disciples to walk in the light. Of course, He was talking about them learning from Him while He was with them, to keep the darkness from overtaking them. He said simply that those who were in the darkness could not see where they were going.

I took a walk in our backyard the other evening. It was a peaceful evening and a very pleasant night. As I walked, I wasn't paying particular attention to where I was going and, in an instant, I stumbled into the picnic table. In the darkness I had my mind on other things. I skinned my shin pretty good because of not being careful in the dark. I couldn't see where I was going. Spiritually without the light we cannot see where we are going. We think we know where our path is leading us but in reality, we have no idea.

Then Jesus said something to His disciples that transcends time and gives us hope today. He told them that while they had the light to believe in it so that they could become the sons of light. This is the key to knowing the light. We believe in Him as the light and in doing so we become the sons of the light. We in turn convince others to believe in the light so they too can become the sons of the light. In this way the light goes on until He returns.

The light attracts many different creatures from the night. In these verses of scripture, we see some examples of this and so we explore those caverns in the great cave of darkness in which the people of this world aimlessly grope.

THE GREEKS WANTED TO SEE JESUS

This part of this chapter makes you wonder if Jesus was even listening to Philip and Andrew. Some Greeks had approached them asking an audience with Jesus. I can almost hear them saying, "We're not sure, but let us go ask Him about it." They did and Jesus went into a discourse about His time.

Sometimes I'm bad about that. Someone will say something that sparks a thought in my brain and I just begin talking about it out of the blue like they know exactly what I'm talking about. I'm sure other people, out of politeness, have endured my discourse not having the faintest idea of "where'd that come from . . ."

I'm not accusing Jesus of doing this because, being God in the flesh, He knew exactly what He was talking about. He knew that the time would come when his disciples would carry the Good News about Him to the Greeks and all the other gentile races. He knew that this was the time to get ready for the sacrifice. All over Jerusalem people were preparing their sacrificial lambs. They were making plans where they would celebrate this feast and with whom. While they made their plans, Jesus too was making plans. They were agonizing plans, however, not those of celebration. He was getting ready to lay down His life as the ultimate sacrifice for man.

For this reason, Jesus talked with them not about the Greeks who had come as mere spectators out of curiosity, but about the next greatest event of all history – His crucifixion. He told them, "The time is here that the son of man will be glorified." He

talked to them with the example of a grain of wheat being buried beneath the earth, typifying death. There it remained, in the dark and cold of the ground, all alone. But because of this implantation much fruit would be produced. By the sacrifice He was preparing to make, much spiritual fruit was about to be produced.

We get sidetracked by the “Greeks” sometimes. God has given us each a mission and a purpose in life. But so many things fight for our attention and get us off the path that we are meant to walk. The challenge of this is to realize what is taking place and think of the hour that has come in our own lives – the hour in which Jesus must be glorified in us. We make the necessary sacrifice if it is required to put ourselves back on that path. It may mean not entertaining every “Greek” that comes our way. It may mean being misunderstood by others because we have refused to be a part of an activity that may have very good intentions. But it is not God’s path for us. We must stay focused on the path down which He is leading us if we will accomplish that He has chosen for our lives. His path will lead us out of the cave, not down a dead-end passageway that is caused by the “Greeks” getting us sidetracked.

If we would see the light, He is trying to show us we must be intently concentrated on Him, His mission, and His direction. We won’t be the most popular person with everyone because others have their own idea of what we should be doing. But His light is most important, most urgent and must prevail in our lives. Jesus said that those loving their lives in this world would lose them, while those dissatisfied with their lives here will find eternal life. What did He mean by that? While we must be content with the “things” and the road He has directed for us to take, we can never be satisfied with this life. It is so temporary, so vain at times. Any goal in this world that does not include Christ and His plan for us is worthless. It will only cause us to end with nothing. But His plan, though it may not make us rich in wealth, or famous and well known, will indeed give us hope and eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus called for anyone who would be His servant to follow Him. There is more to it than just walking behind Him. Sure, we need to do that. But following Him means going all the way with Him to Calvary. It means that we count our physical life as unimportant and that we are focused on Him and trusting that wherever following Him may take us we rely Him to know that all will be okay.

There may be times that we come to places in the cave of the soul that look appealing and maybe downright beautiful. But we can’t stay here because we need the light and the dampness and darkness will destroy our lives.

THE VOICE FROM HEAVEN

God speaks to people but most of the time He speaks to us in our thoughts and from deep within our soul. As we read the Bible, we see that He seemed to speak audibly to several chosen Old Testament characters. He spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He talked with Moses and Samuel. But these seem to be especially chosen people. I will not deny that God can speak audibly to anyone He wishes. If there are people today

who claim to have heard the audible voice of God, I will not deny their experience because God can do whatever He wants to do – He’s God you know! But most of us have never heard the audible voice of God. That doesn’t mean that we are any less a Christian than one who claims to have heard His audible voice.

It is significant, however, that three times during the ministry of Jesus God spoke audibly from Heaven not just to Jesus but so that all present could hear His voice. When Jesus was baptized God spoke from Heaven saying “This is My much-loved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Then, on the Mountain of Transfiguration where Peter, James and John witnessed the transformation of Jesus and saw Him talking with Moses and Elijah, once again God spoke from Heaven. He said, “This is My much-loved Son. Listen to Him.” Here in our text God spoke for the third time in the hearing of the entire multitude that surrounded Christ. Jesus had prayed to God saying, “Father, glorify Your Name.” When He had finished these words, the Bible tells us that a voice came out of the sky that said, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.”

Those who heard that voice on that day had various opinions. Some said that it thundered. Others said that it was the voice of an angel. They were all wrong. It was the voice of God. He answered Jesus so that all could hear. It was a further witness of His kinship with God but it was so much more than that. God was saying that His name had been glorified. His signature was on all of creation. Those in history who had known Him could not help but speak of His glory. But His ultimate glorification was coming in His own Son.

What are we going to do with the voice from Heaven? It too has much to do with our own choice. The light that illuminates our spiritual path not only reveals the way God wants us to go but contains in it the voice of God. He speaks to us in the light. He spoke to Paul in the light. If we want to hear the voice of God, we can seek to hear an audible sound and, don’t get me wrong, that would be awesome. But He is continually speaking to us in the light He gives us. Listen to Him.

Jesus told the people that the voice had not come for His sake but for theirs. He always speaks to us. God wants to communicate with us and not just with those who have influence. He wants to talk to me and He wants to talk to you. We’ve just got to be in the light and then we can hear Him. We get in the light by following His path. We follow His path by following Christ. We know where Christ is going and can keep up with Him by knowing what His word says. We know what His word says by reading it in the Bible and listening to the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

In the cave of the soul God speaks to us. Those not in the light will hear the echo and may come up with many excuses like, “It’s just the wind.” But when we have stepped into the light, we hear clearly His voice calling out to us, beckoning us in the right direction.

PROPHECY

Seeing the Light requires us to listen to His voice, His prophecies and believe them. Jesus gave those people a prophecy of Himself that day. He told them first of all that it was time for the judgment of the world and the prince of the world to be cast out. He also said that if He were lifted up from off the earth that He would draw all men to Him. He wasn't talking about being exalted but about being suspended between heaven and earth on the cross. The power of what happened that day, when Jesus was crucified, may never be fully revealed. But we know that several things happened. He paid the price for man to finally be free and united with God the Father. This sacrifice gave man freedom, brought judgment to the world and dethroned the devil.

We still feel the effects of the slavery of sin. We still see crime being done by men and we still see the devil showering havoc on the people of this world. But while all of this is going on the power of Christ is working in the hearts of men, women and children all over the face of this planet. People are coming to Him. People are accepting His sacrifice and seeing the purpose of His life on this Earth. That is the lull between the payment and the proclamation that all is done. During this time, we have the opportunity to accept Him and be restored to God.

When we write a check there is a period of time between giving it to the payee and the final transaction is finished. We paid our bill when we wrote the check and dropped it in the mail. But before our account is credited the check has to travel through the mail system to the designated payee who receives it, deposits it in their account and the creditor posts it. During that time, we are still in the clear even though the final posting has not yet occurred.

Jesus paid for our sins and we are indeed changed and made free. Judgment has been made and the ruler of our life is dethroned and Jesus now sits there. But the actual influence of our soul's enemy will not be completely gone until Christ returns to claim what He has purchased.

The devil still tries to influence us. He still knows what tempts us the most, what makes us angry, and what gets under our skin quicker than anything else and you can bet your bottom dollar that these are the areas in which he will attack us. Even though the blood of Jesus has cleansed us of our sinful nature and we have been made new creations in Christ, while we remain in the fleshly house in which we live, we will have difficulties thrown across the path that the Lord illuminates before us. These are efforts to sidetrack us from our destination. Half the battle is the knowledge of this truth. When we realize what is taking place then we have a choice: We can either give thought which will produce longing at the thing lying there or we can lift our eyes from it, step over and move on. It becomes a matter of choice when we are walking in the light.

These people chose to not believe Him. It too was a fulfillment of prophecy because Isaiah had said, "*Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*" (Isaiah 53:1). Isaiah had also prophesied, "*He has blinded*

their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them” (Isaiah 6:10). Isaiah had witnessed the glory of God and had written these words. They were words that transcended time and looked at this moment when the Messiah would be speaking the words of truth to the Jewish people. But God had not allowed them to understand and to choose disbelief in order to fulfill the sacrifice. It seems cruel and horrible, but it was necessary or we would not be able to experience restoration to the Father. It was part of creating the light of revelation which we now have.

As we move through the cave of the soul there are many temptations but also many warnings. We must choose to heed the warnings, avoid the temptations and keep moving down the path our Lord illuminates before us.

WHICH PRAISE?

Many did believe on Jesus. The Bible tells us that even amongst the rulers there were many who believed Him. But a terrible thing happened to them because even though they believed they did not confess Him – they didn’t voice their belief. Why? Why would they make such an eternally detrimental choice? The Bible tells us that they were afraid that they would lose their positions in the Synagogue and also because they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. They liked their position over the people and they liked being exalted above others and because of that they chose not to confess Christ even though they knew in their hearts that He was indeed the Messiah.

Still, in our modern day of technology, in our beloved country of freedom, we choose not to confess Christ even though we know in our hearts that He is indeed the Savior of the world. I have spoken to many people who have made this choice and they will readily admit that they believe in God and they believe that Jesus is the Christ, but they won’t confess Him as their Savior because of other things they like and harbor as dear in their hearts. What a death wish! What a terrible choice to make!

The question that is posed before us is “which praise do we value the most?” We like man’s applause. We like having the spotlight put upon us and being put on the pedestal of life in the eyes of others. It means that we have been socially accepted and people think we are great.

On the other hand, what value can we put on the praise of God? We don’t typically think about getting praise from God but He applauds us when we make the right choice and confess Christ. When one comes to Him and confesses Him as Savior, putting aside their old life even if it means giving up their occupation, their friendships, their old loves and haunts, a great accolade echoes from Heaven.

Walking in the light requires us to make this choice. Which praise do we value the most? Do we value that of men or that of God? Our natural ear may never hear that of God even though it happens just the same. It all comes down to whether we insist on trusting our human senses or that of faith. It is a challenge to walk in the light. We may

make it sound easy but it isn't. Walking in the light requires us to lay aside every hope, dream and plan that we may have made in this world, and replace those things with a new direction – walking down the path in the light of Christ. We will only see ahead what we need to see for the moment and it requires putting our full trust and confidence in Jesus.

In the cavern of the soul there are many echoes of applause, some from one passage and some from another. We are tempted to find out why we are being applauded. Beware: The enemy of the soul would like nothing more than for us to stray down that tunnel and disappear into the black. But listen more closely. In the light there is another sound of hands being clapped that perhaps we didn't hear before. It is the praise of God encouraging us to continue down the lighted path.

CHAPTER 27

The Challenge of Washing Dirty Feet

John 13:1-20

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”

(John 13:3-5)

When you were a kid did you ever make mud pies? Chances are you did.

We always made those pies barefooted. In the hot summertime when the sun was beating down like fire falling from the sky, that cool squishy mud felt like you were standing in ice cream as it squished between your toes. But you didn't dare go into the house after such "culinary artistry" was performed without a good "foot-washin!"

It was just before the feast of the Passover. Jesus knew that He would not be able to participate that year in the traditional way, sitting at a table with your family eating the Passover Lamb with unleavened bread, and so He set up this special meal with His disciples which we have called "The Last Supper." The Bible tells us in the other Gospels that Jesus had a great desire to do this. He had instructed His disciples to go into Jerusalem and look for a man carrying a pot of water on his head. This was very unusual for this was considered a woman's job and finding a man doing it wouldn't be difficult at best. They were to follow him and he would lead them to a place with a rather large upstairs area (an upper room) where they were to make preparation for this meal.

This was the supper where Jesus broke the bread, and passed it around to the men telling them to eat for it represented His body which would be broken for all. He then passed around a cup from which they were to drink, representing His blood that would soon be spilled for the world.

It was at this time that Judas Iscariot was revealed as the one who would betray Jesus on that very night. John's Gospel doesn't relate much detail as to what I have mentioned so far. But it does go into great detail about what happened after the meal.

After supper Jesus did something that only a lowly servant would do. He got up from the table, filled a basin with water, removed His outer clothing, wrapped a towel around His waist, and began one by one to wash the dirty, dusty feet of those men. At that time, most people traveled by foot with only the wealthy riding mounts or traveling in chariots or carriages. All others walked. They wore sandals leaving most of the foot

exposed. The roads were all dirt. Can you even imagine how dirty, dusty and soiled a person's feet would be at the end of the day? They were filthy.

OUR OWN SERVICE

The first and most obvious point in this narrative tells us that we are to be servants. Jesus did the work of a servant when He voluntarily began to wash the dirty feet of those men. We are never greater than our Master (see John 15:20). If He could do the job of a servant, then so must all of us. I don't know if you have ever had the privilege of participating in a foot washing ceremony, but it is a very humbling experience. If you ever get the chance to do it, I would most certainly recommend it. If performed with the right attitude, you can feel how demeaning it is to be the lowly servant washing feet.

Of course, the entire ceremony is representative of our position of servitude in the Kingdom of God. We are all called to service. Not to leadership, but to service. Many times, in God's Kingdom, opportunities of service will result in leadership, but leadership is not the desired position. Jesus said that if you wanted to be the greatest in His Kingdom, then you had to be willing to be the least (Luke 9:48).

Take a good look at all the office gifts to the Church: Pastor, Evangelist, Prophet, Apostle, Teacher – All of these are offices of service. Each one requires the individual to give his best service to others. If they had been leadership positions then they would have been called, President, Vice President, Chairman, Boss or some other such title. No, they speak of service to others. However, as a result of that service, those performing the duties of these offices are considered leaders and are looked to in such a capacity.

We are all called in the Body of Christ as a servant in his own way. God has a plan of service for each of us. The great thing about that is that we will love doing what He has called us to do (for the most part anyway). The reason for this is that He has pre-gifted us in the capacity in which He wants us to work. What about that! Does God have a plan or what?

MISTAKEN

I'm sure that each one of them wondered what Jesus was doing as He began to wash their feet. But the only one who spoke up was, of course, Simon Peter. Peter was always speaking up. He was a very opinionated person. So, when Jesus came to him, Peter protested thinking it to be the noble and righteous thing to do. He would never let the Master wash his lowly, dirty, stinking feet. Jesus was above that sort of thing. He was, after all, the Messiah. God had revealed that to Peter. He was the One prophesied to come. No way was Peter going to let this great Man from God stoop to washing his feet.

So, he protested to Jesus. Jesus told him that He realized Peter didn't know the meaning of this, but he would later. Still, Peter said, "You shall never wash my feet, Lord." To this Jesus replied, "If you don't let me wash your feet, Peter, then you can have no part

with Me.” I don’t believe Peter realized the importance of this, but he knew that he didn’t want to be left out of whatever it was Jesus was going to do next, so he blurted out, “If that’s the case, Lord, then just give me a full bath! Wash my hands and my head too!”

Jesus replied, “He who has taken a bath is already clean except for his feet.” The obvious point here is that, even though one might bath every day, if he spends much time outside with only sandals on his feet, they are going to get dirty and soiled.

Don’t be misled in blind, well-meaning, but mistaken humbleness. Peter thought he was saying and doing the noble thing. But he almost missed out on a ceremony that represented being a part of the Kingdom of God. We might have the best of intentions but we must be obedient to the word. Good intentions are just like good works – They are noble characteristics but don’t mean squat in our salvation experience.

WHY AFTER SUPPER?

Washing the feet of dinner guests was normally done before the meal ever began. Customarily as the guests arrived the servant would be waiting at the door and wash their feet as they came into the room. It would have seemed logical, since being poor themselves, one of the disciples had been appointed to wash the dirty feet of the men as they came in. At best by custom, they should have had a pan of water available so that they could wash their own feet as they arrived. Had Jesus committed a great oversight? By Jewish tradition it was an unthinkable thing to do to eat a meal without washing one’s hands and feet.

Jesus had made no mistake. As usual, He knew exactly what He was doing. This was but another symbolic point of what took place that night around that table. We know that the bread represented His body that was only hours away from being broken, just as the wine was a token of His blood that would be spilled the next day as the sacrifice for the sin of the world. Jesus had spoken these words to His disciples.

But when He washed their feet, He was showing that after we eat the bread of His flesh and drink the wine of His blood, only then are we truly cleansed of sin. He washed their dirty feet which was a minor task to the washing of the filthy and putrid smelling soul of each of us.

It is His sacrifice, His broken body and shed blood that paid the penalty for our sin. There is no way possible for us to be cleansed and made useful vessels for God without the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. It is only by His grace that we are saved. Our good works can never be good enough to save us.

So, we can “wash our feet” in preparation for service all we want. But without the supper of the body and blood of Christ it does us no good. By waiting until supper had ended, Jesus also demonstrated that we are never fit for service in the Kingdom of God aside from His sacrifice.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT I HAVE DONE?

Jesus then asked His disciples if they realized what He had done to them. He reminded them that they called Him “Master,” and “Lord.” And He was. But if He, being Master and Lord, washed their feet, so they should wash the feet of others. Yes! We are called to be servants. Yes! We must do good works to reflect Christ in our lives! But we must do so in His order. We must be a servant, but we must first partake in the supper of the Lamb.

If by chance you are reading this and have never really committed your life to Christ, you can remedy that situation today. First of all, know that all have sinned and come short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). Admit that you are a sinner, then confess to God this realization (Romans 10:9-10). Repent, or tell God you are sorry for being a sinner. The Bible tells us that if we do this sincerely from the heart, He will save us. Then, we must believe that His body and blood are sufficient to pay for our sin. We believe that He has saved us. Only if we believe can we really be changed.

Once we have been changed (made a new creation in Christ – 2 Corinthians 5:17) then we can be washed in Christ. Now we are ready to “wash the feet” of others.

Our job in the Kingdom may be labeled with many names, and the duties involve a host of things. Every tool that reflects the image of Christ is to be used for His Kingdom. However, we are all really only one thing – “Foot Washers.” Our job, regardless what form it may take, is to do the work of a servant. We are to proclaim the Good News of the Body and the Blood, but we are merely servants stooping to washing feet alongside our Lord.

Let us go forward in our service for the Master!

CHAPTER 28

The Challenge of Betrayal

John 13:21-30

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you
will betray Me.”*

(John 13:21)

Richard and John had been best friends for many years. They had grown up together, played ball together, fished together, and fought together. As adults, they had become very fond of a good Saturday morning game of golf. It allowed them to forget about the problems of the past week and just spend some quality time having fun. They also got the opportunity to catch up on what was going on in each other's life.

But one Saturday morning as they were finishing their game, Richard became very serious as he spoke to John. "John, this will be my last golf game with you for a while. Cindy and I haven't been spending enough quality time together and it's just past time that we begin to work on our relationship. I'm sorry, man. I sure hope you understand."

"Hey, of course I do, buddy. We'll just have to play it by ear and get together when we can." But he didn't mean it. The fact was John would miss this time with his best friend, more than what he could even imagine. In fact, almost immediately he began to feel resentment towards Richard. After all, it had only been two years since Richard had confessed to him about his extra-marital affair. It had only happened once, but Richard was torn up about it. What if his wife, Cindy found out? How could he ever face her?

John had come to his rescue and had helped Richard to repent to God for his sin, and assured him that God had forgiven him of it. Richard never did it again, but he also had never confessed his sin to Cindy.

John felt as if Richard had stabbed him in the back. Something happened to him and he began to toy with the idea of letting Cindy know what had happened. But how could he do that without Richard knowing? The weeks passed and the idea continued to fester in his mind, until, one day, he sat down and wrote an anonymous letter to Cindy spilling the beans about everything. He knew he shouldn't do this. This was between Richard and Cindy now, but it seemed that he just couldn't help himself. Then, when he dropped the letter in the mailbox, it was past reversal. It had been done.

Two weeks later he learned that Cindy had filed for divorce from Richard. What had he done? He called Cindy and explained that he was the one who had sent the letter and he begged her for forgiveness. He'd never forget her words, "It doesn't matter, John. Richard should have told me before. I'll never forgive him and this is just the best way. You do whatever you want."

John never saw his friend, Richard, again after that. It was past – a friendship lost forever. Now John would never forgive himself for what he had done to his best friend.

After Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples He was deeply troubled in His spirit. He knew what was coming. He revealed that one of them would betray Him. Of course, they were shocked. Each disciple began to ask Jesus, "Is it me?" I can imagine them holding their breath in anticipation of His answer. They had spent three amazing years with Him and I'm sure could not imagine ever doing that to their beloved Master.

The disciple that Jesus loved, who most authorities believe to be John, was leaning on Jesus' chest and Peter beckoned to him to ask who the betrayer was. This John did and Jesus told him that it would be the one to whom He presented a piece of bread dipped in sauce. He then dipped the bread and handed it to Judas.

THE DEVIL ENTERED HIM

At this point the Bible says that the devil entered him. Jesus instructed Judas to do what he was going to do quickly. Judas arose and left the room. Most of the other disciples, knowing that Judas was the treasurer, assumed that Jesus had instructed him to go out and get something for the feast, or perhaps give something to the poor. The Bible says that when Judas left, it was now night.

Judas Iscariot has received many judgments over the centuries for his horrible decision to betray the Master. He has been judged, condemned and accused of not being able to do anything else. But let's take a good look at the facts the Bible reveals concerning his situation.

First of all, Jesus knew from the very start when He picked Judas as one of His twelve disciples that he would betray Him (John 6:64). Popular teaching says that Judas was pre-ordained by God to do what he did. I agree that God knows what each of us will do even before we are conceived. But because of free will, each of us has the same choices. Judas had choices to make. God knew which choices those would be, but that doesn't mean that he was created just for this purpose. The Bible refers to Judas as "the son of perdition" in only one place in the Bible (John 17:12). But even this reference came after Judas had made his choice. Satan did not enter into Judas until Jesus had identified him as the one who would betray Him (John 13:27).

We must remember that Jesus never let any of His disciples know for an instant that Judas was going to be His betrayer. When He sent His disciples out by twos to

minister the Gospel from city to city, Judas was included. Judas was included in all of those intimate moments Jesus spent with the twelve.

I believe that Judas had the best of intentions. He saw hope, peace, and the future in Jesus. Just like the other disciples, Judas felt that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Who knows what happened? Perhaps when Jesus began talking of His coming death Judas became confused with all the teaching he had heard about the Messiah bringing in a new and perfect kingdom. Perhaps his hope died when he heard these things. We saw his doubt in Jesus at the dinner with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in the house of Simon the Leper. Judas snapped at Jesus when He allowed Mary to wash His feet with a very expensive perfume.

Somewhere along the line, his doubts caused him to begin to think about ways he could turn Jesus in and perhaps collect a reward for it. "Surely," he may have thought, "these past three years are worth something." His temptation soon materialized into a secret meeting with the Jewish leaders and a plot was hatched.

Still, I believe it didn't seem real to Judas until that night when Jesus handed him the bread dipped in sauce. As we have already established, at that moment his temptation, plotting, and actual meeting with the Pharisees, became reality and Satan entered into him.

I believe the words in the scripture from verse 30, "He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night" are significant. Judas took "ownership" of what he had plotted and planned to do. By receiving the morsel from Jesus, he was acknowledging his guilt. He had allowed himself to be tempted to the point that the devil now influenced him more than Jesus did, in fact, even though it doesn't seem to be a full "possession" the Bible does say that "Satan entered into him." I say that it doesn't seem to be a "full possession" for later in this account we find that Judas was truly sorry for what he had done and in his own way, tried to undo it. That doesn't seem to me like something a demon-possessed individual would do.

NIGHT FELL

Now, not only had night fallen outside the confines of the upper room, but also in the heart of Judas Iscariot. He could have and should have repented to Jesus right then and there, but he didn't. The feelings he had been experiencing were so imbedded in his heart that he left immediately and went straight to the Pharisees to enact their plan.

