



THE BLESSING

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 894

Ephesians 1:1-3

First Message

Brian Morgan

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Have you noticed that there is a deep ache in our world today? I call it the "Cain Syndrome." It seems people everywhere are under the curse of Cain. They have been cut off from something very precious, and they are wandering to and fro on the earth, like Cain, lonely, aimless fugitives finding no place to rest. Gary Smalley and John Trent in their book *The Blessing* feel they have discovered what these wanderers are so desperately seeking: it is love, acceptance, and approval from their earthly fathers. When we probe this generation's past, we discover that very few children received their father's blessing. Many have grown up under the curse of rejection or abuse.

I grew up in a loving home, but I am keenly aware of how much I missed that blessing when I fell out of my father's favor after I became a Christian. Seeking the blessing became a driving force in my life. At times I saw myself like the patriarch Jacob of old who would do anything, beg, steal or cheat, for the blessing. Seeing how prevalent this phenomenon is in our culture, David Roper asked, "Who will set us free from the tyranny of our father's love?" Our text this morning, from the opening verses of the book of Ephesians, answers this poignant question. If, like so many, you are wandering like Cain in search of the blessing, I pray you will receive it in full measure this morning.

The apostle Paul begins his letter with a greeting to the Christians at Ephesus:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Imprisoned in Rome in 60 A.D., Paul writes to the church which he founded in Ephesus. He begins with a typical greeting, identifying himself as the author, with his full apostolic authority. Then he addresses the recipients, whom he describes as "the saints in Ephesus." They are saints not because they are an elite group, but because they belong to Christ Jesus by faith. This is what makes them holy and set apart. Paul also describes these Christians as faithful.

Verse 3 begins the body of the letter with a Hebrew blessing:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ.

Verses 3 through 14 actually form one long sentence in Greek. Paul searches for words to describe the richness of the Christian's blessings in Christ. This sentence is really a crescendo of OT theology which reaches a climax in Christ. In a way, this is like the Hallelujah Chorus, which is the climax of Handel's *Messiah*. Like the Hallelujah Chorus, which we usually hear sung on its own and not as the climax to the oratorio, so too we hear these words from Ephesians in a limited context. This causes us to miss the full weight these words had upon the original hearers as the grand climax of Old Testament theology.

As I studied to preach on these verses, I decided to look up

every usage of the words "bless" or "blessing" in the Bible, and I found they are used a total of 379 times in the Scriptures. So this morning I would like to trace "The Blessing" from its beginning to its application in the church. We will seek to answer the following four questions:

1. What was the original meaning of the word "blessing"?
2. From whom is the blessing to be found?
3. How did Christ transform the blessing?
4. How is the blessing applied to us in the Church?

I. What was the original meaning of blessing?

Genesis 1:28

What exactly is Paul talking about when he says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ"? Let's begin by looking at the first time this word "blessed" is used concerning mankind in the Bible. Genesis 1:28 says: "God *blessed* them and said, 'Be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth and *subdue* it. *Rule* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" God's blessing originates from God's command, imparting fertility to mankind, granting them the ability to have many children; and their many children are to fill the whole earth, subduing it and ruling over it. The term subdue means

to "bring into bondage, keep under, ...by force if necessary." It "assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place" (John N. Oswalt, *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, 1:430).

The blessing, therefore, is designed to make man king so that he rules like God rules.

So the blessing is two-fold: a) man is gifted with fertility leading to abundant life, and b) that life is to have dominion over the whole earth. We can see these same two ideas when God repeats the promise of blessing to Abraham. God promised, "I will greatly *bless* you, and I will greatly *multiply your seed* as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore [abundant life]; and your seed shall possess the gate of their *enemies* [his seed would have dominion and conquer evil]" (Gen. 22:17). So the original meaning of the blessing in the OT was God's gift of fertility that gave abundant life to conquer evil.

II. Where is the blessing to be found?

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with..." The blessing cannot be given by human fathers, it can only be bestowed by the heavenly Father.

Three things about God's character and this blessing are noteworthy.