This account relates something that all of us as believers should be aware of. We can turn away from our Lord. I know that many will tell us that once we have been saved, we will belong to the Lord forever. Yet we have others who tell us that if we commit just one sin after being saved, we must start all over again. So many voices and opinions ... The truth, as always, lies somewhere in-between these two conflicting teachings.

The Bible does indicate that we can fall away from God. Consider Romans 11:20-23. This passage is speaking of the Jews being broken off the olive tree and Gentile believers being grafted into the tree in their place. But it also says that we should be aware because if God is able to cut off the Jews and graft us in, then He is also able to cut us off.

Also look at the parable about the sower found in Matthew 13. There are two instances which indicate that the seed can be received but then dried up because of shallowness of root, or choked out by the cares of the world. The argument against this is that the word wasn't received well to begin with so the questions arises, "were they really believers?" But the Bible says that in both cases they did receive the word, but chose other paths later.

On the other hand, the Bible also indicates that nothing can ever separate us from God. Look at Romans 8:35-39. Nothing can separate us from God and His love.

The key is people. When God saves us, He does a work that will last forever. He never wants us to leave Him. He isn't holding a threat of being cast out over our heads if we do the least little thing wrong. His grace through the sacrifice of Christ is enough. But people who get it in their head to just be "saved enough" (if that's possible) to make it into Heaven and those who want to see what all they can get away with, simply have the wrong idea about God. This attitude results many times in those who come to God simply out of fear of death or eternal destruction in hell. While hell is a very real place, it is not God's will that any should go there. It's not His will that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). But, sadly, many will, simply because of their rejection of God.

I realize that Judas nor any of the other disciples were Christians at the time we are speaking of. Jesus had not died for sin yet. Grace was promised but not completed. So, no one on the Earth was a Christian at this time. But the concept of what Judas did in comparison to Christians is there just as the concept of eternal security is there. So, what's the answer?

As I said before, the answer is in people. People make the choice simply because of the free will God has given them. God is not to blame. He has made the provision, given the free gift, supplied the grace, but if people choose to trample all of that, He will not stop them. Yes, they will pay an extreme price for it, but God will allow them to do it.

It has to be a conscience choice. One must determine that he is going to disregard the grace of God. What a horrible thought! But it happens every day. God does not choose for someone to fall from His grace, nor does He make it happen. It is man's choice.

WE HAVE A CHOICE

However, if we choose to remain in God's grace, He will also honor that. Many times, we sin against God. When we get saved and repent for the first time, it is only the

beginning. We will find ourselves repenting for committed sin many times afterward. The good news is that His grace is sufficient each time! We aren't getting saved all over again, just telling Him we're sorry for sin we have committed. His shed blood covers it all! As long as we continue in His grace, we don't have to worry about falling from it. He loves us so much that He will always forgive the repentant heart.

Judas chose to go into the dark night. He made the choice to let the night settle on his heart as well. Later on, he did try to make things right. When he discovered that Jesus had been condemned to die, he tried to reverse what he had done. But he couldn't. Right then and there, had he known that he could have repented and the Jesus would have forgiven him, I believe that he could have been saved (after Jesus paid the price that is). But instead, Judas could not bear what he had done. He felt sorrow, but instead of driving him to repentance, he chose suicide. He hung himself. Judas made choices that decided his fate forever.

THAT CHOICE IS OURS

The choice is ours. God loves us so much that He, through Jesus Christ paid our penalty for sin. He provided grace when we deserved death. He even allows Christ to continue to make intercession for us. But He has left the decision up to us. We make the decision when we come to Him, but we also make the decision if we truly fall away from Him. If we go into the black of night as Judas did, it is our choice. No one else is to blame. We can't blame God, only ourselves.

If we choose to fall from grace, then we have betrayed the grace of God. We have betrayed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. I know there are those of you who will disagree with what I am saying here, but search the word. We are eternally secure as long as we remain eternally secure. Again, it is our choice.

What a glorious thing Christ has done for us! What a wonderful Savior we serve! He has made the way for us to be saved from the penalty and guilt of sin by His own shed blood and resurrection. I thank Him for it. Yes, I do fail Him. Yes, I do things that aren't pleasing to Him. But I love Him. I will never turn from Him. That is our security. When you decide to fall in love with Jesus Christ based on what He has done for you and you make up your mind that you will never stop loving Him no matter how much or how often you fail Him or whether He answers your prayer the way you think He should, then you can be secure in your relationship with Him.

CHAPTER 29

The Challenge of the Commandment

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John 13:31-38

*“By this all will know that you are My
disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

(John 13:35)

Commandments. They are rules that tell us what we can and cannot

do. It would be nice if we didn't have to have them, and if everyone would do the right thing, we wouldn't need them. They exist because there is always someone who refuses to do the right thing. Some say that rules are made to be broken. Unfortunately, there are those whose sole purpose in life seems to be testing this saying.

The Pharisees and interpreters of the Jewish law had been trying to get Jesus to say something that they could arrest Him for. In the process of this they began to ask questions that would have been very difficult for the average Jew to answer, especially in light of what Jesus had been teaching the people. In many instances they had actually accused Him of breaking the Law of Moses. But because of Jesus' scriptural rebuttals they just couldn't quite twist His answers enough to make an arrest.

In one instance, after having answered several of these trick questions, one of the lawyers in the group asked Him, "*Which of the commandments is the greatest?*" (Matthew 22:36). At this time Jesus didn't dare to issue a new commandment. Besides, He was talking to non-believers, and not to His own beloved disciples. So, He wisely answered by giving them not one great commandment but two. He told them to "Love the Lord God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and love their neighbor as much as they loved themselves. On these two hang all the laws and prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). What a challenge this was! But Jesus wisely knew that if we could succeed in loving God with all our being and then to love the one next to us as much as we love ourselves that all the other laws and commandments would simply become non-issues.

THE SIMPLE SOLUTION

How wise our Lord and Savior is! How difficultly, simple the solution! I say it like this because the solution is very simple. If everyone in the world would operate on these two commandments from God all crime, cheating, stealing, killing, raping, divorce, strife and anger would immediately cease! But it is also very difficult because we are human

and have been taught much of our lives to react from the sinful, human side. This side of us says things like, “No one is going to look out for you,” or, “Get it while you can,” or even “If you don’t do it for yourself no one will do it for you.”

I heard a story once about a lady who had grown to hate her husband. After they were married, he had laid down many rules for her to follow. These rules were about very major things but also about many minor things. He wanted her to fold his clothes a certain way, and put them in a certain place. He expected the house to look perfect and in order and when it didn’t get done, he very quickly reminded her of it. Over the course of time her husband died and she was finally free from all those “dos” and “don’ts” that he had insisted on.

A few years later she married again. But this time her husband was completely different. There were no rules and there were no requirements – Only love. After a few years of marriage to this man she was doing her housework one day and suddenly stopped in her tracks. She began to conscientiously look at the way she was doing things and she realized that she was doing things for her new husband exactly as she had done for her first husband. The difference was that now she was doing these things because she wanted to and because she loved her husband and not because she was made to do them.

It is like this story with God. If we truly love Him with everything in us, we will find ourselves being obedient to His commandments without even realizing it!

It works the same way with people. If we really love people as much as we love ourselves then we will treat them with respect and consideration. There is no need for laws governing us on how to treat others for we automatically know if we are operating in these commandments.

But with the disciples, and with us, Jesus took this theology a step further. Jesus even went as far as to call this a “new commandment.” It was new because it marked a new time. Jesus told them that the world would know that they were His disciples by the love they had for one another. They were to have the same love for each other that Jesus had displayed toward them.

Let’s take just a moment and look at how Jesus had displayed love toward them. First of all, He had hand-picked each one of them. From a large crowd Jesus had called them out one by one and by name. This means that He had been watching each one of those people in the crowd and waiting for God to tell Him, “He is one of them.” Jesus had spent much time with these men. He had rescued them from a storm at least twice, once by walking on the water to their boat and once by awaking from sleep and calming the storm. He had bestowed His own power upon them when He sent them out two by two into the villages of Israel.

But the most important way that He was going to show His love for them was yet to come. He was about to die for them (and for each disciple that would come to Him

from then on – That’s us). In fact, the disciples really didn’t fathom that Jesus was very God in the flesh! God had allowed Himself to come in human form, be tempted, battered, and beaten all because of His love to man.

LOVE AS I HAVE LOVED

Jesus was telling these men to love each other with the same love that He had displayed to them. Jesus had told them that He was one with the Father and that He was one with them. So, in essence, Jesus was saying that each of His disciples was one with the rest of His disciples. WOW! We truly are the body of Christ for we are one! We must love each other as one.

Jesus went one step more. He said that this was the way that other people would know that we were His disciples. It wouldn’t be because of great miracles, though the Bible teaches that miracles can and do happen. They wouldn’t know that we were His disciples because of signs and wonders, great healings, or the words that proceeded from our mouths, but only because of our love for each other.

THE NEW COMMANDMENT

This was the “New Commandment.” Number eleven! “Love one another as Christ had loved us.” That’s it! But, wow, is that it!!!? It requires us to look at His example before we react to another brother or sister in Christ. It requires us to pray before we get angry at each other. It requires us to think of our witness to the world. We could preach Christ until we were blue in the face, but if we don’t display this one quality then we aren’t showing the world that we belong to Him. We have failed in our witness.

And the church of today has failed. We have not displayed the love of Christ toward each other. Oh, there are a few. There are some who display love towards those closest to them but not as Christ did. In fact, we have successfully divided ourselves into denominations. We have put barriers up and some even go as far as to accuse those of not being a part of their group as not really being saved.

Today, we see Christian’s suing each other over copyrights, slander, and so forth, just like the world does to each other. Yet we want the world to believe that we are Christians and that if “they come to Jesus their lives will change.” But we haven’t demonstrated that. We see brothers in Christ at odds with each other. We see feelings hurt over petty things. We see congregations split because the members can’t agree on the color of the carpet. We see Christians and even Pastors divorcing their Christian wives because they can’t get along – Even they can’t seem to love each other as Christ loves us.

“God forgive us! What have we done?” We have measured our success and witness by how many people fill the pews each week. We have measured success by how large the offering is or by the value of our property. But unless we can fulfill this “New Commandment” given to us by our Lord, we have failed, and failed miserably.

If ever there was a time, my brothers and sisters in Christ, that we come together to prove to the world just Who Christ is, that time is now. We are surely hurtling toward the last days. All the signs are pointing in that direction. The world is taking its place as far as sin and promiscuity goes. The devil is right on schedule with all of his wickedness and evil. Yet we believers in Christ are seemingly lulled to sleep as the time draws close.

The world is ripe for harvest and all we have to do is to fulfill this “New Commandment” given us by our Lord, and the world will know that we are Christians. The world will be drawn to us because we are Christians. But up to now, by and large, the evidence is not there.

HOW CAN WE CHANGE?

How can we change this? How can we begin showing our brothers and sisters in Christ that we love them like Christ loves them? There is really only one way and it is not the easy way.

First of all, we need to evaluate how much we truly love ourselves. We “pious” Christians seem to have been taught this idea that we aren’t to love ourselves. But how can we love others like we love ourselves if we don’t love ourselves? We shouldn’t think too highly of ourselves but we know that, in normal and healthy thinking, we are not going to harm ourselves. We know that we are going to protect ourselves, and we know that we want what is best for ourselves. So, to love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves requires us to not want to harm them, but to protect them and to want what is best for them.

Secondly, we need to look at the gifting God has placed in the lives of each of His children. Because of our unique gifts we all have different personalities. When a brother or sister in Christ “rubs us the wrong way” our first reaction is to get defensive and protect ourselves. But when we are truly operating out of love for our brothers and sisters we should first stop and think, “where are they coming from? What is really going on in their hearts? Are they simply operating in the gifts that God has placed in their lives?” When we love each other as we love ourselves and we ask those questions we help to avoid conflict and so shine forth a witness to the world that will make non-believers want to believe.

Finally, are we really treating our brothers and sisters as we would like to be treated? The Golden Rule says, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” You know, I searched the whole New Testament and could not find a verse of scripture that puts it exactly like that. But the concept is most certainly there. Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our brother as ourselves, to love our enemies, to pray for them who spitefully use us and so on. Many have twisted this “Golden Rule” to say things like, “Do unto others before they do unto you,” or “Do unto others as they do unto you.” But both of these interpretations are spoken very selfishly. They do not reflect having love for each other.

WHAT HAPPENED WITH PETER?

Peter thought he loved His Lord that much. He had been given the revelation that Jesus was the Christ – The Messiah Who had come to redeem the world and all those in it.

Jesus had told the Pharisees that He was soon going to a place where they couldn't come – A place where they couldn't touch Him. He now told His disciples the same thing. They didn't understand, especially Peter. He responded with, "Lord, why can't we go with You? I love you so much that I am ready to die for you!" I believe Peter was sincere. I believe that he really thought he could lay his life down for Jesus.

We all have times when we feel confident about something that we really don't know how we'll respond until the time comes. When the time came for Peter, he did exactly what Jesus had predicted – He denied ever knowing Him. Now, we must understand that Peter had not yet received the Holy Spirit in his life and we who are Christians have. That makes all the difference in the world. Peter was speaking from the natural.

But we can't use what happened with Peter as an excuse for our own sinful behavior because we have received the Holy Spirit. The problem lies in the fact that we don't take time to rely on the Holy Spirit within us during the difficult times – the times when our brother in Christ makes us angry, or does us "dirty." He shouldn't have done that because he should have been relying on the Holy Spirit in his life, but that still is no excuse for our own behavior. We must answer to Christ and His calling of love for ourselves.

We can love our brothers as we love ourselves. If we couldn't then Jesus wouldn't have told us to do it. But we can only do it in Him. Let's begin to ask Him to make us mindful of each other beginning today. Let's seek to please our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Let's start the love relationship today that Jesus meant for us to have. If we do, we can win a multitude in that ripe harvest field that Jesus spoke about. It is our greatest witness – ever.

CHAPTER 30

The Challenge of the Final Place

John 14:1-7

“Let not your heart be troubled ...”

(John 14:1)

One very muggy but bright summer day I decided to go fishing with some friends but I really had no intention of doing any actual fishing. I had taken my Bible and just wanted a quiet place in the shade to read. The others picked what looked like a good spot to catch some action, but me? Well, I just found a tree that spread out in all directions, half-baited the hook and cast out into the lake. I didn't care if it was a good place or not on that particular day. Fishing was just my excuse to lie back next to a tree and absorb the wealth of light from the word.

As I sat there, completely submersed in what I was reading, I felt the slightest twinge on the fishing line. I had sort of wrapped it around my finger just in case I got a bite. "Probably just a little blue gill not big enough to even swallow my bait" I thought. So, not wanting to fool with them and still not caring anything about catching fish, I just let it go.

As I turned the page, I glanced out over the small lake. The air was very still that day, and so the surface of the lake looked like a gigantic mirror. I could see the reflection of clouds and the blue sky above in the water. You could almost count the leaves in the reflection of the trees that lined sparsely around the lake. It was still enough that I could have shaved with the clarity of my own reflection.

It was then that I noticed it. A small ripple surrounded my line in a circular pattern, very slight at first, but then, with each gentle tug on the line, it began to grow. I laid down my Bible because I knew I had something on the line that was more than a little tiny blue gill. As I grabbed up my pole and began to jerk on it in effort to completely hook whatever it was under the surface of the once calm water, the ripples became larger and more turbulent. As I reeled in the line the point of entry in the lake danced back and forth and caused even more turbulence on the surface. The reflections dissolved in the conflict that was taking place between the creature below the surface and the creature above the surface (me).

And then, just as suddenly as it began it was finished. Whatever was at the other end of the line managed to get itself loose from my hook and it was gone. All that was left was the waves as they glided across the lake.

Jesus began by telling His disciples “Don’t let your heart be troubled.” In the original language He was saying don’t let your soul, [the very being of your life,] be agitated [like the growing ripples of the lake.]” In the example I shared above what had been a very calm body of water was very quickly affected by the least amount of motion. As the struggle continued it became more and more disturbed. So, it is with our souls. We are very delicate creations. We can be at calm and peace and because of our emotional reaction to the slightest of situations our surface attitude is instantly changed to being “troubled.”

WHAT KIND OF TROUBLE?

Jesus was referring to a specific circumstance causing the “troubling” of our soul and that was where we were going to stay in our final place. He said, “don’t let your soul be agitated [troubled]: You have faith and trust in God you can also have faith and trust in Me. In my Father’s house are many rooms ... “

The King James Version reads “mansions.” I had always envisioned going to Heaven and living in an enormous house filled with servants to take care of my every craving and desire. But as I grew older, I realized that there would be no servants in Heaven. All who go there will get the same reward. Suddenly it dawned upon me that if I got that enormous house, I’d be all alone in it. It just didn’t look very appealing to me. But as I began to understand the scriptures, I found out that the picture is not one of streets lined with mansions but one extremely large house, my Father’s house, with more rooms in it than could be imagined!

We have selfishly sung and talked about building our mansion beside of Jesus, or closer to the throne of God. But let’s face it, we can’t all live beside of Jesus and with millions in Heaven, if we all live in separate mansions some of us are going to be many, many miles away from the throne of God.

But if we all live in God’s house, with ample room just for us, what a different picture it paints! Think of it, Jesus said that He was going away to prepare rooms in His Father’s house for each of us to occupy when we get to Heaven! We’ll all live in God’s house, with God our Father and Jesus, our big brother, and be together but each having his/her own private place. To me, that’s much better than knocking around in a big mansion all by myself, walking miles and miles to get to the throne of God! Why, I’ll just go downstairs and see Him!

IF HE GOES AWAY . . . HE’LL BE BACK

Jesus also told His disciples that if He went away and prepared a place for them that He would surely return to receive them back with Him. It is a promise that has been

given through the ages. It is still true! As each one of us leaves this world in death we are somehow greeted by our Lord and King, but the day is coming when He will indeed return to this Earth to receive us up to God's house! Isn't that exciting? There is much teaching as to how this will happen, or when this will happen, but for the sake of here and now let's just rest in the fact that it is going to happen. All who have trusted Christ as their Lord and Savior will be received up to this final place and what a place it is!

It's been five years now, at the time of this writing, since my grandmother passed away. She was 97 years old and a saint of God if there ever was one. She was human let me assure you. She had her problems and hang-ups just like the rest of us, but I want you to know that she loved Jesus. She was ready to go and I know where she is. She isn't under the ground in the cemetery (oh, her remains are there. If you dug her up, what's left of her body would still be there, but her life – her soul is not there). She's living with Jesus! I know it. And if I knew her very well at all, I'd say she spends a good part of her day shouting around the throne of God!

The point I want to make with this example is very simple. I know her love for Christ. I believe in divine healing and I believe that if it were God's will that she could be raised from the dead. But I'd sure hate to be the one who called her back up! All her life she waited for the time she'd be just where she is now and let me tell you, to bring her back to this place wouldn't be a pretty sight! She'd thrash you to within an inch of your life! You just might be joining her when she went back!

We let the ripples of life grow into very troubled water. We let those little small waves continue to increase until it seems that a tidal wave is about to overtake us. We fight and scratch to hang on to this life (and don't get me wrong, I wouldn't even hint or suggest that suicide was a good solution) and hold it so dear, but let me tell you, what is really in store for us on the other side of life is more than we could even imagine!

TO DIE IS GAIN

Paul said, *"To live is Christ and to die is gain"* (Philippians 1:21). What he was saying was that as long as he lived here on Earth it would all be about Christ. He would spend his life telling and teaching about Christ as long as he had breath. But if he died, oh what great wealth he would inherit. Not because of his work on Earth but just because Christ was preparing for his arrival.

Each of us, as believers – as Christians, is being prepared for! Christ is preparing for my arrival in Heaven, just as He prepares for yours. It is exciting to think about going there. When you really get the true picture in your heart it seems sometimes that you just can't wait! And when our mission here is done, He will have all preparation made. He's going to let us live here until our final witness has been made. When our mission is complete and we can truly say, "It is finished," He'll have our room ready!

YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT

But then, Jesus said something else, something that confused some of His disciples. He said, "Where I go, you know, and the way to get there, you know." I'm sure he wasn't the only one, but Thomas spoke up, asking the question that I believe was in the hearts of at least some of the others. Thomas said, "Lord, we don't have any idea where You are going. How could we know the way to get there?" What a valid question! At this particular time what Jesus was talking about wasn't well known. They just weren't sure about what He was saying. All they could fathom at the time was the physical world. They couldn't see into the Spiritual world of truth. What they heard Him say was that He was going to take a journey away from them and they knew where He was going and the road to take to get there on their own. In the natural, if He didn't tell them where He was going how could they possibly know which road or even which direction to go to get to where He was?

The explanation Jesus gave them only really makes sense in the spiritual kingdom. Jesus explained it by saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." In the original language He was saying, "I am the road, the true path to take, and the destination of time" (verse 6). When we take a trip, we naturally want to know the best roads to drive on, the ones that are best marked so we can be sure we are on the right road, and how much time it is going to take to get there. In a way, that's the information Jesus gave to the disciples. He was leaving them for Heaven to get them a room ready in His Father's house and all they had to do to get there was to use Him as the highway, the one well marked and he'd be the final destination of time (life).

WHO'S GOING?

Jesus is the only path to get to that wonderful house in Heaven – God's house! It's the place I want to live for eternity. It's the final place, if you know Him as Savior. But not everyone is going to go there. Jesus would like nothing more than to prepare a room for every human being that has ever lived on this planet! But sadly, that is not going to be the case. Many will not believe upon Him. Many are caught up in other religions proclaiming other deities. Only Jesus Christ is the way. He is the only door. His is the gate to the true way.

We aren't going to make it just by leading good moral lives. On the contrary, we have no hope of ever being good enough to even think about going to live with God in Heaven. Our human righteousness is just like filthy rags according to Isaiah (Isaiah 64:6). It doesn't even come close to being good enough. We can't just "mend our ways" and "turn over a new leaf." No, if we really want to make it to our Father's house, we've got to travel the right road and Jesus is it.

THE HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

"But He said that if He went away to prepare a place that He'd surely come back to get us, didn't He?" That He did. He will one day return to this Earth physically. But for

now, He has returned to us as the “highway to Heaven.” He is the way (road), truth (trustworthy path), and the life (the timeliest way and the final destination of time). He has returned from the grave, paving the way to Heaven!

I don't want to live in this troubled world one more minute than the Lord has planned for me to live here. I want to be up and about my Father's business while I am here, but I tell you that to echo Paul's words, “to die is gain!” If you are not a believer in Christ today, repent of the sin in your life and let Jesus be your highway from this day forward. Give yourself to Him and let Him be your way, truth, and life. You will still have problems and situations to go through. But let me tell you, the hope of living with God, in His house, more than compensates any trouble we may go through while we're here.

If you are already a believer, make the hope of Heaven more real to yourself than ever before. Know that Christ is surely getting your room ready. Know that it will be decorated just for you and you will love it! Know that “to live is Christ and to die is gain!” Know that He prepares this place not in mass but just for you. When your heart begins to be troubled about what is to come, or about anything for that matter, hope in what He has in store for you. It's not a fairy tale. It's not a fable. It is reality!

CHAPTER 31

The Challenge of Authority

John 14:8-26

*“If you ask anything in My name, I will do it
...”*

(John 14:14)

My dad is a smart man. As a teenager I thought I knew more than he did, but as I got older, I was amazed at how much smarter my dad had become! In a great way my dad is in me. The things that he taught me and the wisdom that he instilled in me have become parts of my life.

One day, after about 20 years of marriage, I tried an experiment in the mirror. No one was around and so I removed my glasses and held my hand over my forehead so as to hide my hair. My dad has been bald for almost as long as I can remember. When I looked into the mirror again, I saw him. Without my glasses and my hair, I resembled him more than I ever thought I might have. It was almost scary, but there he was. He was in me.

We all do that. In our children we impart some of ourselves. It can be good qualities or bad, but nevertheless, part of us goes into them. We should keep that in mind as we raise them into adulthood. What we put into them is going to be a part of them and the bad things we impart will take a lot of work for them to overcome.

Jesus had told His disciples that His Father (God) was in Him and He was in the Father. He was letting them know that if they wanted to see God all they had to do was to look at Him. Now, before anyone goes off and says that I'm teaching the doctrine referred to as "Jesus Only," let me remind you that the truth always lies in the middle. We have those who are so passionate about three separate entities in the Godhead that they completely refuse what the scripture says about Jesus and God being one. On the other hand, there are those who are so insistent that there is only one that they refuse what the scripture says about the three members of the Godhead. The Bible teaches both. What we need to understand is that there is only one true God, but He is a three-fold being.

We are a three-fold being like Him because He made us in His image. We have a body, a spirit, and a soul (our very life which is housed in either the body or the spirit). The difference is that we cannot separate our three-fold being as God can. God can exist

in all three forms at one time. Look at Luke 3:22. When Jesus (God in the flesh) was baptized the Bible tells us that God (The Father – the Soul or Life of the God-head) spoke from Heaven, and the Holy Spirit (God the Spirit) descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

So, as with most doctrines of the Bible, we must look at both sides. When we do we see that if we'd just take our own interpretations out of it, we're both saying the same thing. There is only One God that eternally exists as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

I LOOK LIKE MY FATHER

Jesus told Philip that when he looked at Him, he was looking at the Father. If they saw who Jesus really was, then they were looking upon the bodily form of God the Father. He asked them to believe that the Father was in Him and that He was in the Father, if not by any other proof than the works that He did. They were amazing. They spoke for themselves. The things that Jesus had done could only have come from God the Father - Proof enough.

While Jesus was on the subject of works, He said something that has made men speculate on its interpretation for years. In studying for this chapter, I consulted some of the top commentaries in print today. Most could not really acknowledge the truth of what Jesus was saying here. We have tried to explain it with numbers, and certainly the vast numbers of people getting saved speaks for itself. But Jesus simply said, "Those who believe on Me will do greater things than I have done." We never want to diminish the great power of Christ. What was Jesus saying? Was He saying that what He had done was nothing compared to what we would be able to do just by believing in Him?

No. It's not just about miracles anyway. I believe in miracles. I believe that God still heals people today. I believe the stories told by missionaries in other countries of incidences where people have walked on water. I believe that regardless of what anyone, including myself, says, that God can do whatever He wants to whenever He wants to. After all, He's God, isn't He? I study the writings of men about God because I know that I'm not the only one that He reveals truth to. But in studying I have read many ridiculous teachings that try to bind God to laws and codes. I tell you today that God is good, perfect, and true and because He is God. He can do anything He wants to do. Who am I to tell God any different?

BY HIS AUTHORITY

The key to understanding what Jesus was saying here is found in two verses in the text for today. In verses 13 and 14 He emphasized it twice. He said, "Whatever you ask in MY NAME I will do it." Over the years we have contorted that so badly that we have volumes of false teaching and belief floating around. I cut my teeth in ministry during the "prosperity age." I grew up with the "Name It and Claim It's." I even tried to put God to the test. I reminded Him of His word just like the teaching said to do.

God taught me the truth of what He was saying in this passage at a very early age. As a teenager I was riding home one night with my parents from, I can't even remember where. But this I distinctly remember. Jesus had said that if we had faith we could say to this mountain, "be plucked up and cast into the sea." I was thinking about that when we drove by a rather large hill. I prayed, "Lord, I have faith in You, so I command that hill to be plucked up and cast into the sea." I watched and nothing happened. I was sincere in my prayer and in my young mind I couldn't understand why God didn't do it. I had done everything just like it said in the word, hadn't I? But then I heard that still small voice in my heart saying, "Yes, you had faith. But you failed to realize that there are people living on that hill." It was then I saw the light of a house near the top of the hill. God loved them too.

Over the years as I researched my simple truth, I realized a great truth. The key is "in the Name of Jesus." When I commanded that hill to be plucked up, I had used those words. I said, "In the Name of Jesus." Since then, I have witnessed many who have asked for things in His Name by word but never realized the truth of what Jesus was saying. You see the meaning in the original language of "Name" means "authority" or "character." In other words, it means we are to ask for things on behalf of Jesus. We are to be His representatives on this Earth. We are to ask for what He would ask for if He were physically here; things that were characteristic for Him.

In a way He is still here. By way of the Holy Spirit (we'll write more about in the next chapter) He is here in us. Yet we have tried to selfishly use those mighty words, "In the Name of Jesus" for personal gain. Many who pray for miracles for others are really only doing so because of how it will make them look if God answers that prayer. There have been miracles performed when these selfish individuals prayed but, in those instances, God was not honoring their selfish motives but the faith of the one being prayer for.

WHAT WOULD JESUS ASK FOR?

Think about the things Jesus would ask for when He was physically on this Earth. The only selfish thing I can think of was when He cursed the fig tree, and even that was to teach a very valuable lesson to His disciples. Jesus lived very poorly with no home of His own and without a pack animal to carry His goods. He traveled by foot with only what He could carry. Yet, He had more spiritual authority than any man alive in His day. That tells me that He wasn't interested in selfish gain. It tells me that He was only interested in helping the deprived men and women He came into contact with.

This is what Jesus was telling His disciples. The word bears it out. As those first Christians went forth in His Name great things were accomplished. Peter's first message on the day of Pentecost resulted in 3000 converts. It is a great miracle to see a soul saved from sin and death. But Peter also had miraculous power on His life. At one point just his shadow falling upon people resulted in great healings. The anointing was so strong on Paul's life that he sent handkerchiefs from his body and people were healed.

But it was all because of the authority that accompanied their lives. It wasn't to make them great or one to be envied in the eyes of other believers. It wasn't to prove the great ministry to which God had called them. It was only because of the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them. They had the Name. They had the authority of the Master. They were operating in that authority and because of it things happened. Lives were saved, touched, healed and changed forever.

JESUS' NAME IS NOT A FORMULA

Today, we need to stop looking upon the Name of Jesus as a formula and see it as Christ meant for us to see it. It is imperative if we are to do the work of the Master to be operating in the correct authority.

When we begin to do this, we will see greater things than Jesus saw, not because we are greater than Him but because He is in us and with us. We are utilizing His authority and characteristics and allowing Him to do what He did before – Work the works of His Father!

Those works will be miraculous whether they are speaking in the authority of the word of God, praying for the sick, or leading a soul into salvation. The miracles don't have degrees. One is not more honorable than another. When we look at it in this respect then we have lapsed back into selfishness. Whether it is salvation, healing, or great revelation it is all the same because of the authority of His Name.

Many whom Jesus healed didn't even know who Jesus was until later on. It wasn't because Jesus was trying to be popular and establish a great and prosperous ministry. It was only because of the compassion He had for that individual at that time. In many cases He instructed the people not to tell anyone about what had happened to them. Jesus wasn't seeking fame and fortune, but only the will of His Father.

When we come to that place where we are seeking the will of the Father – Not our own will, we will begin to see change. We'll begin to see things happen and we'll know it is not ourselves but only Christ in us. That is the challenge of His authority.

CHAPTER 32

The Challenge of Peace

John 14:27-31

“My peace I give to you ...”

(John 14:27)

When the United States pulled out of Vietnam, I was a senior in high school.

I remember how relieved I was that day. You see, at that time (1973) any young man who had graduated from high school and didn't have concrete college plans, was prime pick for the draft. It had only been one year before that I had been required to register with the draft board. I had no plans then of attending college and my grades were just above average. A mouse in the gaze of a snake had a better chance of getting out of that than I did.

I know that there are many mixed emotions about that war and the way it ended, and I'm not going to go into the politics of that event but I will tell you that it brought a great relief to the heart of this young man. I did do "my hitch" in the United States Army a few years after that, but I was in my mid 20's and I volunteered.

I will never forget the peace that I felt. I don't mind telling you, before that announcement came, I was scared. My life seemed to be just beginning and I wasn't ready to die in a far-off jungle. I was one of the lucky ones. Many did die in that far-off jungle. Many did not experience the same relief and peace that I was privileged to enjoy.

I also remember another peaceful experience about that war. A young man from our home town had been a POW. A few of years after it ended, he was released and a parade and celebration was given in his honor in our little town. That was peaceful because someone close to home had been given another chance.

This world has known little about peace in its existence. The time between when God created it and Adam sinned in Eden (however many years that was) became the most peaceful time ever to be experienced on our planet. Since then, there has been conflict, war, fear, death and murder. Men cannot seem to resolve their differences without making sure that those who disagree with them have been exterminated. It has resulted in war and conflict throughout the ages.

Wars have even been fought in the name of peace. World War I was to be the war to “end all wars.” But it wasn’t. Wars have been fought over everything from skin color to ending the reign of wicked and vile men who have suppressed their nations. But always, somewhere, sometime, another conflict arises. There may be those who will call me crazy, but I tell you today, that physical peace on this planet will not come until the time that the Bible predicts that it will.

I read a sign in front of a church the other day that read, “Pray for World Peace.” What a noble thought! What a wonderful thing that would be! But unless we are praying for the time when the Lord will reign for a thousand years on this Earth as predicted in the Book of Revelation, we are praying in vain because it will never happen as long as mankind has control of the governments of this world.

WHY CAN'T WE HAVE PEACE?

The absence of peace is a result of the presence of sin. That’s not to say that the individual is sinning (although we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God – Romans 3:23), but it simply fortifies the fact that sin is still the dominating force active in this world today and in the lives of men. Until sin is eradicated in the world, we will never see world peace. It might be possible that we could see a lull in wars that are taking place, but somewhere in this world, even at a time when no nations may be at war, there is still violence going on to somebody.

Jesus very profoundly spoke about this in the text. He gave Himself as the solution to man’s “peace” problem. Very boldly Jesus said, “I’m leaving peace with you. My peace, I’m giving to you.” What a strange thing to bequeath. How could Jesus have any peace? I mean, He was constantly hounded by the Pharisees in attempt to entrap Him in His words. He was poverty stricken, owned no real-estate, livestock or any of the things that marked a one who would have come close to having peace by the standards of men. Yet He told His disciples, and ultimately all his followers, past present and future, that He was leaving His peace with us.

And that is exactly what Jesus did. It only takes a short while of delving through the pages of Christian history to see that, even though men and women alike have been tortured, murdered, and severely persecuted just because they identified with Christ, they have lived and died in peace. Oh, there have been many over the years who have named the Name of Christ who have been instruments to try to steal peace away from these true believers, but they have never been successful. The true peace that Christ left with us can never be stolen away from us. We may rot in some prison somewhere for our faith. We may be tortured and maimed because we have chosen Christ, but the peace He left with us cannot be carved from our flesh. It is deeply imbedded into our spiritual being and cannot be snatched away.

THE WORLD WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND

The world can't understand this peace. It is a gift that goes beyond reason. By worldly standards one cannot be at peace as long as conflict is present. But the peace that Christ gives ignores the turmoil that may rage around us. This peace doesn't look out and long for a time without trouble but rather looks inward to the One Who is the creator, restorer, and giver of peace.

In Philippians 4:7 Paul described this peace from God as a peace that goes beyond human reasoning. It passes all human understanding. It goes beyond any mortal definition of peace. It can put a song in the heart that aches. It can bring calm to the individual in the very midst of storm. It can bring joy to the dying. It is the peace of God!

This verse goes on to say that this peace that goes beyond man's understanding will keep our hearts and minds through Christ. Peace by the world's standard requires the absence of conflict. Removing this type of peace from most mortal men for an extended period of time will eventually cause insanity. But according to Paul, the peace that Christ left with us does just the opposite. It keeps our hearts and minds giving us peace in the middle of conflict! In other words, in Jesus Christ we can keep our sanity! The peace that Christ gives, when we realize it's silent power in our lives, will actually assure us that regardless what happens we are safe in Christ. The devil may be able to kill our bodies, but he can never destroy that peace that assures our very souls that we are safely anchored in God!

LIKE NOTHING EVER BEFORE WITNESSED

It's not like any peace that this world can give. Nations have signed treaties that are supposed to guarantee peace, only to have those treaties broken in some way. A piece of paper cannot guarantee peace. Men have tried to run away from their enemies in order to achieve peace. But if we are successful in that endeavor, conflict will arise with someone new. The devil does not want anyone to have peace for he knows when real peace is achieved it will bring such joy to the hearts of men that they will guard it carefully and make every effort to keep it secure. As we have already said, in this world system, man will never have peace. But Christ left us His peace.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

It also stands to reason that if Christ left us His peace, then it becomes our responsibility to share it with others. It's not an easy task because men can't understand it so they are naturally suspicious of it. But it is ours to share. If we can only convince them to accept Christ, then we have imparted Christ's peace on to them as well. In order for us to have world peace the whole world must accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is our duty to share the Gospel with all we can so as to impart this peace Jesus left us with. This will ultimately be accomplished when He returns.

Finally, Jesus repeated what He had started this chapter out with. “Don’t let your souls be troubled, worried, and afraid.” The peace that Jesus left us with, when we allow it to reign in our lives will chase out worry and stress. This peace will eliminate these negative emotions in our lives, but only when we let go of those things and grasp firmly to the peace of Christ. It is not easy to do. It takes work to let go of anxiety and worry. Our natural man wants to cling to stress even though we deny it. But as a child of God, we must let those things be replaced in our lives by the peace of Christ.

NO WORRIES, MATE

We don’t have to worry about tomorrow! We don’t have to be stressed out over our jobs because if we are operating in the peace of Christ and doing what we’re supposed to be doing, He’s taking care of us - not our jobs and not our bosses. Despite poverty or wealth, despite sickness or health, regardless what country we live in, or what things we possess, our peace is not found in a book, or in a thing, but only in what Christ left in our hearts when He saved us!

If you are a Christian, you need only look inwardly for peace in your life. It is there because Christ is there. We’ve just got to do some “un-learning” and “re-learning.” We must see Him as our only source for peace. Man will not bring us peace. Our husband or wife won’t bring us peace. Our sons and daughters will not bring us peace. Just getting saved won’t bring us peace. It only comes when we realize that Christ left His peace with us and we look to Him for it. When we find His peace in our lives, then He will bring peace in contentment with the things we have, the money we have, and the daily provision He has given. When we find His peace in our lives, then He will fill us so that there is no room for those negative emotions that try to weasel inside of us.

He is the Great Hope! He is the Prince of Peace! No one can remove that from us. If it leaves then we must be the one who let it slip. No amount of pain inflicted upon us whether physically or emotionally or both can remove that peace given us by Christ!

Stand with your head lifted up this day! Stand knowing that we are a little taller inside because we have realized from where our peace comes, and Who has given it to us. Know in your heart that Christ is there and is even now beginning to fill us with His peace!

CHAPTER 33

The Challenge of Bearing Fruit

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John 15:1-15

*“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear
much fruit ...”*

(John 15:8)

Grape vines are good for a lot of things, particularly swinging on. As kids we used to love to go into the woods, find a tree with a vine growing in it, cut the end of the vine coming out of the ground and swing out over the hollow. It was a lot of fun until someone fell, or the vine broke. That wasn't so much fun.

Grape vines are also good for smoking - kind of. We would cut the little thin dried-up ones, light one end with a match and smoke it like a cigarette. I don't know how good that was for us (I'm sure not very) and I don't know of any drug concerns with smoking grape vine, but it made us feel like we were big. It probably wasn't very smart though. (Maybe that's what's wrong with me these days, you think?).

But mostly grape vines are good for eating grapes, unless you pick them too green, which is what we did many times. Those sour grapes would begin to make your stomach cramp and caused other problems (you probably can figure out what I'm talking about).

At the end of John 14, Jesus had gotten up and told His disciples "It's time to go." They were headed for the Garden of Gethsemane. The end of His public ministry was quickly drawing to a close. This had been a special night for the disciples. During the short evening He had already taught them much and still had some things to tell them. He spoke to them about many important issues all the way to the garden.

As they walked from that upper room and started down the road towards the garden, Jesus began to share with them concerning the close relationship they would have with God which would depend on their attachment to Christ. He used the vine as a wonderful example of His Church that was still yet to come.

EVERYTHING HAS A COMPARISON

It seems that everything God has made has a spiritual comparison and I believe He did that on purpose. There are so many spiritual lessons to be learned from nature and

God has implanted their meaning in wisdom so that we discover more about Him. These examples “paint” pictures of what He has given us in His word so we can actually see just what He is talking about. We have to be careful with this however, because the temptation is to just go by nature instead of comparing it to the word. The danger in this is two-fold: First, we must realize that, as beautiful as nature can be, it is under the curse until our Lord returns. Secondly, we must be very careful to not do as the “New Age Movement” did and try to say that nature is actually a part of God.

Jesus started out by saying that He was the true vine and God was the “Keeper of the Vine.” As keeper of the vine, God nourished and watered it. He made sure that plenty of good rich soil was around the vine. He also kept it pruned and healthy. Pruning was especially important. Dead branches could become a source of infection and spread to other branches of the vine.

Jesus said that we (those of us who make up His Church) are the branches. The vine gives life to the branches. It is the vine that extends its roots deep into the soil soaking up the nutrients and moisture from below the dirt. These nutrients are turned into the things that the branches need to extend out, grow and most importantly, produce fruit.

There are two points I’d like to discuss in regard to bearing fruit. Fruit, of course, is the grape itself. In the art of husbandry growing grapes is the total purpose of the occupation. The vine is important, the branches are important, but if the whole does not yield grapes, then it is but a useless weed. Our vine is never useless for Christ will produce fruit. The branches are what we’ve got to worry about because we are the branches.

WE MUST YIELD FRIUT

The first point is the obvious: That of yielding fruit. The fruit of any plant is the way it sustains its species. The seed which brings life to new vines is in the fruit. The fruit itself contains all the nutrients that the seed will need to develop and grow. We have mistakenly, over the years, identified the fruit as “new converts.” It is extremely important and mandated by our Lord to win souls into the kingdom. But in reality, we can never win a soul. I have no power within me to forgive the sin of another individual. I cannot on my own make another person accept the Good News of the Gospel. Only Jesus Christ can do this. Only He has power to forgive sin, and only He can perform the miracle of new birth that takes place during the salvation experience.

When we really get down to it, all we can do is to produce fruit. In other examples Jesus spoke of us as “sowers” of seed, and harvesters of crops. But neither of these can take place without fruit. We are to spread the Gospel – The Good News of Christ – to every creature – Every soul of man. We are to tell about how God, through the blood of Jesus Christ, wants to save people from sin and the curse of death. And, we are to pray for them that the Holy Spirit will do His work in bringing conviction to their hearts. When they accept Christ then we can direct them in their next steps to Christian growth and this is harvesting.

But we can't harvest without the seed falling and growing. In essence, we are powerless in the process. We can speak the word but it must be demonstrated before it is believed. I could tell you all day, every day for weeks, months and years not to steal but if I do that, then go out and steal myself, I have voided all those words spoken in all that time. But if I instruct people not to steal and then give them the example of honesty in my own life, then the fruit of not stealing is present and can be believed.

It is the same with salvation. I can tell people all about salvation and what it brings in our lives, but if that is not demonstrated by fruit in my own life it isn't very believable. So, our main job is to witness, but make our witness believable by bearing fruit. We must be fruitful. That fruit includes our witness but also supplying the nutrients and food to help new believers in Christ grow.

The fruit we must bear in our lives was detailed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. We have a tendency to think of the marks of a "good Christian" as one who doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't cuss, and doesn't beat his wife. We think in terms of what is seen on the outside. But folks, I know I ride a hobby horse about this sometimes, but there many people in the world who think in these terms. What we fail to understand is that these are only the external results of what is going on internally. If you see smoke billowing from the tailpipe of your car you are not going to fix the problem by covering the end of the tailpipe with a rag or stick a plug of some kind up the pipe. In reality, when you do that, you are about to make the problem worse. What you do is to find out what's going on in the engine that is causing all that smoke to be coming from your tailpipe. You fix the problem under the hood and the problem coming out the tailpipe will take care of itself.

So, it is with us. Our external problems are, more often than not, results of heart matters. We fix the heart matters and the external problems will fade away on their own. Our fruit is not a result of doing things that we think Christians should do or should not do on the outside - No. We must look at the heart. What comes from the heart will be exemplified and demonstrated externally. If we are full of those things Paul lists, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control, then the result of these fruit will be seen on the outside of us. These are the nutrients needed along with a steady flow of the word of God to cause us to be fruitful and provide food for the new born to grow.

WE MUST BE HEALTHY TO PRODUCE FRUIT

The second point I'd like to make has to do with our own selves. You see, when a branch isn't producing fruit, it is because it is diseased, or perhaps it has had a break between it and the vine. And it is the same with us. If we are diseased (and I'm not referring to our physical health condition here) we will not produce fruit. If we are not producing fruit the vine simply doesn't send down the nutrients needed to continue growth and so we begin to wither and die. If we have a break between us and the vine, then we need to graft that break. If we don't do these things then we will begin to die ourselves.

As we produce fruit that is healthy and nourishing to others it also keeps a flow of the nutrients going through us as well. This allows us as the branch to continue to stay spiritually healthy.

We cannot produce the fruit necessary for growth aside from Bible study and devotion, as well as ample time spent in prayer to the Vine. This forms a two-way communication between us and the Vine and so we begin to produce fruit without even noticing that it's there! This is what our Lord wants for us. We don't try to be fruit producers. We just do what we were meant to do, read to know His word, pray and spend time in praise and worship of our Vine, Jesus Christ, and then obey His commandments. Before we know it, we have an abundance of fruit hanging all over our branch! (John 15:3-5). If we don't bear fruit, it is because we are out of fellowship – two-way communication with the Vine – and we will die (John 15:6).

ULTIMATELY, GLORY TO GOD

Our fruit bearing brings glory to the Father (our Husbandman). I remember one time as a young teenager going blackberry picking with my grandmother. It was fun at first but then it became hard work because of all the thorns and weeds. How joyful I was when I stumbled across a plant with big bunches of berries on it. It would make my container fill up faster and so take a lot of work out of the job.

God is delighted to see great bunches of fruit hanging from us just like any gatherer of fruit would be. It is a beautiful sight to see abundance from our work and it brings joy to God when we are fruitful.

This in turn makes us happy because we have brought glory and joy to our Father, God. Jesus told us about this so as to bring us joy, and that our joy may be full just like big clusters of fruit!

I want to be fruitful, don't you? I want others to see Christ in my life so that when I do witness to them my witness will be believable. I also want to be full of fruit so that I can nourish young Christians and help them grow in the Lord. I want to have large clusters of fruit hanging from my limbs, don't you?#

CHAPTER 34

The Challenge of Being Chosen

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John 15:16 – 16:6

*“You did not choose Me, but I chose you
and appointed you ...”*

(John 15:16)

Over the years I've written about several of my experiences in the United States Army while stationed at Fort Myer, VA. The most amazing thing to me was how I got there. I knew that God had His hand on the whole situation by just getting stationed in the US. Probably ninety percent of the class ahead of me (which was the class I should have been in, but that's material for another time) was stationed in Korea. That meant that no family members could go with you. I was a married man with a three-year-old son so I was very eager to have my family with me.

The morning before I was to "graduate" from my AIT training for chapel service, the sergeant began to announce the assignments of those who had completed training. Germany seemed to be the popular place and most names called out were assigned there. But when they called my name, they didn't say "Frankfort" or "Berlin," they said "Fort Myer, VA." If you don't know where Fort Myer is it's located just across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. – Right in the middle of the top brass of the entire armed forces! I can tell you that under my breath I was praising the Lord!

We took leave so we could find an apartment and within two weeks we were living in Arlington, VA and I showed up for my first day of duty. The conversation turned to the assignment fairly quickly and I began telling them how lucky I felt getting stateside service, especially in this prestigious area. It was then they told me that luck had nothing to do with it – I was hand-picked. Of course, I will always believe that God had a lot to do with that, still it was nice to know that my abilities were recognized.

The men walking with Jesus toward the Garden of Gethsemane had also been "hand-picked." At the beginning of His ministry Jesus had finished speaking to a crowd and He began calling out the names of twelve men. These men were chosen to follow Him, learn from Him, and witness the marvelous healings and miracles that He would do.

It was a privilege for these men, whether they realized it at the time or not, because the very Son of God had chosen them. Of course, He had a plan in mind. They walked

with Him, learned the word directly from Him and saw more than the crowds. They saw Him walk on water, calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and cast a legion of demons from a greatly feared man who lived in the tombs of the dead.

It was also very dangerous. As time went on, despite Jesus' popularity with the common people, the Jewish leaders were finalizing their plans to capture Jesus and have Him executed. The men who were close to Him would not escape their watchful eye.

As they walked on toward the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus spoke to them. He told them that they had been hand-picked to carry on the mission that He had started. He warned these men that they would be hated just because they had been with Him. They would be hunted and persecuted just because they knew Him. It was a privilege but it was also a grave responsibility.

From that day forward, all who have become disciples of Christ have been hand-picked and personally chosen by the Master. We must be careful with these words because they have a tendency to make people feel like they are above others because of this choice. The fact is, God knew from the very beginning before Adam ever walked the earth who was going to be born when and where. He knew those people who would come to Him by His grace and be born into His kingdom. But we don't possess that knowledge. We have no right to tell an individual whether they are chosen or not. Instead, we must assume that he has chosen anyone who comes to Him.

Is being chosen what is referred to as predestination? Yes, in a way. Men carry the teaching too far, just like we do with most teachings in the Bible. We are predestined to the extent that God, in His infinite foreknowledge, knows what choices each of us will make before we are ever granted life in this world. But this doesn't mean that people were created just for the purpose of being saved or lost – It simply means that God knows what choices we are going to make in life even before we do.

THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING CHOSEN

It is a privilege to be chosen by the Master. We mistakenly think we have done God a big favor by choosing Him. Some even seem to feel like they hold some power over God because they chose Him. It is true that God wants us and desires our worship. That's why He made us after all. But it was His grace that sought us out, reached out to our hearts and opened our eyes to see the horrible crime of our sin. He sent His Holy Spirit to pull on the strings of our hearts and allowed us to finally realize our need for Him. It sounds to me like we are the lucky ones.