(a) In a Father who longs to be gracious - Genesis 1:28

The blessing comes from a Father who is generous and longs

to give abundantly. From the creation account we learn that God blessed man before he had ever done anything to earn blessing. Man therefore cannot demand or earn God's blessing. This is hard for some who tend to think of the heavenly Father like they think their own earthly father. Some, like Jacob, may take a lifetime to learn that God is truly gracious. This was Jacob's experience in the OT. He tried to steal the blessing by deceiving his brother Esau; then he sought to acquire it by manipulating Laban. Even when he came face to face with God, wrestling with the angel of the Lord in the dust, he tried to gain the blessing in a violent confrontation. "Let go," demanded the angel of the LORD. "I won't let you go until you bless me!" responded Jacob. But ironically, Jacob could not have the blessing until he let go because the blessing is only acquired as a gift. So the angel touched the sinew of Jacob's thigh, dislocating his hip, and at that he was forced to let go. At last he received the blessing. At the end of his life we find him resting on his staff, worshiping God, and in that state of rest he imparts the blessing of grace to his sons.

So the heavenly Father longs to bless you without any manipulation, begging, cajoling or vain achievements on your part. And you don't have to wait until he is in a good mood before you approach him.

There is a second thing about God's character.

(b) In a Father who is uncompromising - Deuteronomy 28

The blessing is granted by grace, but it is maintained by obedience. God blessed Abraham, saying, "I will bless you and make you a great nation..." It took 600 years for God to complete that promise by grace, but then he told the nation Israel through Moses that the blessing, though granted as a gift of grace, could only be maintained by obedience. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy: "All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you *if you obey* the Lord your God" (Deut. 28:2). "You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock...your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed... The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none" (Deut. 28:3-12). But if Israel failed to obey, then the curse, not the blessing, would be theirs. Their prosperity would be dismantled and their land would dry up. Instead of victory over their enemies, their foes would enter their gates and take them off the good land which they had received as a gift. Instead of being many in number they would be few.

God is not only gracious in his demeanor, he is also uncompromising in his holiness — and he leaves reminders to us to attest to that fact. In the British Museum in London a month ago, I saw an entire room dedicated to the siege of Lachish by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Lachish was the most fortified defense post in Judah, but Solomon did not trust the Lord to deliver him fully in battle so he made the city into a chariot horse center contrary to the Lord's warning in the Law: "*He [the king] shall not multiply horses for himself...*" (Deut. 17:16). Rather than trusting the God who had given them the blessing, the Jews put their trust in an idol. Today, 2,500 years later, you can view God's wrath carved in stone by Sennacherib, detailing the fall of Lachish. Though the blessing was given by grace, it can be lost, and the proof of that can be seen in the British Museum. The holy God will not compromise his holiness.

So the blessing is received as a free gift of grace, but it is to

be maintained by obedience.

But if that were the sum and total of God's character, the blessing would be lost forever. There is something deeper in the Father's character, however, that makes this blessing possible.

(c) In a Father whose loyal-love is unending - 2 Samuel 7

God is gracious and uncompromising, but he also is tenacious in his love. He is determined to bless us no matter how many times we fail. On every occasion when man loses the blessing because of disobedience, we find God faithfully judging man, but afterwards he recommits himself anew to bless him.

We find the climax to God's determination to bless man in the oath God makes to King David in 2 Samuel 7. There God promised David that he would have a son who "shall build a house for me and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me...but My *loyal-love shall not depart* from him...and your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me *forever*; your throne shall be established *forever*." (2 Sam. 7:13-16.) Now the blessing is secured forever through God's commitment to the line of David.

Oh how God the Father is determined to bless us! His tenacious love will not end with uncompromising judgment, but with a renewed commitment to ensure we will be blessed in the end. What a great principle this is for parents in the raising of children. Parenting begins with a demeanor of grace toward the child, granting him privileges and blessings. But this must also be coupled with uncompromising discipline. If it ends there, however, our children are doomed. Each time the child fails the parent must not only discipline, but renew their love commitment to the child. Our love must be tenacious despite their failures. Ray and Elaine Stedman modeled this kind of tenacious love in many wonderful ways. The greatest example of this, perhaps, was that after 40 years of ministry, Ray could have built his own empire, but instead he quietly walked off the worldwide stage. He and Elaine wanted to spend their last years with their children and grandchildren in a small town in Oregon, just to make sure the children received the blessing.

III. How was the blessing transformed?

Not only was this blessing promised and secured by an oath of God, it was taken to a transcendent new level in Christ. We see hints of this in the Psalms.