When we look at it in that way then it isn't hard to understand why it is a privilege to be chosen by Him. Just that fact is enough. There are so many more benefits to being chosen, like a life of peace regardless what storms rage around us. What about suddenly being born into a family that loves us? This is not to even mention the hope of Heaven and eternal life. Yes, it is a privilege.

It's a privilege to be chosen to carry the good news of His word to those in a world who otherwise will die lost, not only in their souls, but in their direction of life. We carry the truth that will set people free from their fears, worries, concerns, doubts, and misfortune. Just think, even though the world doubts and misunderstands the word of God, still we have the truth of life. All we've got to do is to speak it out and allow the Holy Spirit to do His work in the lives of those the word touches. That's a privilege!

It is also a privilege to know that we have been chosen by God the Father to experience joy beyond comprehension even when we find ourselves in situations where having joy is unfavorable. The world cannot understand this joy because there is no physical stimulation for it. This joy can only come in knowing Christ as Savior. Just think, when we are poor, we can have joy because we are really rich! When we are sick, we can have joy because we know we are really whole in the kingdom of God! When we are persecuted because of our stand for the Gospel we can be happy because we are persecuted for Christ's sake and we suddenly feel closer to Him! The world will never understand this but it is still the truth.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING CHOSEN

We can't fool ourselves – being chosen carries a lot of responsibility. With any gift or special knowledge comes added responsibility. That's the way with anything in life really – The more we get the more we are responsible for. It is also true with being chosen by God.

There are none chosen who are not chosen to serve in their own unique and special way because we have all been gifted as individuals. You can reach people with the Gospel that I could never reach and I can reach people that you can't reach, and so on and so forth. It is true for each one of us. I have said many times over the years, that God never chose anyone for the ministry of pew warming. That is not a derogatory statement against the Church. We should be worshipping together. But if that's all we do then we have sadly let down on our own calling – The reason God chose us to begin with.

He chose each one of us to fit into the Body of Christ in our own unique spot. There's a place for each of us that no one else will fit into, just like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You might be able to force another piece to fit but it really doesn't. Even if its shape is similar, the colors will all be wrong. There is one piece that fits into that spot that not only fills the shape but also finishes the picture. That's your place.

The responsibility also extends to who we are responsible for. This could become an unbearable weight if we let it. You see, we are responsible for getting the Gospel to those we come into contact with. Nothing happens by chance and we realize that even more as members of the Kingdom. Every day God puts individuals in our way on purpose because He wants us to give them the Gospel.

That can be a terrifying thought. Many of us get a lump in our throats the size of a football when we think about talking to others about Christ. It isn't that we don't want to do it – It's just that we aren't sure we have the knowledge to say the right things.

As with many other things the key is in changing our thinking about that process. You see, if God has sent this person to you then that means that God wants you to witness as only you can. It doesn't mean that you have to know all the answers and have the ability to spout off all kinds of theological theses. It does mean that you have the key to that person's heart for that time. Your witness may not even come in the form of words. It might be in your action or reaction to a situation. Your witness will be in what is observed rather than what is said. Of one thing you can be sure, your talents and personality are exactly what that person needs at that moment.

So, the responsibility is not limited to words but in how we conduct ourselves and how we utilize those skills and talents God has given us just for our witness. That can be exciting because it tailors the Gospel to what Christ preaches through us, using our unique abilities and capabilities.

THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING CHOSEN

So far, we've really only talked about the good parts of being chosen. There is a downside to being chosen as well. We don't see the downside very often here in the USA, still it exists. While most people in this country would tell you that they are Christians or at least believers in God, there exists much criticism today. We can be persecuted without being physically tortured, maimed and killed.

There are those seeking to maim and kill the Christian voice in this country. While I believe firmly in freedoms those freedoms are indeed two-way streets. Many are challenging our constitution while taking little consideration for what the men who formed that constitution really meant when they put it together. There are organizations that are dedicated to stamping out any public display that would steer others toward God. They want his name removed from our Pledge, from the courthouses, and from any public facility. They succeeded in removing the right to pray in our public schools. It's interesting to note that the present crime rates found in the public school system began climbing the very next year after the government proclaimed that they couldn't do that anymore.

I realize that we can't force others to be Christians. That's not God's way anyhow. Even though He chooses us, He doesn't force His choice on anyone. He granted each of us with a free will and He respects that. Just so, we as Christians cannot force our faith upon anyone as well.

When I started our "Spirit Bread" ministry a few years ago, right out of the shoot we were attacked. I heard from "witches," pornographers, and even had a death threat. I encountered attempts to send me viruses and was accused of breaking spam laws and threatened that they would get me thrown off the internet (I didn't break any spam laws because I checked it out very carefully before beginning). The devil just didn't want the

Gospel invading the internet. I'm sure others who use this venue for Christ have experienced similar things. Any time we do what Christ has put in our hearts to do we will be met with resistance and persecution.

He expected that for us and, as we can read in the scripture passage, told us that it would happen. In some countries of the world today telling someone about Jesus is grounds for the death penalty. Sure, there is a downside to being chosen, but the upside far outweighs it!

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING CHOSEN

So now we know about being chosen. God issues us the challenge, what is our response? Will we go head-to-head and do spiritual battle for the privilege of being chosen? Or will we be beaten down, discouraged, and always on the verge of quitting for being chose? If we meet the challenge head on, we will be persecuted. The world doesn't mind "religion" as long as it doesn't get in the way. But any time that it requires change, then be sure persecution will follow.

It will come from the strangest places too. Christ's persecution came from the religious leaders – Those who claimed to know God. Often ours will come from the same sources. The devil likes nothing more than to persecute the Church of the Living God with the organized church of man. It makes it look as if God is divided. This practice has, in my opinion, caused more harm to the church in America than any other form of persecution put out in our country.

I read just the other day of a prominent denomination that is trying to get gay marriages, and partial birth abortions approved in the church. Further, they have issued a statement that they will no longer support any group or activity that supports the nation, Israel. This is none other than the devil trying to destroy the witness of Christ in the Church. But it will not work. It has never worked. The more controversy and persecution that arises the stronger the true Church of the Living God will become.

The challenge of being chosen is before us. How will we meet that challenge? What is our response?

CHAPTER 35

The Challenge of The Comforter

John 16:7-33

“... If I depart, I will send him to you ...”

(John 16:7)

I loved my wife. When you really got to know her, she was an amazing woman. She was my companion for 39 years. There were times, however, that she made me mad. She would tell me the truth about myself and sometimes I didn't like what she had to say. Still, it was the truth and after I'd had time to "mull it over" in my mind, I realized what she had told me had to be dealt with. In those times I always found myself coming back to her with something like, "you were right. That is the way I felt," or "I'm sorry, honey, I did do that." Often the truth really does hurt, because it goes to the core of who we are and often who we are isn't good or pretty.

She did more, though, than just point out my faults. When I got discouraged, she was there to encourage me. When I was happy, she was happy for me. When I laughed, she laughed with me. She took up for me and defended me.

THE COMFORTER

This is what the Holy Spirit does for us, only in a much greater way. Jesus now told His disciples that it was urgently necessary for their benefit for Him to go away. If He didn't go away, then the Comforter could not come. This name, "Comforter" means several things. It means that He is our intercessor. He intercedes many times for us. I was driving down the road one night coming home from a second shift job. It was about 2:30 in the morning and in many low places along the highway there was a thick fog in the air. I approached a particular place and dead ahead there was such a patch of fog. A voice in my head interrupted my thoughts and said, "You better keep your eyes opened for deer." It was no longer than a minute later, as I entered the foggy area, I slowed my speed in heed to the warning I was given and sure enough, right in the middle of the road was several deer! Had I not listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit interceding for that moment I would have plowed right into them.

The Holy Spirit intercedes for us in areas we never think about. When we think of this intercession, we usually think in terms of wrong doing and sin in our lives and He does intercede for us in these areas. But He also intercedes for us in our daily living.

THE CONSOLER AND ADVOCATE

This word for comforter also includes His role as “consoler.” He is always there ready to bring consolation to us. Even after He has brought great conviction to our hearts, He also brings consolation, not in justifying our sin but in revealing the way to forgiveness and winning the battle against temptation.

Comforter also includes the role as “advocate.” He is on our side. He isn’t there just to convict us all the time, but also to take up for us. He wants us to do well and He is our “fan.”

In His role as “Comforter” He is all these things and more to us. To the believer in Christ the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary. He is the way that Father God and Jesus Christ dwell in us. He is the force of God in this present world Who brings salvation to us. He is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ.

WHAT WE NORMALLY THINK OF WHEN WE THINK OF THE COMFORTER

So many times, when we think of the Holy Spirit, we immediately shrink back thinking of those wild things that Charismatics and Pentecostals do. We think of speaking in tongues and emotional responses that come from these groups of people. The thing is that most Charismatics and Pentecostals think the same thing. I can write this because I have some Pentecostal and Charismatic beliefs. But first and foremost, I am a Christian, a Believer, and a Saint of God by Biblical definition. I see both sides of the coin by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

What we must understand about Him is that He must be present in our lives before we can ever be saved. Does that mean you have to speak in tongues and act emotional to be a Christian? Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, the Bible says, “Without the Spirit of Christ we are not His.” (Romans 8:9). I don’t want to dwell very long on this point but it must be made. When we come to God asking forgiveness and seeking salvation, upon our confession of sin, belief in Christ and acceptance of His forgiveness, the Holy Spirit enters our lives. When He comes in, He brings change and newness, wholeness and completeness to us. He doesn’t make us do strange and weird things. As a matter of fact, He won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. He is the Gentleman, of gentlemen.

On the other side of the coin, He will fill us with Himself and give us witness of our duty to win the lost to Him. In so doing He will equip us with the gifts of the Spirit to aid us in accomplishing this goal.

This is only a minute explanation. There is so much more to explore, but for the moment let's leave it at that. The important thing to know is that the Holy Spirit isn't just for Pentecostals and Charismatics but for each and every believer who comes to God through the grace of Jesus Christ. We don't have to fear Him for He only has our best interest in mind. Remember that Jesus knew this coming of the Holy Spirit was very important to us. He knew the plan of God and felt the expediency of His departure so that the Holy Spirit could come in a way that the people of the world had never known and do a complete work in the life of each believer. He is not to be feared but to be loved and desired. He is the gift of God to every Christian despite denominational affiliation.

A THREE-FOLD MINISTRY

Jesus further said that the ministry of "the Comforter" was three-fold. He was coming to reprove the people of this world, or show us where we have been deceitfully wrong, concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. These are the "big three" aren't they? Ever since Adam and Eve "lost it" in the Garden of Eden, man has been trying to undo his wrong. God dealt with man in several different ways over time. Each of these ways was not done in trial and error in attempt to get mankind straightened up, but because of our own stubbornness to do it our way, God used each one of these time periods, dealing with man by freewill, by human government, by conscience, and by law, just to illustrate to us that none of our own methods of redeeming ourselves works. Each one of us has a slightly different definition as to sin, righteousness and judgment based on who we are. We all want to think that we're pretty good guys and so surely our way isn't all that bad or wrong. So, we may look at sin differently than others. We tend to put degrees on sin. "Oh, that's just a little sin," or "What I did isn't as bad as what he did." But when it comes to sin, the fact of the matter is, there is no such thing as a "little sin." If it's wrong and if it's sin it's just as bad as the "biggies."

We do this same thing with righteousness. Righteousness has to do with how good we are and how "right" we are concerning our morals and standing with God. Humankind tends to view righteousness in our good deeds and works towards others. We feel really proud that we are concerned about others and just like everything else, we tend to measure righteousness by comparing ourselves to others. This makes us feel more righteous and we tend to look down on the less righteous. This in itself becomes sin.

We've got it wrong about judgment too. I'm sure glad that the one judging us as far as our standing with God isn't a man. We have judges in each and every culture in the world. They might not wear long black robes but in their own ways they are deciding on the behalf of others. Their decision is final. If an individual is found guilty, he bears his punishment and if the judge's opinion or "call" happens to be wrong, guess who pays for it? If a man judged the fate of sinners, we'd all be in big trouble.

WHAT JESUS HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE MATTER

Jesus was going away to allow the "Comforter" to come in His place to show the world where it is wrong in these "big three." Here is what Jesus said about this:

First, the Comforter reproveth us and shows us where we're wrong about sin because the world as a whole doesn't believe in Christ; Who He is and what He came to do. The world is still wrong about Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit is not yet complete. It is the will of God for the entire world to know that Jesus Christ came to forgive sin. He has finished the work and He has forgiven. But we must do one thing in order to validate and activate this forgiveness. We must accept what He has done. We must realize our guilt and our need for forgiveness. We must see that our conscience has been misinforming us. The old adage, "let your conscience be your guide" is only good advice if the conscience is being guided by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we are going to interpret things by our own standards and as we have already concluded, that didn't work. Our own morals and laws are only as good as the men interpreting and enforcing them. So that doesn't work either. We must allow "the Comforter" to define sin for us. But let me warn you, when we do it is never a pretty sight. He will begin to point out "ugliness" in our lives that we never even dreamed about. It is ongoing too. He will continue to do this until we are ready for Heaven. On the good side though, we are constantly being improved, made better, and becoming the individual God wants us to be, and that is exciting!

Second, the Comforter reproveth us concerning righteousness. Jesus said that the world would be shown where it is wrong about righteousness because He was ascending to His Father and the world would never see Him again as He was then. Yes, He is returning to this world but in His glorified state. Just read the first chapter in Revelation if you'd like to get an idea of what He will look like in that glorified state. While in Heaven He is ever interceding for us at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34). He does this because our righteousness can never measure up. Even in Old Testament times Isaiah saw that our righteousness, at its best, is just like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). So, Christ is ever pleading our case. That is exciting! That brings joy! To know that He is sprinkling His blood to cover our sin is a miracle that mankind needs desperately. The Holy Spirit reveals this truth to us. In this revelation we should react by first of all repenting of the wrong for which Christ is making intercession on our behalf. Then, we realize that any righteousness we may have comes solely from Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

Finally, He said that the Holy Spirit would show the world where it is wrong concerning judgment because the "prince of this world is judged." By the law of God, we deserve nothing but death and destruction. But because our sin has been forgiven and we are made righteous by Christ and only by taking on His righteousness, then we are not condemned in punishment but instead let go as free men. Christ took our punishment for us and has earned the right to judge the "accuser of the brethren," the devil himself. His judgment is destruction in the Lake of Fire. We have been pardoned and he has been condemned.

When we accept the call of the Holy Spirit into salvation, take on the righteousness of Christ, then we have been pardoned and the prince of this world who would have us condemned to death, will be judged. This is our ultimate victory! This is our win over death! The sting has been removed because we are not condemned!

The Holy Spirit reveals all of this to us and Christ makes us free! It is exciting. It is most wonderful news! It is salvation. It is freedom from the curse. It is for each and every one who accepts Christ as their personal savior. It is yours for the asking.

CHAPTER 36

The Challenge of The Prayer of Jesus

John 17:1-26

*“Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His
eyes to heaven, and said ...”*

(John 17:7)

So far, we've only covered the highlights of what Jesus taught His disciples during this last night with them. Still on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus finished what He had to say for now, leaving them with the knowledge that "The Comforter" would teach them all things that they would need to know, and then He began to pray.

When we think of Jesus praying, we generally think of the one that begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." While this was a model prayer that Jesus presented to His disciples early in His ministry, the prayer He prayed this night was much more specific. Jesus asked several things of God regarding His own glorification, and then prayed for His disciples.

TO BE GLORIFIED

First of all, Jesus prayed to be glorified. He had glorified the Father during His walk on Earth and now He longed for the glory that He had shared with God before He came here. Glory speaks of credit, honor, and being in the spotlight. Jesus had been very careful while here, not to take away from the glory of God. He was quick to say that He was only doing what His Father had told Him to do. It was not to put blame upon God but to let people know that He was sent from God and that He was acting under God's authority. Even though Jesus was God in the flesh, and He was almighty God, He did nothing while on Earth under His own power. He did all that He did by the authority and under the power of His Father.

And so, He had brought glory to God. What a wonderful example Jesus gave us to follow. It would be good for all believers to remember that we are to bring glory to the Father. All too many times credit is given to man. Man is patted on the back and told what a good job he is doing. I suppose we need those "at-a-boys" from time to time. But we must always remember to give praise to God. He is to be our inspiration. He is to be our director. He has even written the script. We are merely carrying out His work per His directions.

I know I get “down” on the church here in the United States, but it is only because I am so concerned. We have grown so prosperous in wealth, in talent, and in ability, that I am afraid we give more honor to men than we do to God. Of course, we say the right words. Of course, we are quick to say “Praise the Lord,” but do we really mean it? Is it really okay that God gets the credit and not us?

We have built great edifices in which to worship God. We have put together great networks of “good works” ministries. We have written books, recorded songs, and even made movies and it has all been done in the “Name of Jesus.” But let someone infringe on us and we are quick to react. Let someone duplicate what we have done and we want to “sue the socks off of ‘em” because they have “stolen our idea.”

Don’t get me wrong. I believe when we have written material, books, or music that credit should be rendered to whom credit is due. We give God the glory for it. But let’s let it be used from there to win souls to the kingdom. God doesn’t give us these tools for our own profit (although many in this country act as if that is the case). I’ll get off my soapbox now. The bottom line is that all we do here is to bring glory to God. That glory is demonstrated by souls coming into the kingdom.

Jesus had almost finished the task given Him by God. As we have already said, He longed for that glory He had left behind to fulfill His Earthly ministry. He was now very close to being restored to that original glory and He longed for it.

I believe that once we have tasted of the glory of God we can never be fulfilled again. Just the small insignificant amount of the glory of God that can come down upon us during a worship service can be enough to make us long for the full glory of God. Just imagine what it would be like to have left that full glory of God behind for what we’ve got here on Earth. That’s what Jesus did. Now, He longed for that relationship once again.

THOSE WHO BELONGED TO HIM

Then Jesus began to focus upon those God had given Him. He had given these men the words that God had told Him to tell them. There was now no doubt in their heart as to where Jesus was from. When He spoke of His Father, they knew He was talking about God. It had become a natural thing to them.

And so, it should be with us. This relationship with Christ should be so absolutely real to us that it is impossible to try and separate our life away from Him in any aspect. We cannot be one way in business and another way when we worship God. We must know that God permeates and influences us in each and every aspect of life.

When we rise in the morning to get ready for the day, He is there. As we do our duties of the day, He is there. As we enjoy our leisure He is there. And when the day is done and we lie down at night to sleep, still He is there. He is always present. We don’t say “bye” to Him for the week when we leave the church building. No, because He walks

out with us. We haven't just visited His home for an hour or two but He has attended the service with us and He leaves with us.

The disciples had come to know the reality of God through Christ Jesus. The requirement has not diminished for us. We must know Him. We must recognize Christ at work in our lives. We must see the handiwork of God and give Him glory for it.

FOR HIS DISCIPLES

Jesus' prayer was then directed in behalf of the 11 men that were walking with Him. Later in His prayer He made it clear that this didn't apply to those 11 men only, but also to all that would come to Him (men and women – see verse 20). Jesus was very specific. He was praying for those who would come to Him. He was not praying for the world (indicating all those who would turn away from Him and also this world system still operating under the curse).

We must be careful here. Jesus did love the world. In the first part of the Book of John (3:16) the words are found, "for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." So, He loved the world. He just knew that all in the world would not come to Him. He also knew that those in the world who refused to come to Him would be persecutors and enemies of those who did come to Him.

We must understand that even today this world system still remains under the curse. It is governed primarily by men and women who have not committed themselves to Jesus Christ. Yes, there are those in our own government as well as in some of the governments of other countries who know Jesus Christ as Savior, but by and large most do not.

We must also understand that, as much as we would like to see it happen, until Christ returns this world is never going to become a place of peace. So, Christ is specific about who He is praying for. He is praying for those who would truly be His. He was praying for all those who would come into His kingdom. He was praying for strength and perseverance for those individuals.

The key was in something we discussed in an earlier chapter, that we would be one just like God the Father and God the Son are one. And that is the concept that will win millions to Christ: The witness of the presence of the Son of God in our lives! It is not in marching in protest against abortion or homosexuals or anything else. It is not in rallying around flags in prayer. While these things may be well and good, you very rarely hear of anyone getting saved during any of these events. Even the principles of our natural business tell us otherwise. It is supply and demand. But the supply is controlled by the demand. When the demand is gone, the supply dwindles to nothing. What we need to be doing instead of protesting is uniting in an effort to show the world that those who belong to Christ stand together in love. That we are one just as God and Jesus is one.

But, alas, that seems far from true these days. We have divided ourselves into denominations and placed “name brands” upon ourselves. While we are seeing more things being done in unity today, we are still far from being one as God the Father and God the Son are one. If we ever lived in a day and time when we must display to the world that we are one in Christ it is now and today.

KEPT IN GOD – SANCTIFIED IN TRUTH

The second thing that Jesus prayed for concerning those who belonged to Him was that they would be kept in God and that they might be sanctified (cleansed) in truth. Jesus Himself said that we would be hated because we are not of this world just as He was not of this world. Wouldn't it be nice to think that nothing bad would ever happen to us as believers in Christ? Wouldn't it be great if the illusions we have been given of nothing but happiness and blessings coming our way because we are Christians were all true? Certainly, those things will come. Absolutely, we will be blessed in God. But we must understand that this world is still governed under the curse. Those in it who don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are under the influence of the devil.

Because of this we will be hated. We aren't from here anymore. Our citizenship is now in Heaven. We are not understood nor are we accepted. Here in the United States of America we are tolerated at best. Because the great freedoms we enjoy and the powerful country we possess are based upon God and the freedom to worship Him, the people of this country who don't know Him as Savior have not quite figured out yet how to suppress us. But they are slowly doing it. They are gradually eliminating any reference to the Almighty God from public appearance. How long will it be before we will not be allowed to publicly speak of God at all? Only God knows.

We must take comfort in knowing that, regardless any opposition we may meet in our journey on Earth for Christ, that He is with us. He has sent His “Comforter” the Holy Spirit to lead us, guide us, and teach us. We'll be okay. He isn't going to let things come our way that we cannot handle with Him at the helm. He is going to be with us.

Why wouldn't God just take us out of here once we get saved? Because we are His ambassadors to this world. He desired that we stay here in order to witness for Him. He prayed for us to be kept from the evil. This did not necessarily mean that He was praying for nothing bad to happen to us as much as He was praying that we wouldn't fall into evil. Bad things are going to happen to Christians but that doesn't mean that Christians have to give in to the evil of bad things. Sickness, disease, and persecution will come to us but we don't have to let it rob us of our joy in Christ. These evil things can only hurt us in our souls if we allow that to happen.

Finally, we are sanctified through the truth of God's word. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them through your truth. Your word is truth.” This cleansing only comes through God's word. As we mold our lives to His will as found in His word, we will continue to be made clean. Most times that cleansing comes a little at a time. He shows us a truth and we

are made clean in that truth. When that victory is won then He reveals something else. It is a continuing process. But it is a good one for it deals directly with the problem.

It comforts my heart knowing that my Savior has prayed for me. Just to know that He cares and longs for my protection and preservation is a wonderful honor. Things won't always go the way I'd like to see them go, but then He has a plan for that too. He is still praying for us. Hebrews 7:25 tells us that He is ever making intercession for us. Rest in that. Be comforted in that. Know that regardless what comes our way, He is there.

CHAPTER 37

The Challenge of The Black Brook

:-
John 18:1

*“... He went out with His disciples over the
Brook Kidron.”*

(John 18:1)

What a perfect day for a hike! Summertime had come, school was out and so was the sun. The fish were biting and it was a perfect day for a long hike. My cousin, Ron, my brother, Ken, and I began our trek down the road. We had taken some provisions but we had decided to “live off the land” as much as we possibly could.

As we walked what seemed to be an endless amount of time, the sun began to beat down on us. It was hot enough to melt the soles off your sneakers. You could see the asphalt oozing whatever asphalt oozes. I don't know exactly what it was but it was black and sticky. My tongue was getting thicker and thicker. I needed a drink of water. Now, don't get me wrong. We were not at the point of dying of thirst. It seemed like we had been out for hours but in reality, we were maybe two miles down the road from home. But we thought we were dying.

That's when we came upon the stream. Of course - A country stream! This was sure to be the purest water we could drink. We hurried down to the clear, running water knowing that this had to be healthy. But as we scooped a mouthful up it came out faster than it went in. It tasted horrible! It was the worst tasting water I had ever put across my lips!

We hadn't thought about all the chemical runoff that probably was in that stream from the soybean and corn fields all around us. Nor had it entered our minds that there could be some good ole' country sewers flowing into this stream as well. All we knew was that this wasn't pure! Not at all!

The brook “Cedron,” or “Kidron” as it was also called, was such a brook. In my mind I had always pictured this as a perfect brook over which they crossed into the Garden Gethsemane. A picturesque garden should be bordered by a perfect brook.

Kidron was far from that. This brook is said to have been approximately three feet wide but it was most likely the foulest stream in Israel. A canal had been dug from the

temple directly to it and in this brook flowed all the blood and whatever else got washed from the altars where the sacrifices were slain. Kidron was also used as the main sewer ditch for Jerusalem. It was far from pure. In fact, it ran black. Hitchcock defines the word as meaning, “obscure, making black or sad.”

Jesus had shared all the things of the past few chapters with His disciples, and it was time to cross Kidron. I’m sure the stench from this brook caused the disciples to make a few faces, and comments as they passed over. It was not pleasant. The Bible does not tell us that there was a bridge across this brook, and it could be very likely that they had to jump it. It is said that most of the time it ran dry and is also referred to as the Kidron Valley. Even if that were the case it meant crossing over all the filth and mess that flowed through this brook.

THE UNPLEASANTNESS OF LIFE

Life is full of unpleasant things. In today’s world sin abounds. To get to the garden requires passing over this mess. Christ did it. So must we. He paid the penalty for our sin, but He also told us to “take up our cross and follow Him” (Matthew 16:24). Only He can pay the debt but we are asked to follow Him in dying out to ourselves. It means first passing over Kidron.

Even though the Garden was a beautiful place, it represents a decision that must be made. It represents giving up our rights as Christ did, and truly saying to God, “Not my will but Yours be done.” Before we can ever get to that point however, we must look at our lives and cross over all the sin that is there. We’ve got to see it as the putrid brook of Kidron and we’ve got to go through it somehow. When we see how wretched our sin really is it makes us sick. How could we have done all those wicked and terrible things? How could we ever have disgraced our Lord like that? But we did. We’ve got to face it.

We do that when we first come to the Lord. But then, over our Christian life, we do it again and again. No, Christ can only be sacrificed once for sin. That’s the word. But we must face those filthy sins that we have committed. Yes, He forgives us of all of them through and by the grace He showed us at Calvary. They are forgiven when we get saved. Praise God for that! We can never live good enough to deserve this forgiveness and that’s why it is by His grace!

But as we live our Christian lives and He begins to show us little by little those things that are in us that are so unlike Him, we begin to move up. Taking up our cross daily requires a daily self-examination. Every day we look at ourselves. We see the progress that we’ve made. We are thankful for that and we are in love with Jesus for making it all possible. Yet we also see where we need to be.

A SLOW REVELATION

Fortunately for us, more often than not, Christ only reveals a thing or two at a time. We see the dirt and the “nasty” of what that thing is in our lives and we see how unlike Christ it is. We cross Kidron again into the garden. Sometimes it just takes time. Some of those things in our lives are harder to overcome than others. But we must never give up. We must continually seek God about it. In our sincerity He will eventually aid us in getting the victory over that thing.

I want to say something here about that. In some cases, God grants miraculous deliverance to individuals. It seems like that problem in their lives just disappears. For others, that same problem is a constant struggle. What’s the difference? Is the one who gets instant deliverance more “righteous” or more “holy” than the one who struggles? No. Our righteousness and holiness are only through Jesus Christ. Some Christians go boasting about how God gave them instant victory and they just can’t understand why it is not so with others. “They must be doing something wrong,” or “They don’t want it bad enough.” God has His ways. For some He grants instant deliverance and others He does not, but it is His will to deliver both. Sometimes we just need the lessons in our lives that go along with the struggle. So don’t be condemning to a person who hasn’t attained the same victories that you have as yet. Don’t ever forget, it was God Who granted you instant deliverance. You had nothing to do with it. Give Him glory and pray earnestly for your brother or sister who struggles.

WHERE WE GET VICTORY

The garden is the place we get victory. It is where we agonize over what God has for us. Sometimes we go there with a longing. Sometimes we go there in pain. Sometimes we go there broken hearted for others. Whatever the case, we must cross over Kidron.

There is always unpleasantness associated with making ourselves better. An athlete must sacrifice long hours of training and physical conditioning to obtain his or her goal. To gain knowledge always requires a sacrifice of time and sometimes hours in mental agony trying to “get it.” It is so in our Christian experience. Now, I want to say something here because I hear all kinds of sirens going off out there about grace and works. I am not purporting that our works in any way makes us any more or any less “saved.” When we come to God through Christ, accepting His sacrifice, and His free gift offered by grace and we really believe on Him and believe that He has done the work, we are saved. We’re ready to go to Heaven when He comes back. But then we must choose if we want to just “lolly-gag” around and just get by waiting for His appearance, or if we want to know as much as possible about our Lord, and grow as close to Him as we can. This is where the revisits to the garden come in.

There are many Christians in this world who are faithful to attend church, give their tithes, and pray over their meals. They have made a sincere commitment to Christ, but it seems they never go any further in their experience.

Then there are those who spend the rest of their lives searching their hearts and winning back the strongholds that the devil has not released. No, we can't be demon possessed as a Christian. When you fill us up with Christ there is no room for the devil. Yet, if we all really look at ourselves in truth, we will find that, even though Christ has forgiven us of sin, there are still a lot of sins hanging on. When we see one, it means a trip over Kidron into the garden to seek the Lord.

It doesn't make us any less or any more saved. It just means that God is preparing us for service in His kingdom. God wants each of us to be close to Him. But we've got to get those impurities weeded out in order to be worthy of His presence.

Kidron is an ugly place. Kidron is not pleasant. Kidron will make us sick of ourselves. But as we cross Kidron into the garden, the surrender that we offer our God becomes a sacrifice of praise to Him. Just as the blood from the sacrifices flowed into Kidron, so our sacrifice helps us to get rid of one more thing unlike our Master.

Most likely we will never get rid of it all before we meet Him face to face. Under grace it isn't required. We will make many trips over Kidron. But as we cross, He is always on the other side. If it seems we are about to slip in the muck He is there to grab our hand and help us across. He wants to meet us in the garden. Don't be afraid to cross Kidron. You will always leave the garden a better person because you have given up more of yourself and allowed Christ to be formed a little more in you.

CHAPTER 38

The Challenge of the “I AM”

John 18:2-9

“... I AM He ...”

(John 18:5)

The odor of fresh salty water in the air, the cry of the seagull, and the crashing of breakers on the beach had my senses pumping with excitement. As we climbed to the top of the rise, for the first time as an adult, my breath was momentarily taken from my body as I beheld the mighty Atlantic Ocean in Folly Beach, South Carolina. It is one of the most magnificent scenes recorded in my memory and I'll never forget it as long as I live. Even today, after many trips to the ocean, I never tire of hearing its roar and I can scarcely take my eyes away from those seemingly endless miles of water. Its awe holds me in its sway as I survey the horizon.

The power that Jesus put forth in this scripture reading towers over my first experience of the ocean in all its magnitude. John skips over the part of Jesus' prayer and the slumber of the disciples. While these events were extremely important to the message of His betrayal and crucifixion, I suppose John felt that the other writers had said what needed to be said regarding them. For whatever reason, he jumps ahead to a powerful event not recorded in the other Gospels.

Judas, who had left them earlier in the evening, now returned with a band of heavily armed Temple soldiers. I wondered at first, "why the overkill with the armed soldiers?" and then I thought of what Judas had witnessed over the past three years. He was there when Jesus raised both the dead son and Lazarus from the eternal sleep of darkness. He had witnessed lepers instantly cleansed and restored. He ate of the food Jesus had provided in the feeding of both the 5000 and the 4000. Judas was in the boat both times when Jesus calmed the storm, and trod the menacing waves of night storms on the sea. He was well aware of the power held by Jesus. Had Jesus decided to protest that night instead of allowing Himself to be taken, the heavy arms they carried would have been puny instruments of no use in comparison. I believe Judas was scared.

Little did they realize just how they would experience this tremendous power for themselves. At this point, after praying in the garden, Jesus knew what was about to take place. He knew they were coming for Him before they ever arrived. It was no surprise to

Jesus but what a surprise it was going to be for this group of men. As they entered the garden Jesus asked them, "Who are you looking for?" To which they answered, "Jesus, of Nazareth." I'm not sure exactly where in this scenario that Judas kissed Jesus so as to identify Him to the others, but I think probably before He asked the question. When they experienced what was coming next, it would seem hard, at least for me, to walk up to Him and betray Him with a kiss.

After their answer, Jesus identified Himself in a way they never expected. Many of them had probably heard Him preach in the streets and around the temple during the day and heard His claims as being the Messiah. They had no inkling of an idea that they were about to experience a small part of the magnitude of the power of the Messiah.

Jesus said, "I am He." Now notice here that the word "he" is in italics. In most versions of the Bible, it appears like this. We must remember that when the translators put words in italics it meant that in the original language that particular word wasn't really there, but it had been added by the translators for clarity as to the meaning of the scripture. Jesus actually said, "I AM."

THE OTHER "I AM"

On a country side in the Arabic desert, a shepherd lifted his eyes one day and saw a bush up on one of the mountains that had apparently been set ablaze by the heat from the sun. After a few minutes he looked again and the bush still had flames licking upward from it. Some more time passed and once again he saw the burning bush. But now it struck a chord in his curiosity. Why would such a small bush still be fervently burning? It had not been consumed. The silhouette of branches was still visible in the midst of the flame. He had to get a closer look at this strange phenomenon.

He climbed the mountain trail up to where the bush burned. As he stood gazing at the bush, he suddenly heard a voice that changed the course of his life forever. It said, "Remove your shoes, because you are standing on holy ground." It was the voice of God speaking from the midst of the bush. Moses was awe struck with the instructions that followed. During his conversation with God Moses asked an extremely important question. God had told him to go to the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt and let them know that he had been sent by God to deliver them from their bondage. Moses asked, "Who shall I tell them has sent me?" God responded with a name for Himself that identified Him as the Eternally Existing, One True God. "I AM. Tell them that I AM has sent you."

Jesus' response in the garden was identifying Himself as the "Great I AM" that spoke with Moses. When He said these words, they went out with such a gale force of power that the entire band of soldiers, Judas included, was knocked over backwards. I can only imagine what may have gone through the minds of those men. "What are we up against here? What have we gotten ourselves into? There's no way our weapons can stand against such an invisible force! We're all going to die!"

Of course, we know from the reading of the scripture that Jesus willingly let them take Him to the Jewish leaders. He allowed this power to go out from Himself only briefly, I believe, to let them know just what He could have done had it been the will of God. This is yet another proof of how God in the Flesh laid Himself down for our sin. It serves as another example of the great love He has for puny, insignificant man.

HIS POWER IS STILL THE SAME

His power has not diminished today. Should He choose to do so, there are not enough nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, or any other such instrument of mass destruction available to stand against Him. Yet today, man's arsenal pales in the shadow of God's power. Our Creator simply spoke the mighty suns of the universe into existence. At His word the mighty waves of the ocean began their endless journey from the deep to the sandy shore. At His desire stately forests sprang into being. From His mouth came the words and all the creatures of the Earth from the smallest of one-celled life forms to the towering giraffes and massive whales in the seas, began life. From the breath of His nostrils man became a living soul. No! His power has not changed. He still rules all of creation!

Just as Jesus chose not to retaliate against the small band of soldiers in Gethsemane, so God chooses today to not react in anger towards those who scoff at Him. Men of this world have denied Him and defied Him. They laugh at Him, make His name a byword and dare Him to do anything about it. They say that because of His silence that He is not really there. But I want you to know today that He holds back the angels of Heaven from unleashing unimaginable horrific destruction against mankind for one reason and one reason only: He loves us.

God is secure in Who He is. He doesn't need to prove His power like mankind does. When we are scoffed at and ridiculed, anger rises and we retaliate with everything in us. We have to stomp and snort to prove our puny power. We kick the dirt and spew warnings to let our opponents know that we are a force to be reckoned with. But God doesn't need this assurance. He doesn't have to do a war dance to build up His confidence and work up courage. All He has to do is to speak. One word from God and the balance of this entire universe would be consumed into nothingness. But God loves us.

This doesn't mean that He isn't angry with us from time to time. It doesn't mean that everything we do and say is pleasing to Him. In more ways than we'd like to admit we act like children in His eyes. I'm sure He gets tired of our complaining, grumbling, and negative attitudes. But He loves us.

HIS LOVE

That love is stronger than any love man could possibly know. If we spend a hundred years of life here below serving Him, we'll never be able to fully comprehend a love like God's. It was love for man, and yes, even for those who took Him captive that night, that

caused Him to silently walk off with them, knowing that He had only hours now to live. It was love for mankind that made God in the flesh endure the pain and torture that was to come. It was love for the puny people of this Earth that caused the all-powerful God to come in human form and let them treat Him with degradation, humiliation and death.

It is love for mankind today that keeps God from instantly destroying us and starting over. He could you know. We like to say that God is bound by His word, and, don't get me wrong, as long as God chooses to do things the way He has, He will honor what He has said to us in the scriptures, but don't let that ever sway you into demanding from God. God's word is important but we must realize that all the promises and all the provisions hinge on our relationship with Him. There is coming a day of judgment. There is coming a time when insignificant man will stand before the Almighty and answer for his life.

God chooses to allow the sin to abound on the Earth today. Thank God for those who realize and come to Him. But still man retaliates. Since man can't get to God, he retaliates against those who have chosen to give themselves to Him. I read a news report just today of a Muslim man somewhere in the Middle East who was converted to Christ. He armed himself with tracts and Bibles and climbed the mountain into the highlands to spread the word. Ten days later his body was returned to his family, cut into for pieces. Don't tell me that God is not angered by this. You'll never convince me that everything in God doesn't want to send lightning bolts at those who murdered His chosen. But He doesn't. You know why? Because even though He is angry about that, He also loves those who did it.

HE NEVER FORGOT

Even when Jesus was allowing Himself to be taken in the garden He thought of man. He requested the guards to let His disciples go. None of them were to be killed at this time. He had asked God to keep them and so they were kept. Yet today, the Lord has purpose for us. Yes, Christians do encounter tragedy. Christians are persecuted to death in many parts of this world. But God's love and grace abound and so He continues to give even the worst of scoffers another chance.

I don't know about you but I can't help but love God for this. You see, even though I don't consider myself a violent person and I wouldn't harm even the smallest of God's creatures without good, just cause. But if they get in my way, I've got it in for them - Not God. We get in His way all the time, still He remains compassionate toward us.

No wonder that we can't help but to love Him when we understand but a minute portion of His Divine love. When we catch the vision, even just a glimpse, we are changed forever. We stand before a burning bush today. God calls to us in His magnificent power yet in a small way that we can understand. What is our response? What will you do with Jesus? My prayer is that you'll allow Him in to the center of your life.

Let us today fall under His power. Not in retaliation and fear, but in submission, honor, and glory to the All-Powerful God – the great I AM!

CHAPTER 39

The Challenge of Denial

John 18:1-27

“... Peter then denied again ...”

(John 18:27)

“Andy, I’ve been practicing my quick draw and I think I’ve got it down pretty good, if I do say so myself.” With that Barney Fife firmly grabbed the grip of his pistol, and quickly jerked to pull it from his holster. In the process, his “lightning quick” reflexes caused him to accidentally pull the trigger. This motion was followed by a loud “bang” and a new hole was found in the floor of the Mayberry sheriff’s office.

“Barney!” exclaimed Sheriff Taylor, “I thought I told you to keep your bullet in your shirt pocket!”

Sheepishly Barney answered, “Sorry Ange.”

When it came to weapons, I get the feeling Peter was somewhat like Barney Fife. He was a fisherman remember. He knew the nets, and he knew what fishing vessels would do in water. He had made a living by fishing and he knew his trade.

But he was no swordsman. In Luke’s Gospel, during the conversation following supper, Jesus had told the disciples that if they didn’t have a sword that they should sell their garment and get one. At that point it was told to Jesus that they had two in their possession (Luke 22:36-38). Apparently, Peter had one of those.

Following Jesus’ announcement to the band of temple soldiers as to who he was, the narrative tells us that Peter proceeded to pull out his sword to defend Jesus and, in the process, he cut off the right ear of a man named Malchus. Peter truly loved Jesus, I believe, and he wanted to defend Him. After all, just moments earlier Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny Him three times that very night. Peter had answered that prediction by telling Jesus that he would never deny him. Now, he had to prove it.

Malchus was a servant of the High Priest and was one of the temple guards sent to fetch Jesus. Whether Peter cut off Malchus’ ear accidentally while drawing his sword or if he meant to split the man’s skull open and just missed, I don’t know. Whichever the

case, it became yet another opportunity for these men who had been sent to bring Jesus in, to see his Divinity in action. The Gospel of John doesn't record this part of the incident, but in Luke we read that after Jesus rebuked Peter for drawing his sword, he touched Malchus' ear and restored it whole.

We don't read any more of Malchus except the mention of his name later in this text. Yet I can't help but believe that he became an instant believer. He had felt the pain and most likely grabbed his bleeding ear. Feelings of both anger and fear ran instantly through him like an emotional gauntlet. In his day there would be no sewing his ear back on. He had been permanently scarred by this rebellious traitor and he was probably in the process of ordering Peter killed when Jesus stepped in. "Put away your sword, Peter. Shouldn't I drink from the cup that my Father has given me?" As he spoke, he reached for Malchus and put his hand over his damaged ear. When Jesus took his hand away, the bloodied mess was restored as it was before. It was a miracle. Malchus couldn't deny it. He should have been permanently mutilated but he wasn't. That would have made a believer out of me.

Peter had been rebuked again. His heart was in the right place. He wanted to be loyal and defend Jesus. But he just kept saying and doing the wrong things. Sometime before this Jesus had said that he was going to be taken by the Jewish leaders and Peter had basically told him that he didn't know what he was talking about. Jesus responded by saying, "Get behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16:21-23).

I can identify with that. How many times have I tried to be valiant for the Lord? How often have I zealously attempted to do some work for him and failed in my attempt? How many times have I counseled someone, thinking I had all the answers only to find out that I didn't know what I was talking about? He has "restored Malchus' ear" many times for me.

And so, they took Jesus to the High Priest. Peter followed leaving a distance between them. His heart was beating hard and fear kept his adrenaline flowing like a gutter in a hard rain. He just had to know where they were taking Jesus. He was driven by his dedication, even though it was a little tarnished at this point.

Another disciple, whom we assume to be John, had also followed. He had made himself known to the High Priest and had been allowed inside the judgment hall. When he realized that Peter had also followed, he spoke to the servant girl who was taking care of the door and asked her to let Peter in. As she did, she looked Peter over and said, "Aren't you one of his disciples?"

While in basic training during my three-year tour of duty with the United States Army, I really wanted to get along with the men I was training with. I was a licensed minister of the Gospel at the time but I just didn't tell anyone. I didn't use the foul language that the others used and I didn't act like the others; I just didn't tell them. I excused myself by reasoning that I could be a better witness to them if they thought I was just "one of the guys." I knew that they would treat me differently and act differently themselves if they

knew, and so I kept my silence. It all sounded good and almost like words of wisdom. But in my heart of hearts, I knew that, in a way, I was denying my Lord.

It wasn't a good feeling. When they did eventually find out they of course wanted to know why I hadn't told them before. I responded with the same excuse that I had told myself and sure enough, from that day forward I was treated differently. I wasn't just "one of the guys" any more. But it still had been an excuse. It was what it was: Plain denial.

I wonder if that's how Peter felt? Perhaps he justified himself by thinking that if they didn't know who he was he could somehow get Jesus out of this mess. He reasoned something in his heart to get by with what was to follow, for he told the girl, "I am not." He lied. But he knew that it was wrong and had somehow justified it in his mind. The rooster crowed.

As he warmed himself by the fire, apparently some of the temple guards were there also. One of them must have thought he recognized Peter. It had been dark in the garden. The only light they had was from the torches they carried. Yet, in the dimly dancing flames, bits and pieces of faces could be seen. "Aren't you one of his disciples?"

The second time was somewhat easier. "No, I'm not." Still, I can't help but believe that his heart told him it was wrong.

Then another spoke up. This guy was related to Malchus. When something tragic is happening to a blood relative, you tend to notice more of the details. And so, he said, "didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Once again Peter denied it. Mark is the only one who defined the two "alarms" of the rooster (Mark 14:72). After Peter denied his association with Jesus the third time, the Bible tells us in all four Gospels that the rooster crowed. Luke detailed the look from Jesus. Peter's eyes locked with his and he immediately remembered what Jesus had said. It had happened, even though at the time Peter couldn't see how he would ever do such a thing. But now he had. He went out and wept bitterly. He had failed his Lord and Master. How could he ever face Jesus again? But he would.

THE FORMS OF DENIAL

I realize that the plan of salvation had not been completed at this point. I know that the Holy Spirit had not yet entered into Peter. But I also know that he loved Jesus. I know that he meant what he had said to him. Still, it had happened. I can't help but wonder how many times we have denied Christ. Yes, we who have come to him in salvation now have the Holy Spirit living in our lives. We are to be the most victorious people on the face of the Earth. Even so, we are human.

There are many forms of denial. We don't have to say anything at all, for even our silence can be a denial. We should be standing strong for our Lord, but even when we know we should, we have our moments of weakness. Any emotional display that goes against what our Lord taught, becomes a denial. You show me a Christian who claims

that he or she has never once in their Christian walk denied our Lord, and I'll show you a Christian who is hiding secrets buried deep within them. We are human. We get angry when we shouldn't. Yes, we can be angry without sin, but more often than not it goes the other way. We get our feelings hurt very easily and go off pouting about it. We may say the words, "I forgive you," but then go to someone else and continue to talk about the situation. Our negative actions are a form of denial because when we have told others about Christ's love, then act negatively, we are in essence telling them that it really isn't that way.

HOPE, WONDERFUL HOPE

Though our denial is a terrible thing, yet there is hope. There can be two possible outcomes of our denial of Christ. We find both in the lives of two who denied him. We've seen Peter's denial. The other was Judas. He didn't deny Christ verbally but with his betrayal. He turned his back to Jesus and in so doing was telling the Jewish leaders with whom he cut his deal for 30 pieces of silver, "I don't really believe him."

After their treacherous acts, both men went out and wept. But there is a difference. Judas tried to make amends on his own. The Bible says that Satan had entered into him and stirred him to do his dastardly act. But at some point, the real Judas took over again because the Bible also tells us that he went back to the Jewish leaders and tried to undo their deal by returning the money he had received for the job. He would gladly give it up to have Jesus set free again. But it was too late.

Judas felt true sorrow. But how could he ever face Jesus now? He had not only let Jesus down but had also let himself down. There seemed to be no recourse. He could not go on knowing what he had done, but he would not allow himself to believe that he could be forgiven for his act either, so the Bible tells us that he went to a lonely spot and there he took his own life. He hung himself.

Peter, on the other hand, had failed Jesus before, just never to the degree of what he had done now. Still, he knew he loved Jesus. The Bible doesn't record this but I believe in his heart Peter told himself, "No matter what I've done, I must go on. I do love Jesus. I have failed him miserably but I will go on loving him." He didn't fully understand what was then happening or what was going to happen but he knew he was sorry.

He was forgiven by Jesus and after the Day of Pentecost became one of the most powerful witnesses for the Gospel in history. I'm sure Peter failed after this. I'm sure he had his share of ups and downs. But he had determined that no matter how many downs he had, he would always get up with the help, and only with the help, of his Master.

WE HAVE TWO DIRECTIONS

As in the illustrations of these two men, we have two directions to go when it comes to our relationship with Jesus. There will be a time when we fail him and, either by our words or actions, deny him. As human beings it is inevitable. It doesn't make it excusable,

but it is going to happen. What we need to ask ourselves is this, “Will I react as Judas or Peter?” Will we try to remedy the situation in ourselves like Judas did? If so, we’ll always be in defeat. We’ll always let ourselves down and we’ll always be looking for the tree that best fits the rope.

Or will we react like Peter? Peter’s sin was just as bad as that of Judas. Yet, Peter realized that there was no remedy found in his own flesh or mind. The only remedy was in Christ. And so, Peter waited and his wait was rewarded. The Lord did forgive him. He was eventually changed. He learned patience and he grew from the experience.

When we have denied our Lord, we must learn to be quick to go to him in repentance. We must soon come to him for aid. He will give it. But he’ll also give us something we didn’t expect. Not only will we be forgiven but we will learn from the valuable experience. The denial won’t probably happen in that way ever again. It may happen in another form, but most likely not in the one we just wrenched our guts over. We have in essence allowed Christ to give us strength in our failure.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

Paul said, “*When I am weak then am I strong*” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Paul had learned that it took the experience of his own weaknesses and failures to define the strengths and victories of Christ. Paul had learned that in those moments of weakness and temptation, to call out for help from the Lord. His strength was not his own but that of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit living inside him.

We find out where our real strength lies as we repent over our failures and denials of our Lord, as we learn, and as we grow. It is not in our arm of flesh. It is not in our human mind. It is only in our weakness being overcome by the power of God.

We cannot do it ourselves. We must lower our pride and let God do it for us. We must learn true dependence on him. It is only in our weakness that the true strength of Christ comes out, and that is our witness and stand for the Master. It is our cure from denial. It gives us victory when the rooster crows.