(a) Hints of a transformation - Psalms 16, 17

Here is what David wrote in Psalm 16:

The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup;
Thou dost support my lot.
The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Indeed my heritage is beautiful to me.
I will bless the LORD who has counseled me;
Indeed my mind instructs me in the night.
I have set the LORD continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely. (Psa 16:5-9)

In the words, "I will be a father to him, he will be a son to me," we find a new spiritual dimension to the blessing. David would have a deep intimacy with God, the same as a son does with his father. He would be counseled and instructed by him, and flooded with spiritual life. David says that this inheritance is so beautiful and pleasant it rejoices the heart, bringing a security that surpasses any earthly pleasures.

In Psalm 17, David unveils the gateway through which this blessing is given.

Deliver my soul from the wicked with Thy sword,
From men with Thy hand, O LORD,
From men of the world, whose portion is *in this life*;
And whose belly Thou dost fill with *Thy treasure*;
They are satisfied with *children*,
And leave their *abundance* to their babes.
As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness;
I will be satisfied with Thy likeness when I awake.

(Psa 17:13-15)

David says that he entered into this new spiritual dimension of blessing as he lost the old earthly blessings which are described in the Old Covenant. In this psalm he describes the wicked as receiving those blessings — treasure, children, an abundance which they leave to their children, etc. But, having lost those things, David inherited God himself — and that was infinitely better.

And he understood that he would receive his final inheritance beyond the grave, in the resurrection. This is what he foresaw in Psalm 17:15, and, as he wrote in Psalm 16, referring to one of his future sons, the Holy One of Israel:

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Neither will Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.
Thou wilt make know to me the path of life;
In Thy presence is fulness of joy;
In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psa 16:10-11)

Now I understand Elaine Stedman's comment to me after we lost a second child, our baby daughter, in 1976. She said, "God must really love you." It has taken me 16 years to comprehend the full meaning of those words. I thought I had lost the blessing, but she knew I had gained it. My children were living beyond the grave, and losing them made me more intimate with Christ.

(b) The life of Christ: A blessing or a curse?

Without this understanding of the transformation of the blessing you will never appreciate the teaching or the life of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, ...those who mourn, ...the meek, ...those who hunger and thirst, ...blessed are the persecuted..." Some blessing! you say. Hearing this "blessing" of Jesus, a rabbi might well retort, "If that's the blessing, smite me with the curse!" But Jesus went on to talk about the curse, too: "Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who laugh..." Jesus was turning the notion of blessing upside-down!

Under the old definition we have to ask was the life of Jesus blessed? Did he have any physical seed? The answer, of course, is, no. He died barren. Yet Isaiah said of him, "He will see His seed" (Isaiah 53:10). Did Jesus enjoy a fertile inheritance in the land? No. He had no place to lay his head, says the NT. Hear the poignant words of the gospel writer, "Everyone went to his home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives (he had no home)" (John 7:53-8:1). Did Jesus possess the gate of his enemies in Jerusalem? When Jesus entered their gates, his enemies did whatever they pleased with him. There are paving stones engraved with a crown of thorns dating from the first century, still visible today in Jerusalem as a testimony to his torture.

But, following the Davidic tradition, he lost earthly blessings to gain the heavenly blessing — the blessing of an intimate relationship with the Father, and being flooded abundant spiritual life He conquered the ultimate enemies of life — the world, the flesh, the devil and death itself. Thus after the resurrection, the

apostles describe Christ as having received and secured the blessing once and for all.

(c) The blessing fulfilled and transformed - Acts 13:32-34

"And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that *God has fulfilled this promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus... And as for the fact that *He raised Him up* from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure *blessings of David*...'"

Jesus received the "sure blessings of David" in the resurrection. God is gracious in demeanor, uncompromising in his holiness, and his love is so tenacious he is determined to bless in a new and transcendent way those whom he loves.

Now we come to our text, Ephesians 1:3, where the apostle Paul applies this Messianic blessing to all who believe in Christ.

IV. How is the blessing applied? (Ephesians 1:3)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, in Christ.

As we read this wonderful Hebrew blessing we can begin to feel the wonder and awe Paul felt as he understood the amazing work of Christ toward us who believe. There is no blessing like this anywhere in the Old Testament!

He says three things about it.