CHAPTER 40

The Challenge of The Governor

John 18:28 – 19:22

“You could have no power at all against me unless it had been given you from above...”

(John 19:11)

What would it be like to be falsely accused before the authorities? Perhaps some of you know that experience, or know of someone who has experienced it. I know of a man who was arrested under false pretenses. Even here in the great United States of America it took more than a year and a court battle to get his name cleared of those charges.

Jesus found Himself standing before the highest authority in His region in just that position. Pilate was the Governor of the Judean Province and was appointed by Caesar himself. Jesus had not committed any crime worthy of being where He now was. He had helped people everywhere He went. He had taught them truths that would make them free. He had miraculously fed thousands, and healed many, many people of many different diseases. He had even raised the dead at least three times.

Because He did this directly under the authority of God and not under the authority of the religious leaders, they hated Jesus for it. They wanted Him out of the way. They had tried to trap Him in His words. They had presented Him with very difficult and almost impossible situations and He had emerged victorious in them all. This caused them to hate Him even more.

Now that Judas had betrayed Him into their hands, and they had led their own mock trial so as to justify the process, they then took Jesus before the Governor. This was serious. Because Roman law forbade them to put anyone to death on their own, when they sought the death penalty it was the Governor of the province who made that decision. And so, Jesus found Himself standing before the most politically powerful man in that area.

The words of Pilate are a lot like those of the world today. He asked some questions of both the Jews and Jesus which are still on the minds of many. Isn't it something how it seems those questions never get answered satisfactorily? But then, the answer is there if we want to accept it. That's where the problems come in. Most

people don't want to accept the truth when it comes to spiritual matters. The Bible doesn't say this, but from the tone of Pilate's words, I believe that he too was searching for the answers to these questions.

We should also remember that the other Gospels tell us that Pilate was using much caution with this case for his wife had told him that she had dreamed about this man, Jesus, during the night. It troubled him and he wanted with everything in him to set this man free. I'd say he thought it would be open and shut. He'd just tell the Jewish leaders, "No," and let that be that. It didn't go as planned.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The first question Pilate asked was directed to the Jewish leaders. There they stood before him, Jesus bound and standing between him and them. He knew that he wanted to make this quick but he had to go through the formalities, so he asked them, "What is your accusation (verse 29)?" What was this man being accused of? Why such the big deal about one poor man and a handful of commoners? He hadn't led any insurrections, nor had he caused any violent disturbances. Perhaps he was slightly "off his rocker" but that was no reason to place him on trial.

We still ask this question. What's the big deal about Jesus? Let's just go to our church of choice, pay our religious homage and be done with it. The world still is not convinced about Jesus, yet many have been taught something of him during their years of life. They would rather be on their merry way and take care of their own business, but just in case, let's do a quick "church thing," appease our consciences and get on with life.

But the accusation goes deeper. The purpose is simple yet much more complex. It takes in the existence and purpose of each and every man, woman, boy, and girl that has ever lived on the face of this planet. You see, Jesus was even then becoming the type of the sacrificial lamb to once and for all fulfill the death sentence that hangs over us all. Why do you think John the Baptist, when he saw Jesus coming towards him on the seashore, pointed everyone's attention toward him by saying, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of this world!" Even then it was being revealed what Jesus had come to do.

The accusation from the Jews was more than blasphemy. Jesus had insulted them. He had revealed the game of deception that they had used on the people. He had exposed them for who they were. But were they really any different than us? Let's see, they wanted glory from men, to make a living by creating a big religious business that made them rich, and to be viewed as important individuals. All they had to do was to control the crowds. They could interpret the Law any way they desired, so long as they didn't call undue attention upon themselves by the Roman Authorities, and since the common man couldn't read even if he could get access to a copy of the Law, their word was final. We see this philosophy yet today.

Jesus exposed these things and the Jewish leaders didn't like it one bit. He not only dishonored them, but also got into their wallets. Of course, they didn't want Pilate to know this so they answered him by saying, "If he wasn't guilty of something we wouldn't have brought him before you."

CAN'T YOU DO THIS YOURSELVES?

Ah! This seemed like the easy way out for Pilate. So, his next words were, "You've got your own laws for punishing criminals. Take him and judge him according to your law (verse 31)." Yes, this would get the problem out of his hair. They had his permission to hold trial on Jesus and have him beaten and thrown in jail if they wanted. It seemed as simple as that.

The world would like to dismiss Jesus just as easily. "Let those Christians believe in him if they want to. They have freedoms, just make them keep their belief to themselves and not thrust it at us." The definition of religious freedom is just that today. We are experiencing brutal retaliation in most Muslim countries simply because Christians want to share the Good News of what Jesus came to do. We are trying to convert them to Christ, not for their money or to brag about numbers, but because we genuinely want to see them saved from their sure destruction by sin.

It seems harmless enough. But we must remember who the controlling force is in the world system of today. The devil doesn't want anyone to become a Christian, and so those who are not Christians are taking on a very violent intolerance of believers in Christ. All over this world believers are being persecuted severely and even to death. Here in the United States the persecution is much more subtle. The physical violence is not there but the objection is very strong. We are being censored in many areas under the name of "Separation of Church and State." The minority is controlling the majority today in this country and the plan is obvious to anyone who really cares enough to examine it. Even the media is forcing the anti-Christian values upon viewers.

Pilate tried to dismiss it easily but it would not just go away. Nor will the persecution of the world today in regard to Christians. It has always been there. Just read the Book of Acts. We have had a lull for several decades but don't think it will last forever. This world system hates Christ and those who believe on Him.

The Jewish leaders told Pilate that if Jesus weren't a criminal, then they wouldn't have brought him to him. Besides, they couldn't put anyone to death. That responsibility fell on Pilate. This complicated things immensely.

WHO ARE YOU ANYWAY?

Pilate took Jesus inside the judgment hall to examine him for himself. He looked Jesus over. There was nothing special about this man. He was at best average in appearance. You could tell he spent a good amount of time outside from his leathery skin. Still, there was something there, something almost irresistible. He asked, "Are you

the king of the Jews (verse 33)?” This was a most serious accusation. Roman supremacy had caused the Jewish people to look even more towards the coming of their promised Messiah. The scriptures had long promised of the coming of this individual who would bring complete restoration to the kingdom of Israel. People had come to interpret this as the coming of a physical king with great military prowess who would crush the Romans and drive them from their country.

Insurrections had arisen in recent times from radical groups claiming their leader to be the Messiah. So, you can see the seriousness of this question. Pilate was trying to find out if Jesus did indeed pose a real threat to the Roman presence in Israel or not.

Jesus responded, “Is this something you want to know for yourself or just something you overheard from others?” He wasn’t afraid of Pilate. Actually, Jesus knew what was in the heart of Pilate. I believe he sensed the weight Pilate was feeling in regards to this very situation. It was a challenge to Pilate, not as a matter of disrespect, but in order to force Pilate to know the reason for the question for himself.

Jesus yet asks that question of the world. We must come to him for ourselves. We, as Christians, are to spend time in sacrificial service to others, but when it comes to claiming Jesus as our king, it must be done on an individual basis. We cannot make him king in the life of anyone else.

JUST WHO DO YOU THINK I AM?

Sidestepping the powerful question of Jesus, Pilate responded by saying, “Am I a Jew (verse 35)?” The world would say, “I’m not a Christian! Your belief has nothing to do with me.” But it has everything to do with each of us. We must claim Christ as king individually.

Then Pilate said, “Your own nation has delivered you to me. What have you done (verse 35)?” The world delivers up the believer, but in essence it is still delivering up Christ.

At this point Jesus answered Pilate’s original question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He said that his kingdom wasn’t of this world. In other words, it wasn’t a physical kingdom (yet). If it were a physical kingdom then those who followed him would be fighting, not healing. They would be protesting, not bringing deliverance. They would be campaigning with words of war, not words of peace and hope to individuals. The day will come when Jesus will be a physical king in this world. But from the day he stood before Pilate until now, his kingdom has been established as one very unique from any that has ever appeared on this Earth. In this kingdom he sits on the throne of the heart. It is made up of souls of men.

WHAT KIND OF KING ARE YOU?

Pilate then asked Jesus, "Are you a king then (verse 37)?" Of course, he was a king! But just like Pilate, the world cannot comprehend an unseen kingdom. We spend so much time arguing this fact. We tend to interpret the word of God with things we can see, feel, hear, smell, and touch. But the kingdom of God can only be accepted through a spiritual sixth sense that only comes with believing in Christ, and that sense is faith.

Jesus then began to talk about truth. He stated that he came to bear witness of the truth. That truth being the acceptance of the spiritual kingdom and the plan of salvation for lost man. Everyone who is of this spiritual truth hears his voice. But to hear his voice we must be of the spiritual kingdom.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

To this Pilate responded with an unanswered question, "What is truth (verse 38)?" Jesus didn't even get time to respond for Pilate returned to speak with the Jewish leaders. But Jesus had already answered the question. Many seek truth today. We have tried it with peace talks amongst the nations. We have signed contracts and agreements pledging this to be true. But real truth can only come from God and can only really be witnessed spiritually.

What was Pilate to do now? He didn't fully understand what Jesus was talking about but he had heard enough to know that he wasn't guilty of any crime and certainly nothing deserving death. Perhaps there was one way. It was Passover time and Pilate had begun the custom of releasing a prisoner to the Jews on this occasion. Surely, they would allow him to release Jesus. So, he spoke to the Jews saying, "I find no fault in Him. But you have a custom that I release a prisoner to you at the Passover. Should I release your king (18:39)?"

GIVE US . . .

Apparently, the Jewish leaders had anticipated this response and so they had hired a mob to override the true feelings of the people. Many there had heard Jesus. Many had been healed by him. So, the Jewish leaders cry must be heard above that of the crowd. "Give us Barabbas!" they cried. Barabbas was a robber. He had most definitely done wrong. But the Jewish leaders despised Jesus so much that they were willing to put up with Barabbas rather than see this man who had defamed them in the eyes of the people, walk free again. The world still cries, "Give us Barabbas!" The world system of today would rather deal with the "robbers of life" and stand politically correct than to stand in persecution for Jesus.

Perhaps it would suffice the mob if they saw him punished. So, Pilate sent Jesus out to be beaten and to have the crown of thorns placed on his head. The blood thirsty soldiers were glad to oblige. After this beating, Jesus was presented once again to the crowd. Now his face was black and blue. Blood dripped from in under His robe. The

crown of thorns sent streams of blood oozing down his face. Surely this would be sufficient for the people.

SEE – THE MAN

Once again Pilate told them, “I find no fault in Him (19:4).” As they gazed upon Jesus Pilate said, “Look, the man (verse 5).” At the prodding of the Jewish leaders the mob took one look at Jesus and began to cry out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Every time I hear or read those words, my heart drops. I am shocked, amazed and deeply hurt. Yet today, each and every time we speak against God or His people, we are in essence crying out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Thank God he has been crucified once and for all. Never again will our dear Master have to endure the brutal punishment of crucifixion and all the pain and suffering that went along with it.

He died for our sin and those of us who accept him have been crucified spiritually in him. Oh! How wonderful he is. What a great and glorious gift he has given us!

Pilate was getting desperate now. He knew that it must be him to give the order for Jesus to be crucified. Yet he screams, “You take Him and crucify Him for I find no fault in Him (verse 6).” He wanted no part in this, but he didn’t even realize how he played into the plan of God. Jesus must be crucified. Despite how horrible it was we would all be helplessly lost if God had allowed Pilate to succeed in freeing Jesus.

Now the Jews cited their reason by law that they wanted Jesus dead. Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. This struck fear into the heart of Pilate. I believe that Pilate knew it to be so. He took Jesus back inside again. He spoke to Jesus asking, “Where are you from (verse 9)?” How could he be just a mere man? He had to have sensed his holiness as he had spoken to him. Jesus never answered.

DON’T YOU KNOW WHO I AM?

Pilate then said, “Don’t you know that I have the power to crucify you or to release you (verse 10)?” What Jesus said amazed Pilate. Even though he was hated by most of the Jewish community, this man, whom he had just ordered beaten, told him that the greater blame rested on the people. Jesus knew the struggle that was going on within Pilate’s heart. He could have played on that and probably negotiated his release. But He also knew that what was taking place wasn’t just for the moment but for all of time and eternity!

Jesus also removes our blame. When we come to him in repentance all the blame for our sin is shifted upon him. The world struggles against this, but it is true. The world doesn’t want to owe anyone anything. The debt we owe to Jesus can never be repaid. Even if we were willing to lay down our life for our own sin, it wouldn’t be good enough because our very sin which needs to be covered can be covered only by sinless blood. What a predicament we are in without Christ!

From that moment on, Pilate sought fervently as to how he could legally release Jesus. But now the Jewish leaders added a new twist to this situation. They told Pilate that they had no king but Caesar. If word ever got back to Rome that he had allowed a man who proposed to be king and usurped the authority of Caesar, he would likely find himself in jail or worse.

He waited for a while, trying to figure it all out. Time was drawing near to prepare for the coming Passover. This trial had gone on all morning. It was now noon. Desperately Pilate spoke to the Jews, "Look at your king (verse 14). Again, they cried out, "Crucify him!" Pilate said, "Shall I crucify your King (verse 15)?" Once again, the Jews cried out, "We have no king but Caesar!"

He had no choice. He gave the order. The other Gospels record that he washed his hands to symbolize that he was innocent of the blood of Jesus. Then he sent Jesus to be crucified.

Despite any history of Pilate that we have after this, it is certain that Jesus had made a profound impression on the man. He would never be the same again. We don't read anywhere in the Bible or in the pages of history that Pilate accepted Christ, but his inscription regarding Jesus on the head of the cross says it all to me. He had written, "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." Of course, the Jewish leaders protested. This just was not politically correct. But Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written (verse 22)."

Jesus really is the King! Not only of the Jews but of all who come to him in true repentance and allow his spilled blood to cleanse them of sin. In our spiritual kingdom there is no doubt as to who sits on the throne. Praise God that he was willing to die for us. Praise God that he ever lives! Praise God that no governor or leader can ever thwart the freedom found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can meet the challenge – Head on.

CHAPTER 41

The Challenge of the Gamble

John 19:23-24

“Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it ...”

(John 19:24)

*I*t was Sunday morning and the day was pleasantly bright. At church we had a very enriching worship service and it was time for the message. I stepped behind the pulpit to begin and suddenly looked down. I was dressed in the shorts I sleep in and nothing else! I could already hear the rumble going through the congregation as I struggled to find words of explanation and from the warmth that I felt in my face, I know it was as red as a cardinal in snow. Just as I was about to speak something clever to recover from this, the alarm went off and I was, once again, saved by the bell. What a nightmare it had been! We all get embarrassed from time to time but it is usually brought on by something we have forgotten or just a plain, stupid comment that comes out wrong.

It was not this way for Jesus. One of the reasons crucifixion was such a horrible method of execution was because it caused the individual to experience pain in many ways, including the mental agony of embarrassment. The victim of the crucifixion was nailed to the cross naked, then, after everything else, was hurled into the air and left to die, hanging there in the midst of all the rest of the pain, fully exposed for all to see. It was not only agony but also ultimate humiliation.

Nothing personal was left to the individual. It was the soldiers carrying out the crucifixion who had first dibs on the victim's clothing. So, in the text we see four soldiers at the foot of the cross where Jesus now hung, deciding how to fairly divide his last possessions. In reading commentaries written by well-educated men of God, it seems that there are two opinions as to what went on. Some feel that they just equally divided up his garments, while others feel they took each one and ripped it into four equal shares. I feel some tearing had gone on somewhere because of the way verse 24 reads but whichever opinion was true is really irrelevant. What is most important is that when they came to his tunic (also called a coat), it was of such an unusual and exquisite design that instead of tearing it up into equal shares, they decided to cast lots (like throwing dice) to see who would get to keep it.

Jesus' tunic was not sewn or pinned at the shoulders like most folks, but it had been woven as one piece. It took a lot of work to make this. Also, it was much like the tunics worn by the priests and so it was a prized possession.

Since that fateful day, a lot of speculation has been made concerning this tunic. It was reportedly on display for many years in Rome but it is only supposed that this was Jesus' tunic. The claim was that miracles had happened the presence of this garment. It had some stains on it that were said to be the stains of his blood. I'll not comment on this because I don't know for sure whether or not it was his tunic. But it really doesn't matter.

Then there was the movie from the 50's entitled "The Robe." It told a miraculous story about individuals who had possession of Jesus' tunic. While it is a good, classic movie, and wholesome Christian entertainment, it is only fictional.

It would be an honor to see this famed garment that might have belonged to Jesus, but we must realize that it is still just a piece of cloth; perhaps an old piece of cloth, but nothing more. There are two important points to this story, however.

LIKE THAT OF THE PRIESTS

First of all, it is significant that the tunic worn by Jesus was like that worn by the priests. He is our Great High Priest. It is Jesus Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father yet today making intercession for us (see Romans 8:34).

His one sacrifice at Calvary was enough to cover all our sin, past, present and future. Now, I firmly believe that when we commit sin as a believer in Christ, we still need to confess that sin. We still need to acknowledge it as sin and ask forgiveness but that is not to say that we are asking for a new sacrifice. It is realizing that we have sinned against God and without the shed blood of Jesus we deserve to die for it. Thanks be to God, that our Savior is continually pleading our case before the Father. His sacrifice is sufficient but that doesn't give us a free license to just go out and do whatever we wish to do and then say, "Oh well, I've already been forgiven for that so it doesn't matter." Please! We have a responsibility to show our love and respect for Christ.

ALL BETS ON

The second point I'd like to make about this incident is found in the fact that they gambled for Jesus' tunic. It was too exquisite to just rip into four pieces and divide up as rags. It was worth something. It was worth taking a chance on. Each of the four soldiers knew that three of them were going to get nothing out of the deal, but the value of the garment was worth a one in four chance that they would get it.

I don't promote gambling. In itself there is nothing wrong with it as long as it doesn't take food from the mouths of our families, cause us to let our financial obligations suffer, or become an addiction to which we become enslaved. But that's just it. Gambling very easily becomes all of these things and can be immediately addictive. The chance of

instant wealth from a small, meager amount is very inviting to most of us. But it is also very unlikely.

But there is one gamble in life that is most worthwhile. It is called "faith." Each of us is positioned at the foot of the cross. Whether we want to believe on Jesus Christ or not, in a spiritual sense we are present at the crucifixion. Jesus is accused of blasphemy. He has claimed to be King. The world has already convicted him of treason and treachery. But now there is an individual choice for each of us to make.

As you read the account of the crucifixion in the other Gospels, we see the reaction of many of the people there. Some had believed in him all along and watched through tears as their Savior died. Some had been miraculously healed by this man and their hearts were torn with emotion as he hung on that cross.

Still, others mocked him. They said things like, "If you are really the Son of God, save yourself right here before our eyes. Prove yourself and then we'll believe." But in saying these words they were really proving their unbelief.

There were even opinions of belief between the two thieves who were crucified with him. As he hung there with one thief on each side of Him, one of the thieves, also in agony, agreed with the mob, "Yes, if you are the Son of God save yourself and us too!" The other thief had realized that Jesus was not a criminal and corrected the mocking thief by defending Jesus. This belief in Christ saved his spirit from eternal death.

BELIEVING IN CHRIST IS A GAMBLE

Believing in Jesus and his sacrifice is a gamble for each of us. It will cost us something. We will have to lay our entire existence, including our very life on the table if we are to believe in him. Is the gamble worth it?

Jesus himself told two stories of such a gamble as that we face. The first was about a man who had discovered a pearl that he estimated to be the most valuable in the world. He had to have it. He went out, sold everything he had, then took the proceeds of his sale and put it all into this pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46).

The second story was very similar. A man, who apparently had just been walking through a field, discovered there a great treasure. How could he have this treasure for himself? He hid it, then went out and sold everything he had to raise the money to purchase that field (Matthew 14:44).

Was the gamble that these two men took worth it? It was to them because they had found what they had been looking for. Every man, woman, boy, and girl on the face of this earth is looking. Think about your own restlessness. Especially here in the United States of America, we are never satisfied. Most of us wish away a good portion of our lives. We wish we could do this or that. We all have dreams of what we'd rather be doing

instead of what we are doing. But somehow, we just don't think the gamble is worth it. We are afraid of the risk involved. What we are really afraid of is failure.

But there, at the foot of the cross, is a garment provided by the one who has been crucified. It is the brightest white our eyes could ever imagine. It almost glistens in the sun. Many people are admiring this garment. Oh, how I wish it could be mine! How could it ever be? I will never be able to get to it before someone else. But wait! It seems there is a price tag attached. It will cost everything I've got. I will have to dedicate all my possessions and myself in order to get it. Is it worth it?

But look at it! Even lying there in the dirt, it is not smudged. It remains perfectly white and bright regardless of stain. Each time the blood from the man on the cross drips on it instead of an ugly crimson stain it seems to make it even whiter. It is being called the "robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10). Is it worth the price to own such an exquisite garment? You bet it is! For it not only shines with the righteousness that only Christ can give, but with it comes the gift of eternal life. It is the most valuable garment in the world.

Now we have a decision to make. Many want to own this garment but the price just seems too high. How can I give up all my possessions and dedicate them to this dying man on the cross? Is it fair of him to require that I give up my current life-style and take on his life-style? It is a gamble.

Yet, when we have truly realized the value of this wonderful garment, the gamble seems as nothing. When he has revealed all that comes with it, then it seems a very unfair bargain to the seller. We take one look at our own possessions. We look down at the rags in which we are dressed and see the stain and the filth of the world all over them. The things we once prized now appear as broken, frayed and worthless. Yes, it will be easy to make the trade for this marvelous garment.

EVEN GREATER RISK

But wait! There is one more thing that we must do. Oh, how much easier it would be to just pack up all our stuff and make the trade. But one more requirement must be met. In our current bodily state, the garment will not fit. We'll never get it on. We must do one more thing before we will ever be able to wear the garment. We must climb up on the cross with Jesus. Now the gamble is even more risky.

Jesus had said that if any man would come to him, let him deny his own rights, take up his cross daily and follow him (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). Later on, the Apostle Paul said that he had to die every day (1 Corinthians 15:31). I realize that many here are going to accuse me of promoting works as a way to salvation. I emphasize with all my heart that there are no righteous works that we can do to be worthy of this wonderful robe of righteousness. It only comes from Christ. He is the only righteousness we can have that will be favorable to God. Yet we must make a choice. We must take the gamble. We come to Him. We dedicate ourselves to Him, and we deem it so important to ourselves that we are willing to deny ourselves any rights and privileges we

may have, take up the cross of crucifixion and begin marching up the hill. We must die to ourselves each and every day just as Jesus and Paul said.

We must beat down our own sinful lusts and desires, and realize that we have been crucified with Him. Then, and only then, will we be able to pick up that beautiful robe of righteousness that lies at the foot of the cross and put it on.

THE COST CONTIUES

It will continually cost us. There will be those who will call us fools and feeble minded for our decision. We will be mocked, criticized and ostracized for our gamble. In some areas of the world, we may pay with our physical lives. But with that robe comes joy even in the midst of sorrows. With the garment comes peace in the midst of storms. With the clothes of Jesus comes great wealth unimaginable to the human finite mind.

Is the gamble worth it? Each of us must make that determination for ourselves. No one can make the decision for us. But let me tell you this, it is worth it. To own the garment of salvation will make us rich in things that this world system can't even hope to understand. YES! It is worth it!

CHAPTER 42

The Challenge of Responsibility

John 19:25-27

*“... And from that hour that disciple took her
to his own home.”*

(John 19:27)

“Who’s responsible for this?” screamed the boss. A plan had been implemented to consolidate parts that were being made on several machines to only one machine. The plan had been put into motion weeks before and all preparation had been made except for one thing. The extra parts needed to run ahead had not been delivered yet.

“We’re all ready to go,” replied the supervisor in charge, “but we can’t do a thing until we get those extra parts.” The boss stormed into the office and went straight to the individual who did the ordering. “Why aren’t those extra parts here yet?” he screamed again.

The individual looked blankly at the boss and asked, “What parts are you talking about?”

“You know very well what parts I’m talking about! We are consolidating production from several machines to one machine and we have to have extra inventory to put the plan into action. You were supposed to have placed the order six weeks ago! Now, where are they?”

“Sir, no one informed me of this plan. I haven’t placed the order. I’m sorry, I’ll order them now, but it will take four or five weeks to get them here.”

“That won’t work! We’ve got to begin this project Monday!” It was now Friday. “Now you’ve cost me several thousand dollars by not having them here!” The boss stormed out. The individual who did the ordering went ahead and got the parts coming in, still confused about what had just happened. A day or two later he discovered that the boss was supposed to have informed him of the order six weeks before and had forgotten to do so. But somehow, the blame rested on the purchasing guy.

Sound familiar? Perhaps you have found yourself in a very similar situation either on the receiving end or the giving end. It seems that the name of the game today is “Who’s Responsible?” Somehow, especially in the world of the big manufacturers as well as in politics, fixing the problem is overshadowed by who’s responsible. Somebody’s got to take the fall, right? Though we have progressed with leaps and bounds in technology, we have digressed in the area of how to treat people.

Jesus, dying on the cross, knew what responsibility was all about. He looked down in His last moments and saw His own mother, standing with two other women, and knew He had to do something. He could have passed it off by blaming this whole situation on the Roman soldiers who had nailed Him to this cross. He could have accused the Jewish leaders of framing Him. Or, He could have just reasoned that He was in too much pain and agony at this point to do anything about it. But instead, He took care of some important business hanging there in His dying moments.

His Earthly father had been a good man. Joseph had married Jesus’ mother, even though it had been widely spread that she was already pregnant. By Jewish law Joseph could have had her stoned for “fooling around.” But the Bible says that instead he had decided to break off the marriage quietly so as not to drag her through all the “red tape” associated with such a thing. He loved her very much or he would not have done this.

That night an angel had appeared to him in a dream and had assured him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, but that this child was a miracle from God. The Creator Who had spoken the world into existence had spoken a Child into the womb of Mary and she, still being a virgin, was going to give birth to the One promised - the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

Joseph went ahead with his marriage plans despite probable ridicule and shaken heads from the other men in of Nazareth - In a small town, things get around fast.

He had raised Jesus just like He was his own natural son. He had provided a meager, but good home for his family. He trained Jesus, and most likely his other sons, in the trade of carpentry.

But somewhere in the picture, by the time that Jesus was thirty years old, and had begun His short, three-year ministry, Joseph had died. He is not spoken of again in the narrative of the Gospels other than just the mention that Jesus was Joseph’s son.

WHO’S GOING TO TAKE CARE OF MOM?

Now hanging from the cross Jesus was concerned about who was going to take care of His mother after He was gone. Sure, He had brothers. But He was the eldest. It was His responsibility. We would certainly have understood the situation if He would have just left it to His other brothers. I mean, He was dying on a cross, being executed for accusations that were false. Certainly no one would have thought any less of Him had He not addressed the issue.

But that didn't remedy the situation. Why He picked John (the disciple called "the one He loved") is not known. No reason was given by Him. I believe, however, that He knew John's heart. He knew that John could be trusted. His brothers were still "sowing wild oats."

So, we hear Jesus speaking to His mother, "Woman, look, this man is now your son." Then He spoke to John, "and this woman is now your mother." The Bible tells us that John took Mary home with him and from that day until the day she died, he took care of her for Jesus.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF . . .

As I read this portion of scripture it occurred to me, "how different our world would be if people would readily accept their responsibility instead of blaming someone else." But we live in a time where making one's self look good has become the all-important issue. No one likes accepting blame or taking responsibility. But think of how simple things would be if we all would be willing to do that very thing?

Today, especially here in the United States, we have been taught that in order to get ahead in life, we must look good at all costs. We can't do anything wrong because when we do it makes us look bad and it might place a dark spot on our career. And so, our first reaction in a situation in which we have done the wrong thing, whether accidentally or intentionally, is to look for another reason or another person to put the blame on.

We don't like having the attention on ourselves, do we? I tried a very unconventional experiment in church one Sunday. During the course of my message, I asked everyone in the congregation to remove their shoes and socks and look at their feet. The main point was to realize that all of our body parts have a function and that even if they're ugly they have important jobs.

But there was an underlying reason too. I knew what would happen as a side effect. I had asked that each person examine their own feet and not someone else's. But just the opposite happened. I heard a few snickers rumble through the group of people as some made fun of another person's feet.

You know why they really did this? It took the attention off their feet. If they could get others to notice the feet of the person next to them, then they wouldn't notice the feet of the accuser. It is a natural reaction for some people. When they have the attention focused on other people, then no one is focusing on them and they don't look so bad.

WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY TEACHES

The Bible actually teaches the exact opposite of what we have been taught today. The Bible tells us to admit our sins. Confess them, not just to God but also to each other.

Why in the world would God tell us to do that? Why not just confess it to God and then forget it?

I believe it's because God wants others to know that Christians are human. By and large in today's church hierarchy, those Christians who have been saved for many years are to be the examples to the younger, newborn Christians. But we have failed to see what the Bible means. We think that if we show these younger Christians how good we are that it will inspire them to refrain from sin. What happens in the real world though is that first of all they see our so called "perfect" example and then look at how imperfect they are and in all too many cases they just simply give up. How can they ever live up to our standards?

Or even worse, they put us on a pedestal using us as role models for their own lives all the while thinking how perfect we are until they see us fall. Our fall in their eyes can shatter a newborn Christian to the point that they just "lose it all." The devil immediately begins to whisper to them, "I told you it was all fake! They can't live for God and neither can you. You just might as well hang it up now!"

If we live our Christian experience the way Jesus meant for us to live it, see how much different it could be? Instead of putting us older Christians on a pedestal for our perfection, they can use us as a role model for true repentance. They hear us confess our sins and imperfections to God and know that they must follow our example. They see that we are not perfect and they know that they don't have to live up to that standard but instead live one day at a time for God allowing His Holy Spirit to guide us in our Christian walk. They see that each day is a new day with new challenges and know that we only have to conquer the day.

We must not follow the example of the world, always looking for an excuse as to why we did this or that. We must be confessing our sins and imperfections to God and man so others can see Christ at work in our lives.

In the last chapter we said that to wear the robe of righteousness required us to climb the cross with Jesus and that is true. While we are up there let's do as He did and confront our responsibilities, even in the face of death, destruction and hardship. We may not look like perfect role models to others, but at least they will see Christ in us!

CHAPTER 43

The Challenge of the Thirsty

John 19:28-30

“I thirst.”

(John 19:28)

The futuristic movie, “Water World,” ironically depicts fresh drinking water becoming more valuable than silver and gold. Supposedly, in the movie, the polar ice caps had melted and the entire world became covered by great oceans. The catch is that it’s all salty seawater – unfit to drink. Accordingly, the quest for drinking water became a life-or-death search.

Unless we have been in a position to go without water for several days it is hard to imagine how much the body depends on it. If we would add up the water contents of all that we take in per day, we would probably be shocked. Some of us (including myself) don’t drink enough pure water. But we do get water in soft drinks and other beverages we seem to endlessly consume.

Earlier in the book of John Jesus had made a couple of statements about being thirsty. In John 4:13 He had said, “Whoever drinks of the water that I give shall never thirst again.” Then in John 7:37 He said, “If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.”

Now, in His dying moments, He said, “I thirst.” The Bible tells us that they soaked a sponge in vinegar and put it on a hyssop (a long-stemmed plant) then thrust it up to His mouth so that He could drink. Some believe that the vinegar was supposed to act like a painkiller. Whether that is true or not the action still became another fulfillment of scripture (see Psalms 69:21).

Why did Jesus have this craving and thirsting just before He died? Doesn’t it seem like a contradiction when He said that those who are thirsty may come to Him and never thirst again, when He Himself became unbearably thirsty? I believe that He was setting an example for us to follow. Stay with me on this and I think you will understand what I’m getting at.

Of course, we know that when we exert ourselves our bodies release water in the form of sweat and we begin to dehydrate. This process forces us to replace that excreted

water and so we thirst. The process is actually good for us when it comes from our daily work and activities because with the sweat, we expel impurities from our body and then replace them with purer water. The same thing happens when we urinate.

We can only begin to imagine the exertion from pain-wracked bodies and the sweat that was expelled by those hanging on crosses. The crucified were constantly pushing their entire body weight up on the nail holding their feet to the cross. The reason for this was that the physical position they were in forced them to do so or they would suffocate. It was not only extremely painful but the work was excruciating. The body would dehydrate very quickly. It was kind of like doing pushups with your hands on broken glass, until the physical exhaustion killed you.

With most victims of crucifixion, after a drink of the vinegar, they would be somewhat refreshed which would actually work against them because they would have a little renewed strength. This would cause them to go through the agonizing workout for an extended time. The more they drank the longer they lived in excruciating pain. But when the body thirsts and can get access to something to drink it is a natural desire to fulfill that craving.

JESUS WAS DIFFERENT

The experience with Jesus was different. The Bible tells us in the text that after He drank the vinegar, He said, "It is finished," and He died. With His death Jesus was fulfilling the scripture and the plan of our salvation.

In Matthew 5:6 Jesus said, "*Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled.*" He used our natural desire for food and water to illustrate how we must be filled with righteousness. Most people want to be righteous for it is the measure with which we show forth the standards that validate how good we are.

Even criminals, thieves, and murderers justify their crimes. We want to be right in what we do. We reason within ourselves why something is wrong or right. If we excuse ourselves long enough, we can justify any crime as being the right thing to do. That reasoning becomes righteousness to us.

Religion is a set of rules and regulations that define righteousness regardless what "god" one may believe in. That is why Christianity, though classified by the world as a religion, is not a true religion. We can make it that. But in its purist form it is not a religion but a true relationship with God the Creator.

Jesus was saying that if we really want true righteousness in our lives that He had the way and the plan. It was an exact opposite process than that of any other standard in the world. Instead of being the head one had to be the servant. Instead of justifying, one had to confess. Instead of hating an enemy one had to love their enemy. Instead of living, one had to die. Jesus was telling us that if we really desired righteousness to the extreme that it was like dying of hunger or thirst, He would grant it.

THERE MUST BE CHANGE

We have already shared how that if we really wanted the clothing of Christ, we must climb the cross with Him. Our old self must die with Christ. In ourselves we will never be good enough, or righteous enough to be worthy of God. In our flesh, we can never please God (Romans 8:8). Without the sacrifice of Christ not just applied to us, but experienced by us spiritually, we will be just like the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai who begged Moses to ask God not to speak to them audibly again – They couldn't take it! Nor can this frail, human body ever hope to take on the glory and righteousness of God without a change.

While we are there on the cross, we will experience a great, overwhelming thirst for God. He will begin to show us how insignificant and unworthy we are of Him. He will let us see the sin and feel its shame. We will be exposed, spiritually naked, void and destitute and we will thirst for the only thing that will make it all go away. It will cause us to cry out, "I thirst." That thirst will come just before we die out to our old man. It comes from seeing a glimpse of just Who God really is and comparing Him to ourselves. We can never be good enough. We see just a milli-second of His glory and we can never rest without more. It becomes our soul desire. We see in that instant what we are lacking and we must have more.

WE MUST DIE

We will thirst for Him. But we cannot have Him unless we go all the way and die. It is the only way that our spirits can be restored to that which we have been lacking all along. We must present ourselves as living sacrifices, completely acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). Jesus died physically so that we don't have to. But the old sin nature in us must be done away with. That is the death that we must experience.

I've been talking a lot about dying on the cross with Jesus. I realize that because of His one sacrifice we can never even hope to be sacrificed for our sin. His sacrifice took care of the price tag. But to take on His nature we must become a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old nature in us isn't good enough. We take on His new, sinless nature. This is a free gift in Christ, but it does require us to be willing to give up the old nature.

Does that mean we'll never sin again? No. As human beings we have a long road ahead of us in becoming like Christ. We will err. There will be times when we get mad and do or say something that we shouldn't. Does that mean that we have to start all over again? No, because Christ is our advocate. He is interceding on our behalf constantly. Besides, it isn't our sacrifice anyway but His that counts.

What I'm saying is that we must do more than just mouth a few words to be saved. There has to be a change in our hearts. We must realize the great weight and ugliness of our sin nature. We must thirst for His righteousness. As we do this, coming to Him in full repentance, then He will cause a transformation in our lives. We will be changed. Oh,

we will still look the same on the outside. But the inside has been made new and it will show.

Am I saying that an individual must become emotional to get saved? Not necessarily. But I do want to say this about that subject: Today we are taught that if we just say the right words that Christ will forgive us of our sin and we'll be changed. While it is true that we must repent and confess Jesus as Lord, the real change comes when we see our destitute condition measured against what is required. While I will never say that one must have an emotional experience before they will be saved, I will also say that as human beings when we really put our hearts into a situation, or really understand the pain involved, we can't help but have our emotions affected. Most women cry over movies (I must confess that I've seen a few that brought me to tears as well). Why is that? Because they identified with what was happening and it affected their emotions.

Why do people cry when a great kindness is shown them? Why do some cry when loved ones are die? It's because we are emotional creatures and we can't help it. What I'm saying is that when we realize what Christ has done for us, then we must be put out of the way to ever have a position in His body. When we really believe on what has happened it will affect our emotions. Some may cry, some may laugh, some may not have much of an outward reaction, but I guarantee that the emotions will be affected in some way. We can't help it.

The devil has fooled the Church into believing that emotion is wrong. It's okay to get emotional at a football game, or over a movie, or anything else, but not over God. Let me say, "That's pure boloney!" When we come to Christ, we better believe our emotions are going to be affected. We better hope they are!

We realize He is what is missing in our lives and we die out to ourselves and begin taking on the nature of Christ. As Jesus died, He said one more thing. He said, "It is finished." He didn't just mean that His life was over but that the price being paid for the plan of salvation had been met.

We too can cry out, "It is finished," when we come to Him. We have thirsted for Him. We have died out to our old self and begun to take on the nature of our Master. The old man is finished. The new has begun. It is the end of one man and the beginning of a new.

Some may disagree with me on this. Some may rip their clothes and cry out, "blasphemy!" But I tell you we must be broken on the stone in order to bring new life into us. We must die to our old self in order for the new to begin. Our seed must be buried in the earth in death in order for new life to spring forth.

I thirst, I die, and it is finished. So will we rise again in Him.

CHAPTER 44

The Challenge of Broken Legs and Pierced Side

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John 19:31-37

*“But when they came to Jesus and saw that
He was already dead, they did not break
His legs.”*

(John 19:33)

I know of a man who was changing the oil in his car one evening. They were preparing to leave the next morning on a mini-vacation-getaway-weekend. The hood of the vehicle was raised and he had lain down on the garage floor to crawl under the car and begin to drain the dirty oil from the engine. With his hand he steadied himself by gripping the top of the fender which caused his fingers to lap over inside the hood well, and so he began to do his chore.

Now the family cat was curious about what the man was doing and so it decided to jump up on the raised hood so as to get a better look. When it did this it was oblivious to the fact that the lifters which held the hood up were weak and the weight of the curious feline was just enough to send the hood on its descent to rest where it normally was accustomed to being. The hood came down locking itself into place (which is what it was supposed to do) but in so doing also caught the man's fingers between the top of the fender and the hood. It was latched down all the way.

Fortunately for the man, his daughter had been out watching him and was just on her way inside when he cried out for help. She promptly got her mother who came out and pulled the hood release which successfully freed the man's mashed fingers.

As he babied his now swayed-back fingers he just knew that they were broken. But even though they looked like something out of a cartoon, they eventually took their proper shape again and miraculously the doctor confirmed that they were just mashed and not broken.

Jesus never experienced a broken bone according to the scripture. I explained before that those being crucified had to push up on the nail in their feet in order to hold themselves up so they wouldn't suffocate. The day was now drawing to a close and by the Jewish method of determining time, the next day actually began at 6:00 PM rather than 12:00 Midnight. Therefore, the Jewish leaders didn't want these men hanging on the cross on the Sabbath, this one being a high Sabbath. Deuteronomy 21:23 had made

it clear that it was a cursed thing for anyone to be left hanging on a tree. In order to not defile their holy day, they had to get those men down. So, they went to Pilate and asked permission to have their legs broken which would speed up the death process.

Pilate agreed. The Bible doesn't say this, but I think he granted this request simply for the sake of Jesus. He had found no fault in him and wanted to free him. Now that he had been crucified, it seemed the most humane thing he could do was to allow Jesus to die quickly. Whether that's true or not, the Jewish leaders got what they wanted and so the soldiers went to their gruesome task of breaking the men's legs.

But when they came to Jesus, he was already dead. He had "given up the ghost" or released his spirit from his body much earlier. Seeing that he was already dead they did not break his legs. Those soldiers had no idea that at that precise moment they were fulfilling scripture.

The Bible had said in reference to the sacrificial lamb for the Passover that no bone of its body should be broken. We know that Jesus was even then becoming the "Lamb of God," as John the Baptist had spoken, "who takes away the sin of the world." He was fulfilling the type of the Passover lamb. (Exodus 12:46). This action also fulfilled Psalm 34:20.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made, aren't they? It is amazing that, regardless how massive a man's muscles may be, without the bone structure in the body, he would just fall into a massive pile of skin and muscle tissue. Our bones give our body the ability to stand erect. Yes, the muscles have a lot to do with that, but unless they pull against our bones, they would be useless.

The point I want to make with this whole scenario is that the Bible says we, as believers, are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Now that Christ is physically in Heaven with God the Father, we are his body on this Earth. With our individual gifts that he has placed within us, we are all unique members of his body and I want to say that, even though we may be persecuted not a bone of his body will be broken. As we perform our given functions just like in a physical body, we work together and the body glorifies the Savior in Heaven. As long as we fulfill our God-given purpose, we can be happy and blessed in this life.

Of course, when we think about being happy and blessed, we automatically think about "the good life." You know, things always going smoothly and successfully. We know in the real world that this is not the way it is. Things don't always go right. We make mistakes, do things wrong, and get falsely accused at times. But even those times work to make us stronger in our place in the body of Christ. Knowing this, even in the midst of conflict, confusion and disarray, we can be happy and know that we are positioned in the body just where he wants us.

The real problems arise when we become dissatisfied with our appointed position. I know because I have been there. As a minister we get our eyes onto other's ministries sometimes and become jealous or even envious. That can cause a lot of conflict within us regardless of what our ministry position is. We must learn to be content with the work he has appointed for us to do. When we learn this, we can work with one accord with the rest of the body and so accomplish our purpose in life.

We can also be persecuted. Here in the United States, any persecution that may come our way is usually by verbal or censored methods. There is a great push today that is totally inspired by the devil to pressure believers into accepting lifestyles and immoralities that are clearly spoken against in God's word. Our television sets spew forth these immoral values constantly. The devil wants to condition us into accepting these things and these sins as normal and good instead of calling them just what they are. Sex is flaunted outside of the marriage commitment as designated in the Bible and we are expected to accept it as normal. The internet, which is a great tool for the Gospel, is ravished with sexual immorality.

When we take a stand against it then we are called "old fashioned" or "not with it." We have been accused politically in the past as being "weak minded." It is the devil's way of attempting to pressure us into accepting his flood of filth right into the Church itself.

What can, and does, happen is that we eventually lose our close relationship with God and fall into religion (rites and ceremonies instead of true heart-felt worship of our God). It can cause the Church to be at a lull in its mission for the Master.

THE LULL

Down through history there have been times when the Church was caught up in this lull. During the Dark Ages of history, the Church was almost choaked out in its pursuit for ceremonies and law instead of true worship of God. But the Lord has always had a remnant. They were highly persecuted because of their stand against organized religion but thank God for their stand! It led to the great revivals of the 19th Century and on through to today.

But the Church is now being faced with another lull. We, as individual members of this great Body of Christ, must guard against that. We must keep our relationship with God fresh by studying His word and remaining in true heart-felt worship. We must spend time in prayer and fellowship with God. Let it be known that a bone of his body will not be broken. Christ will have his Church. He will have his body on Earth.

THE PIERCED SIDE

The second point is found in what the soldiers did to Him after they discovered that he was already dead. They did not break his legs but they did fulfill yet another prophecy. When they saw that Jesus was already dead, just to make sure (I guess) they took a spear and rammed it into his side. Zachariah 12:10 says that "they shall look upon me

whom they have pierced.” When they did this, the Bible says that both blood and water issued forth from his body.

His blood was spilled for our salvation. His blood covers our sin and we are forgiven. The water represents life. The blood and water show his complete work in the salvation process. He forgives us of our sin and we are given new life in Him. The Bible says that we are made new creations in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15). It’s the only way for us to be a part of his body! We must be forgiven and made new. He does that for us. He became our sin and it was nailed to the cross in our stead. Now he gives us new life and a place in his body!

During our years as Christians there may be many times that we are pierced, maybe not with a spear, but with words of persecution, disapproval because of our faith, or hatred just for being believers in Christ. We should expect no less. They hated Jesus and the world will hate us. Why is that? It’s because the devil now influences the world. He wants to stamp out all Christians because of their testimony for Jesus.

As they pierce us, we should also issue forth blood and water. I don’t mean that we can sacrifice ourselves for the salvation of others. No, Jesus did that. We could never even hope to be worthy to do that for anyone else. Yet it is his blood and water issuing from us. Our testimony even in the midst of persecution can become the very factor that witnesses of Christ and draws others into his great body.

All too often, however, what we issue is hatred and contempt for the embarrassment and audacity of someone who would “have the nerve to persecute me!” We should stand up for our rights but each time that piercing should come with the witness of salvation and newness of life.

Early in the Book of Acts (see chapter 5), Peter and some of the Apostles had been taken prisoner by the Jewish leaders for their witness of Jesus. These Jewish leaders thought that they had put an end to their problem by having Jesus crucified. But now, His disciples were on the streets and people were being saved by the thousands. They arrested them, put them in prison, had them beaten and then strictly forbid them to speak about Jesus ever again.

Of course, this didn’t work. They went right out and began to preach some more. But the one thing that stands out to me is the fact that they “departed from the presence of the counsel rejoicing that they had been worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). They didn’t go away griping, grumbling, and complaining about what they were going to do now. Instead, they were happy and fulfilled because they were considered to be a threat just like Jesus. They were issuing blood and water.

This is our example fellow believers. We must follow their footsteps. When we are persecuted and verbally attacked because of our faith, know that it should make us happy to be worthy to suffer for his name’s sake. Let’s issue forth blood and water so as to increase the kingdom and make the body grow!

CHAPTER 45

The Challenge of Secret Disciples

John 19:38-42

“... Secretly, for fear of the Jews ...”

(John 19:38)

Some years back I was forced to take a second shift job. The place I had been working closed the plant and so I had to find other employment, and quickly. While looking for something more in my field of training, I took a production job in a town about 30 miles away. It wasn't what I really wanted to do and it wasn't my "cup of tea" but it helped to keep the bills paid until I could find something more suitable.

While this action solved my immediate problem, I wasn't a very good witness for Christ during my short tenure there, and I have always regretted it. Here's part of the reason why: Where I had worked before, I had been offered a position at one of their other plants, either in Dayton, OH, or Johnson City, TN. If I agreed to relocate, I basically had my choice. But we were pastors and after sharing with my wife, and praying over the matter, we felt that God wanted us to stay where we were. So, I turned down the job offers and started hunting.

Then, another interesting twist took place. One Friday night it began to rain, and it continued to rain right into late Saturday morning. This was not a light drizzle, mind you, but torrents of rain. In all, about 9 inches fell. As I looked out the windows of our house on Saturday morning, I began to get nervous as the water continued to rise, first out of the ditches and over the street, then up into the yards of our neighbors, and finally into our own yard. I was about to sound the panic button to evacuate when the rain stopped.

But we hadn't thought about the church building. A couple of hours later our brother-in-law (who was also a council member of the church) was knocking on the door, telling us that our building was flooded. Sure enough, the basement had completely filled up taking out the furnace and electric, and had risen 6 – 8 inches inside the building. All carpet was gone except for on the platforms and the old hardwood floors underneath had buckled beyond recognition.

To cap it off, we found that our insurance didn't cover us for flood. So here I was, without a job because we felt we were to stay with the church, and now, no building for the church to meet in. To say the least, I had a lot of questions for God.

To return to my original point, because of these circumstances, I wasn't in a very good state of mind when I went to work on this second shift job. I let it affect my faith. I didn't commit any of the "big sins," but I didn't put forth a good witness for the Lord either. I became a secret disciple.

SECRET DISCIPLES

In the case of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, being secret disciples was somewhat understandable. These men were influential people serving on the Jewish Sanhedrin (their high counsel, sort of like our Congress). They were also members of the party of the Pharisees which controlled what government the Romans allowed them to have and the religious system of Israel. If it were found out that they believed in Jesus they would have been immediately excommunicated from their positions as well as their party, and they would not be allowed to enter the Synagogue again.

But the disciples of Jesus had taken that stand, hadn't they? Yes. However, God works in ways that we don't understand and perhaps He had these men remain in their positions as secret believers so that they could influence what happened to the Christians to come. Of course, it didn't do much good in Jesus' case, but then, it was appointed for Him to die for our sin. If He hadn't, we would certainly be in a mess today.

In other countries of the world where Christians are severely persecuted, I can understand why they would be secret disciples. In this way they could spread the Gospel under the nose of the government of their country. It has been done in China, and other communist influenced and controlled countries for many years. I know that when it comes to getting into a lot of countries in the world today, you are welcomed if your occupation is pretty much anything except the ministry.

Yet we cannot remain in the faith forever without being found out. We will eventually have to take a stand. There will come a time when we must publicly choose Christ over the world. It is very dangerous exposure for some in these countries. It can mean imprisonment, harsh punishment, or even death.