(a) The blessing is applied in full measure

If you believe in Jesus, you get the full blessing. And that full measure is possible because Jesus took the full measure of our curse, becoming a curse for us. So the entire package, the full blessing promised to the seed of David that was given to Jesus at the resurrection — abundant spiritual life to conquer enemies and reign over evil — is given to everyone who believes in Jesus. God's tenacious love guarantees that you get the whole blessing. There is no second blessing. It may, however, take a lifetime of wonderful experiences to learn to appreciate, comprehend and appropriate the love of Christ which has already been given. At times your spirit may become so enlivened you may feel as though you were dead before in comparison, but the text is clear: the full measure of the blessing has already been given by the Father; it is an already accomplished fact.

(b) With total acceptance: Father, Son and Spirit

Notice that there are three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, involved in this blessing. We are blessed with the full acceptance of every family member. Imagine if you had been born with AIDS and you were given up for adoption by your parents. After you were adopted you learned that your new father had to give up his pension to pay your medical bills; your new mother had to leave her job to care for you; and your new teenage brothers and sisters gave up their sports and extracurricular activities to care for you around the clock. What a heavy price everyone had to pay because they had adopted you, yet they felt privileged to do it. How blessed you would feel. This is the Christian's blessing: God places us in a family where every family member gave his all to redeem us and accepts us fully.

Finally, the blessing is given, not in its old dimension, but in its new spiritual dimension in the heavenlies.

(c) In its new dimension: spiritual in the heavenlies

"God...who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, in Christ."

There was a time when I read this blessing and I would say to myself, "What a gyp!" It was because I wanted earthly blessings. My reaction would not have made any sense to these early Christians in Ephesus. They lived under the shadow of the glorious temple of the cult of Artemis, the seventh wonder of the world. They had no political power and no legal sanction. They were for the most part poor in comparison to the venture capitalists of their day. They were tiny in numbers, their founder was crucified, their present leader was in prison. Yet, says Paul, they were "blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ." First century believers may not have had many earthly blessings, but they were so spiritually fruitful they had dominion over the whole earth. How else can we explain the fact that following the preaching of one sermon, three thousand spiritual sons were born into the kingdom at Pentecost? How could a sexually abused woman, an outcast of Samaria, become so flooded with spiritual life following her encounter with Jesus that she gave spiritual birth to her whole town in three days? Rachel never did anything like that in the OT. It was because this Samaritan woman had received the spiritual blessing. How do you explain the countless Christian martyrs slaughtered in the 300-year blood-bath? It was because they had gladly received their blessing.

No one taught me more about the full measure of our spiritual blessings in Christ than Ray Stedman. And it was not just through his teaching that I came to know this, it was because he loved me like a son. Twenty years ago, when my wife and I were first married, I spent many evenings playing chess with him. When I got home, my wife would ask me, "What did you talk about for all those hours?" "Nothing," I would reply. I just took great joy in being in the presence of a father who loved me and accepted me. This was what I was seeking.

Yet if we were to evaluate Ray's life, would we say he was blessed? He did not receive his father's blessing. His father abandoned him when he was a youth and Ray never saw him again. World War II interrupted his studies so he never graduated from college. He went to seminary, but they wouldn't give him a degree because he hadn't graduated from college. He did not have many material possessions. When he died, he left his wife a tiny plot of land in Oregon. He had no earthly sons, yet this orphan of old possessed the blessing. Through suffering he found a gateway to intimacy with God. He had more spiritual sons than could be counted, and he traveled the whole of this earth subduing the world, the flesh and the devil through mighty spiritual weapons.

In his last days, our beloved patriarch Ray sought seclusion to be alone with his wife, his children and grandchildren, to gather them, like Jacob, and pass on the real blessing. At the end, as he lay in a coma, his daughter Linda was reading to him Psalms 40 and 23. Linda asked her mother what was the section of Scripture that her father loved so much, a passage that Handel had used in the Messiah. They found it in 1 Corinthians 15 and they began to read, "But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." As Linda read the word "victory," Ray awoke and opened his eyes. He looked at his family gathered around his bedside, and breathed his last. He had inherited the

blessing.

"When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him and kissed him." (Genesis 49:33-50:1)

O Ray, you were the good scribe
Who took out of your treasure
Things old and made them new,
And Glorious as Emmaus!