A DIFFERENT MATTER

In the United States, being a secret disciple is a different matter. We have the freedom to believe whatever we choose. It may cost us ridicule and popularity, but we can stand proudly and say "I'm a Christian." Let's face the truth about this situation. Given the freedoms we have, to remain a secret disciple only proves that we are somehow ashamed of Christ. Not a good idea! Jesus said, "Whoever is ashamed of Me, I will be ashamed of him when I come in my glory" (See Luke 9:26).

Why would anyone be ashamed of Christ anyway? There can really be only a few reasons: (1) They don't want to face ridicule and rejection, (2) They can't face losing friends, (3) They haven't experienced and realized just what being a Christian is really all about, (4) We have had something happen in our lives that causes us to doubt Christ.

We should realize in reason number one, that ridicule comes to people, Christian or not, when that individual embraces ideas that the majority can't understand or conceive. Today we laud men such as Albert Einstein and the Wright brothers because of their great ingenuity. Thomas Edison and Henry Ford stand out as men who stretched their imaginations to find ways of doing things when others were content with the way things were. Yet these men faced great ridicule because of their ideas. Because of their refusal to allow themselves to be affected by what others thought, we have a great many conveniences and devices that make life easier that we might not otherwise have had.

Facing ridicule and rejection for being a Christian is really no different other than the fact that we have God on our side. Just because the majority thinks something is right doesn't always make it right. It's kind of like a physical fight. When two people come to blows over ideas, just because the stronger one beats the weaker one up doesn't prove that he is right. The facts remain regardless of the outcome of the skirmish. It's the same with ridicule.

WHAT ABOUT FRIENDS?

Reason number two is very similar. We may lose friends when we come to Christ. In many countries of the world today if one comes home announcing that they have become a Christian they are put out of the family. It would certainly be hard to take to have your mother or father tell you that you were no longer their son or daughter simply because you believed in the truth.

Another thing to consider is the reality of that person's friendship. Were they really your friend before you came to Christ? A person who is a real friend is willing to accept you for who you are. If turning to Christ jeopardizes that relationship then it seems to me that he or she wasn't your true friend to begin with.

IS THE EXPERIENCE REAL?

Reason number three is a whole different matter. There are many people today who claim to be a Christian simply because they were born into a Christian family, or they joined a church, or perhaps they were baptized as a child, or even baptized as an adult. The problem is they have never really had a life changing experience with the Master. Just because a cracker has fallen into the cookie jar doesn't make it a cookie.

When we really catch a vision of who Jesus is and what He came to do, it causes conviction in our hearts. This drives us to repentance for our sin against God. This, in turn, will cause us to fall head over heels in love with Christ. This is not a romantic love, nor a "friendship" love, or even a brotherly love, but a love that goes beyond all these

forms. It is a love that is indescribable. It has to be experienced to be conveyed. But when it is discovered, it will give us a natural desire to share it with everyone we know because we want them to experience this great love as well.

Many others “get saved” out of fear. They don’t want to go to the hell that Mom, Dad, Grandma, or Grandpa has told them about. Perhaps a loved one has passed on and we were told that if we ever wanted to see them again, we must be saved. But it is all done from fear.

This is a little off the subject but we need to understand what the fear of God really is. The Bible tells us to fear God (1 Peter 2:17). In the Old Testament people had a reason to be scared of God. Even today, those who don’t know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior have a good reason to be terrified of God.

But when we come to Christ, our terror and dread turns to respect. All of these are forms of fear. I’m not suggesting that we not be afraid of God but on the contrary, that we have a healthy form of fear that should be natural for every believer. Someone could tell me, “Go ahead and buy a new car.” I might respond, “I can’t do that without talking to my wife. I’m afraid she will be angry with me” (and if I did something like that you can be sure that she would be angry with me!). Now, I’m not afraid that she will beat me up, or kill me. I’m not scared of her. I’m not terrified of her. But because I love her and respect her feelings and opinions, I wouldn’t buy that new car without her approval. That is called “respect.” That is how we should fear God as a believer in Christ.

Our salvation experience must be based on love, not fear. When we fall in love with Jesus Christ then He will begin to form Himself in us (Galatians 4:19). Our love for God will grow stronger each and every day. As we grow in that healthy love-respect relationship with God and Christ we will want to tell others about it. It will not be a secret, let me assure you.

As we grow in Him, we will begin our day with a simple prayer to God, something like this, “Good morning, Lord. I want this to be Your day. Direct me to who I am to speak with and help me to display an attitude today that let’s others know that I love You.” Wow! Can you even imagine how powerful our witness for Him would be if all believers would sincerely pray a prayer like that every day and mean it?

I believe that as our relationship with the Lord progresses that we don’t even have to say anything but that people will just sense a difference in our lives because of the presence of Christ in us and with us. “Oh, Lord, let us display You in our lives! Let us desire to be in Your presence to the point that You can be sensed like a fragrant perfume!”

BUT I’M ALL BUMMED OUT!

What about reason number four? What if we do get “bummed out” like I was in the example I gave at the beginning of this chapter? Being “bummed out” as a Christian really means that we have let something affect our faith. I did - I shouldn’t have, but I did.

We are all human. It would be great if all Christians could live above the flesh all the time. We should, but we don't. During those times we may not be a very good witness for the Lord. We may even become secret disciples for a time. But thanks be to God, He will lift us up if we'll only seek Him. As a matter of fact, He will use that "bummed out" time for our good. He will also let us learn from it.

With only a few exceptions, if we really desire to be close to Him and do His will, I don't think His disciples can be secretive. When Christ is present you can't hide Him for very long!

By the way, to finish the story I started out with, the Lord did provide the funds for us to fix our building. It took a lot of do-it-yourself work, and a whole year to complete it, but when it was done it was better than before. Isn't that just like God?

CHAPTER 46

The Challenge of Believing in the Resurrection

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John 20:1-31

“... He must rise again from the dead ...”

(John 20:9)

“There’s no way I’ll ever be a minister of that denomination!” I exclaimed.

At that time, I belonged to a church in a different denomination. A buddy and I had decided on attending the Bible College of that denomination located in Mount Vernon, OH. We were in our dorm room and had been talking about our future. Someone had predicted that I would one day be a pastor of that denomination. At the time I wanted to be faithful to the denomination to which I belonged and so I promptly protested feeling very justified in my claim.

The years passed, I got a job and began my role as the assistant pastor of an independent church. Things seemed very clear to me and I just knew that I was where God wanted me. More time passed and I was married with a child. During those years I served either as assistant pastor or an assisting minister of three more churches.

A time came when I needed a job very badly and I entered the US Army mainly to have a job but also, because I thought going in as a Chaplain’s Assistant could lead to the ministry God wanted me in. I had finally found my place – NOT!

Then it happened. Towards the end of my “tour of duty” I had decided that Army life was not my cup of tea. I didn’t like it and though it is a mission field in itself, I did not fit the mold. So, I was getting out and looking forward to it. I really had no idea what I was going to do when I got out, except that I was finally going to get to live a normal life with my wife a child once again.

It was a few months before my discharge date and I was home for a weekend of leave. While home, my sister-in-law spoke with me about a question asked her by Ruby Chandler. Ruby had attended church with her and my wife several years before. Ruby shared with my sister-in-law about a prayer she had prayed all those years. She had been asking God for a church of the denomination of the college I had attended in the Southeastern Indiana area. Clara, my sister-in-law, had been a licensed minister herself for several years. Well, Ruby had asked Clara to pray about starting the church.

The problem was, other than the fact that she knew this was a denomination, she knew nothing else about the movement. My wife knew that I had attended the Bible College and, to make a longer story a little shorter, when asked I agreed to be the pastor of the answer to Ruby's prayers.

It didn't take God long to remind me of my claim eleven years before, "There's no way I'll ever pastor in that denomination!" God has a way of making a meal out of words, doesn't He? But He does remember to put some sugar on them. He certainly made a believer out of me.

That morning after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and some of the other women decided to visit the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had laid the body of Jesus. They had taken along the customary anointing perfumes and oils just in case the men had been too hasty in their act of kindness. But when they arrived, they found the tomb empty. Angels had appeared announcing the resurrection of Jesus.

This had never happened before – ever. Yes, during His ministry Jesus had raised the dead at least three times. However, in the three recorded cases of Jesus raising the dead, the daughter of Jairus, the dead boy in the funeral procession and His own dear friend, Lazarus, would die again. But He had risen never to die again!

This required belief like never before in history. It was one thing to believe that He was the Messiah. But most did not realize just what was required of Messiah. Most still believed that the Messiah would set up an immediate literal kingdom, freeing them from the bondage of their oppressors. Now, things had changed.

When they returned to tell the disciples, the Bible tells us that John (the disciple referred to as the one Jesus loved) and Peter ran to the tomb. John, being the younger, outran Peter. He arrived at the tomb and stooped down to look in. While he was trying to adjust his eyes to the dim light, Peter caught up with him but didn't stop at the mouth of the tomb. He stooped as he ran and went straight in. John followed him and they witnessed not only the fact that Jesus' body was gone but that the wrappings that had bound His body were neatly folded to one side. The other Gospels tell us that angels also appeared to them telling them of the fact of His resurrection. And they believed.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR US TO BELIEVE?

To some of us an empty tomb is proof enough. The absence of the deceased leads us to believe and know that He has risen indeed. It was enough for Peter and John. It settled the issue for them. There are those who only need the proof that the body is missing to believe in the resurrection.

For Mary Magdalene it was different. Apparently, she had lingered behind when the other women had returned to tell the disciples. She was in terrible grief because she could not sort it all out in her mind. She had been a prostitute. I can imagine how she

had probably felt that she was no better than trash and had no hope of ever being any different. Like most women she had dreamed of having a husband and family. How she must have longed for children. She knew she could be a good mother. But the path her life had taken gave her little hope of ever fulfilling that dream.

Then she had met Jesus. He had forgiven her of her sin and had given back her hope. After meeting Him her life had changed forever. Today many have purported that Mary had been in a twisted love affair with Jesus. But the Bible tells us differently. Mary had learned to love Jesus with a deeper love than any physical or romantic relationship could hold a candle to. He had changed her life.

But now He was dead – crucified on that terrible, cruel cross. She had witnessed it all and she was still numb from the pain when this had happened. Somehow, she couldn't grasp what the angels had told them. She still grieved and the thought had entered her mind that someone had stolen away His body. What further cruelty could be added to this whole sordid affair? Once again, the two angels appeared just to her telling her of His resurrection.

In the middle of her grief a man came from out of nowhere. She had not noticed him before. He asked her, “woman, why are you grieving? Why are you so sad?” Still not satisfied with the words of the angels, she thought this man might be the gardener and so she asked him, “have you taken away the body of Jesus? If so, where have you laid Him?”

Then, He called her name. “Mary.” She had heard Him many times. There was always an authority commanded in His voice. This gardener sounded wonderfully familiar. She looked at Him and instantly knew that this was her very Lord, Who had risen from the dead! She called Him “Master.” And the issue was settled for her.

There are some who need more than the proof of an empty tomb. There are those who need to hear His voice. Most likely this voice will not be audible. But His voice in our heart becomes enough. We can believe in the resurrection because He has spoken to us.

Later that same day as the evening approached, the disciples were still in this upper room. They were trying to make sense of what had happened during the last couple of days. The world they had imagined for themselves had been shattered. I'm not sure that they knew at this point what they were even waiting for. But still they waited.

The door was closed in fear of what the Jewish leaders might do next. Would they also be targets? Would the next few days find them hanging on crosses? As they anticipated what they were to do next suddenly the room was filled with the most wonderful presence and He was there. Jesus stood in their midst. It was as if He had never left, yet it was something they had never experienced. They had heard the words of the women that morning. When Peter and John returned with the news that the tomb was empty and saying that He had risen, still there were some doubts from the others.

Now, there He stood. They believed because He came to them. There are those in the world that still need Him to come to them. He doesn't appear physically because He is seated beside the Father in Heaven. Yet He does come to us in the spirit. We can feel His presence. It is a phenomenal experience to be in the presence of the Master. It too causes belief in His resurrection.

DOUBTERS

However, Thomas had not been present that evening. We don't know where he was but he wasn't there. By the time Thomas returned Jesus had already disappeared. The others excitedly shared with Thomas their experience of Jesus coming to them.

But Thomas simply could not believe. His doubt earned him the nickname of "Doubting Thomas." He said, "Unless I see the prints of the nails in His hands and put my fingers in them, and put my hand in the hole in His side, I will not believe." Thomas needed positive proof that could not be disputed.

Eight days later Thomas got his proof. They were all inside once again and, just as before, Jesus simply appeared in the room. "Peace to you," He said. Even though He had not been physically present when Thomas had spoken of the proof required to cause his belief, Jesus challenged him, "put your fingers in the holes in my hands, and put your hand in my side. Don't be in disbelief, but believe!" The Bible doesn't record that Thomas actually put his fingers in the holes in His hand, or thrust his hand into His side, but the Bible does tell us Thomas immediately cried out, "My Lord and my God!"

There are those who require being touched. They need more proof. And so, Jesus will touch us spiritually. It may not be a physical touch, but it is as real as if He had laid His hand on our shoulders. It will cause us to believe in His resurrection.

Jesus spoke to Thomas once again but His words speak to all of us for time and eternity. He said, "Thomas, because you have seen Me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." Since the day that Jesus ascended to Heaven in the clouds, He has not been physically on this Earth. He is, as we said before, seated at the right hand of God the Father.

HE PROVIDES THE PROOF WE NEED

Yet He provides all of this proof for us in the spirit. It is so real it is as if we have seen the empty tomb, heard His voice speak to our very souls, had Him come to us, and touch us. His presence through the ministry of the Holy Spirit will cause belief in His resurrection. He inspires hope to lost humanity. He gives those who have no chance a second chance. He gives life to those who are doomed and locked in death.

We are blessed because of it. We are made happy because now we really do have a chance. We really do get a second lease on life. The things we have done and

experienced cannot be taken away. They may leave scars on our spirits, but still we are changed forever. We are made a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Many doubt today. We can quote the Bible as fact but unless we really believe the Bible as fact, we are right back to where we started. We can look at nature and see the proof of the Divine stamped upon it. But still, we doubt in our hearts. It can only come by faith. That faith is instilled when we begin to believe. Then we realize the emptiness of the tomb. We hear His voice in our spirit. We suddenly see Him come to us in the Holy Spirit, and we feel the touch of the Master in our inner man.

We haven't seen with our eyes. We haven't touched Him with any of the five physical senses. Yet we believe. There is a knowing in our heart – the very life of man. And we believe. We are blessed in that. How wonderful and glorious this experience of true belief in the resurrection can be to us. This is how we believe in the resurrection. He is alive!

CHAPTER 47

The Challenge of Catching Fish and Feeding Sheep

John 21:1-25

“... I am going fishing ... feed My sheep ...”

(John 21:3, 17)

I used to think that I was a pretty good fisherman. As a kid, I remember a time when we were visiting with my uncle and cousins during a family vacation. They took us fishing. It was a hot summer day and for some reason the fish weren't biting very well. I was only about 8 or 10 at the time but I remember walking away from the group to a deserted spot. I dropped in my line and immediately began to get bites. Then I caught one. It wasn't very big but it was the first thing anyone had caught so far that day. Let me tell you, it didn't take but a very few minutes before my fishing spot was so crowded that I didn't have room to cast my own line in. They took it away from me. But I had caught the first fish.

As I said, I used to think I was a pretty good fisherman, that is until the day two of my brothers-in-law and I decided to go fishing. We hadn't been married but a few years and our son, Jeremy, wasn't very old at the time. We had gone camping and, as usual, the whole clan decided to pop in that day to enjoy the great outdoors with us. The day was hot and muggy, and two of my brothers-in-law and I decided we'd rent a row boat for a little while and try our luck at fishing. That was sometime mid-morning.

The last time I'd rowed a boat it took me a while just to figure out how to keep the thing from going in circles. I wasn't very good at it. One of my other brothers-in-law said that he wasn't very good at it either. I was telling the truth. I always wondered about the other guy, but then, maybe he was wondering about me as well. That stuck my other brother-in-law, Ronnie, doing all the rowing. You know, he never complained one bit about that either.

Anyway, we headed for what looked like a good spot to try, and spent a half hour to forty-five minutes finding out that the fish just weren't biting there. So, we decided to try another spot. Now this was a rather large lake and speed-boating was allowed in certain areas. The problem was that we had to cross the speed boat area to get to a better fishing place. That was, to say the least, a traumatic experience. Well, to make a long story short, we tried two more spots besides where we had started, before we

decided that the fish in that lake just didn't like our bait or something. We got a few nibbles but didn't catch a thing. And now it was late afternoon.

We returned the boat and by the time we got back to camp, my wife was steaming mad at me for some reason. I couldn't figure out why at the time but after some reflection I finally realized what I had done. I had left her to entertain all that company and fix dinner for everybody. We came strolling up just about the time to serve. Now I completely understand her feelings about that but I didn't then. I surmised that we had fished all day and all we caught was "heck!"

This was one of those days for the disciples. It had been several days since Jesus had appeared to them. I suppose Peter got bored with just sitting around wondering what was next when the idea exploded in his head and he announced, "I'm going fishing." The other six disciples that were with him at the time thought this was a great idea and so off they went. It felt good to be back in the boat again, doing what they had been trained to do. It had been growing late and so they fished during the night, all night as a matter of fact and once again, they didn't catch a thing. All they had succeeded in doing was casting nets and drawing them back in empty, time after time. The sun was just beginning to rise as the muscle-worn men decided to pack things in.

Someone was standing on the shore but they didn't know who it was, so they continued their work. Then he spoke, "Children, do you have anything to eat?" Then he said, "Throw your nets out on the right side of the boat and you'll find some fish." Remember, this had happened before when Jesus was calling them as disciples. It had to jog some memory cells. They did as the "guy" told them and now the nets were so heavy with fish they could hardly drag them in – 153 fish to be exact!

IT'S THE MASTER

John exclaimed, "It's the Master!" Peter knew it too. He never questioned John nor did any of the other disciples. They didn't have much clothing on, if any, and so Peter grabbed something and quickly jumped into the water swimming to shore, leaving the other disciples to get the "haul" in.

When they all got to shore, Jesus already had a fire going and fish roasting over its flames (where did He get those anyway?). He had bread too. "Bring some of the fish you just caught," then said, "Come and dine." What an invitation! No one said a word. No one asked, "Are You really the Lord?" They knew who He was. And so, they ate their meal together, glad to be with Him again. It was almost like old times.

AFTER DINNER CONVERSATION

After the meal Jesus had a few questions for Peter. Three times He asked Peter if he loved Him. Each time Peter responded with, "Lord, You know that I love You." The third time Peter was saddened that the Lord had asked him the same question three times. It was as if the Lord didn't believe him. But Jesus had given Peter a response

each time. The first time Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” The other two times Jesus had responded with, “Feed my sheep.” We could go into a great discourse about this situation and the Greek words used when Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. We could elaborate on the meaning of “Feed my lambs,” and “Feed my sheep.” But we won’t here. There is a greater point I’d like to make in this final incident in John’s Gospel.

THE GREAT CATCH

Jesus had provided them with a great catch. This was of course more than they could eat by themselves, and you can’t keep fish very long, especially in the conditions of the day in which they were living. He had provided them enough to sell and make some money to live on. Then, Jesus had provided food for them.

The point I would like to make with this is that God provides what we need. It doesn’t matter if we have toiled in the dirt to grow our food, or worked 8 to 12 hours in the day to earn our living. Ultimately God has provided it for us. All too many times we fail to give God the credit for our provision. But we can’t make a single seed grow. We didn’t make the soil, we didn’t provide the sunlight, nor can we make it rain on the crops. We just put the seed in the ground, cultivate it, and let nature take its course. What more can we do? We toil with our hands or our heads and get paid for it, but God provided our health and gave us the ability to think.

All down through the Bible we read of lives that were abundantly blessed by God. But if you study these individuals, you’ll find out that the wealth was only a byproduct of their living for God. As they dedicated themselves to Him, obeyed His instructions for their lives, and lived in patience day by day, God blessed them with food and abundant supply.

Thank God that He provides for us. It is His will. He loves to take care of His people. But, man, have we gotten the cart before the horse in this country! In today’s church we are constantly seeking God for the blessing. We ask, and ask, and ask for things that we don’t really need. He keeps on providing for us but then we go beyond His provision and borrow against what He is going to provide for us in the future so we can have “things” now. I know how this works all too well.

But we are not satisfied. We continue to ask God for “stuff.” God wants to provide for us and it is no hard task for Him. He’s got unlimited wealth at His disposal. But I believe that it grieves God that we have missed the point so badly.

You see, after Jesus had provided for the physical needs of the disciples, He had a mission for them to do. They were tired from working with those nets all night. They were hungry because they had fished all night without any provision. They needed a break. Jesus gave that to them. He let them take in the great catch of fish which provided immediate relief from the weariness and failure. He had given them enough to make some cash to provide later. And then, when they got to shore, He already had a meal waiting for them, and so provided for their hunger.

He does the same for us today. We worry about tomorrow but He's got all the "tomorrows" covered for us if we just follow His instruction. But then we miss the instruction. We sit back and relax in the provision He has given and just wait for the next provision and somehow block out His will.

I believe God provides for us so that we can follow His instruction. What He had told to Peter to do was to feed His lambs and sheep. He was telling Peter to take the Gospel message to the young and old of this world. He was giving them provision and strength to carry out the mission.

GETTING FAT

We grow fat in provision here in this country and, even though it has been a great missions-minded country, we have begun to grow selfish. We don't send missionaries like we used to. We don't support missions like we used to. We spend all our wealth, except perhaps our 10% tithe, on ourselves when He has given us all of this to use for His kingdom.

He wants us to be refreshed so that we can go out and tell others the Good News of Christ. But we spend most of our time earning money so that we can pay for what we've got and then get some more.

"God, help us to be fishers of men! Stir us to feed the lambs and sheep that need to come into Your fold!" As we do, He will provide what we need. He will increase our wages. He will continue to give us the rest we need so that we can toil for Him the next day!

Am I saying that we should walk off our jobs and start preaching on the street corner? Only if God has spoken that in your heart and you are certain it is His voice. But what we do need to see is that everywhere we are becomes our mission field. Peter didn't start by packing his bags to head off to a far country. He began right there in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit had fallen on them, he preached right there and God blessed that effort abundantly.

We preach everyday right where we are. Our witness speaks volumes about our true faith. How many Christians spend their time at work complaining, moaning and groaning, when they should be showing in the example of their lives, how that God really is love. We should let people see that we are happy and not just putting in our time so we can go home, plop down in a chair and let our minds go numb in front of the TV. We need to let them see Christ in us and then the paths will be paved for us to tell them of Christ. Let's use our resources for the Kingdom, what do you say?

THE WALK WITH JESUS

Apparently, Jesus was walking with Peter while He talked to him about these things. Jesus told Peter the day was coming when he wouldn't be able to go where he wanted to go, but he would be led by someone else and they would make him go where he didn't want to go. He said this indicating that Peter would be taken captive, jailed, and eventually killed for his obedience to Christ. Peter understood what Jesus was talking about and felt very uncomfortable about it. He looked around and saw John following behind them. He said, "Lord, what about this guy?"

I've always been amused at what Jesus told Peter. Basically, He said, "Peter, that's none of your business. If I decide to let him live until I return, what is that to you?" Of course, a rumor began that John would live until Jesus came back, which was not what Jesus had said. Jesus said, "If that's what I willed what business is that of yours?"

The point I want to make about this is that we must do the ministry God has called us to do and let every Christian fulfill their ministry in the way God tells them to. It is none of my business how another church fulfills the great commission. It's all I can do to take care of myself and what God has told me to do. In other words, let's not spend our time judging and criticizing other ministries. Instead let's put all our energies into what God has instructed us to do.

God knows what He is doing and He always has. He has a purpose for each ministry in the world and we need to quit wasting our time criticizing and competing. Instead, let's do our part and let others do their part in the way God has individually spoken to us. As long as we measure ourselves by the word of God, and our hearts are not working in greed but in true, heartfelt ministry to others, then we need to just follow God, pray for fellow workers and see the Kingdom of God grow! Let's fulfill the Great Commission in the way God has spoken to us and add daily to the great worldwide Church that belongs to God!

Conclusion

So, there we have it. The challenge lies before us. What will we do with the challenges issued in this book? I know that there have been times that I have been very blunt and straight to the point, but as we can see in the Gospels, so was our Lord Jesus. It is necessary in our modern world because we have taken for granted so many things, especially here in our country.

If we are to be passionate for the Master then we must face these challenges, the faults that lay within us and one by one meet them head on. It is the only way to find that place with God that He desires us to be.

We can choose to go on as we are, never making changes, always holding to what we have believed and been taught – Many do. It does not alter our decision for Christ, but facing the challenges could change our lives in positive ways that will take us on one spiritual adventure after another. The willingness to change can open new worlds to the center of our lives that will keep us going higher and higher until the day that we finally see Him face to face.

The choice is ours to make and ours alone. Our Lord has put the truth before us and has given us opportunity to change our Christian lives. What will we do with it? What daily challenges will we meet in our souls?