You were the loving disciple
Whose warmth could disarm
The most awkward legalist, and rebuild
From that ancient rubble a heart of flesh.

You were our bright illumined star,
The Luther of our generation,
With earthy genius removing the papal scepter,
And fearing none, returned it to the saints.

No rank of man was able to stand
Before your penetrating eye,
Nor was there a garrison strong enough
To protect one's heart from your piercing gaze.

You were the orphan of old
Who sang in the cave of Adullum,
And in that cave gathered
The outcasts of a new age.

You transformed us
By the simplicity
Of the Sacred page
Into a multitude of Royal sons.

Now we say, "Everything from Him,
Nothing from me!"
Yes, any old pot will do,
But it first must be broken.

And in the end, when you could have had it all,
When all others were playing the role of King,
You arose and said, "It shall not be so among you."
And taking your towel, sat down as a brother.

Now the dream of life is over,
Morning of eternity doth succeed,
Away the shadows of time
To eternal substance - Yeshuah.

And while we remain our tears
Shall bear constant witness,
That it was you who faithfully taught us
The New Covenant.
We love you, Papa.

*In appreciation of Ray C. Stedman
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THE CHOICE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 1:4-6
Second Message
Brian Morgan
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In the opening verses of Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul documents the richness of the blessings that Christians possess in Christ Jesus. Summarizing these in a Hebrew blessing, Paul says, in verse 3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ...” In verses 4-14, the apostle goes on to give the specifics of these blessings. Here we learn that the blessings intimately join Christians in four relationships: the work of the Father (who chose us), the Son (who redeemed us), the apostles (who teach us), and the Holy Spirit (who seals us). And these blessings encompass all of history (even before the Big Bang!) They began in eternity past, they encompass all of world history, and they stretch into eternity future.

Today we will take the first of these blessings, which we find in Paul’s words, “the Father who chose us.” The grand doctrine of election, when it is properly taught and understood, has brought forth great awakenings in the church and elicited a quality of holiness rarely achieved in ordinary times. This was evident in the ministries of John Calvin during the Reformation in Geneva; in the work of Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening in New England; in the ministry of the English Puritans; in George Whitefield’s ministry both in England and the United States; in the preaching of Charles Spurgeon during the last century in England; in the ministry of Martyn Lloyd-Jones in our day; and, of course, in the work of our own Ray Stedman. In Edinburgh last month, I visited the home of John Knox, the 16th century Reformer. When the great man lay dying in 1572, his wife was reading to him the book that was most precious to him — John Calvin’s 48 sermons on Ephesians. These were the texts that brought assurance and peace to his soul.

Since the age of the Enlightenment at the turn of 19th century, however, the doctrine of election has fallen into disrepute. The fact that God reserves the right to make choices is anathema to modern man. Will Durant, in his book on the Reformation from his and his wife Ariel’s famous work on world history, called the doctrine of predestination “the most hellish of all doctrines.” That opinion is commonly held today. When a Christian friend of mine appeared on the Donohue TV talk show to discuss Christianity and politics, the host vented his rage over the fact that Christians believe that God made a selection of Christ as the one way to salvation, thus by implication, he charged, damning millions of innocent people to hell.

Don’t you find it intriguing that today, the very freedom that modern man denies God he vehemently claims for himself when it comes to his own personal choices? Take ethics, for example. Man vociferously upholds his right of sovereign choice in the matter of ethics. He will allow none to interfere — and most of the world will defend the freedom that he claims. The world comes on with irresistible force and, like the Philistine armies who intimidated the armies of Israel long ago in the valley of Elah, tries to intimidate all who dare to raise their voices against it.

So here we are, almost on the eve of a Presidential election, studying the doctrine of election. In my study last week I was surprised to learn that God is pro-choice! But then I was even more surprised to discover that man does not have a clue as to what “pro-choice” means.

Let’s start by reading our text, verses 4-6 of Ephesians 1. To give us the context, I will begin by reading at verse 3:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I. The limitations of God’s choice (1:4a)

Here we have the beginning of God’s choice. First, I will define what the word “choose” means, and take you through the history of God’s choice that leads to this text.

Verse 4 says that “He [God the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world...”

(a) Choice implies individual selection

The Greek word for “choose” means “to select out for oneself.” In other words, God made a choice to select some people to have a relationship with him. This immediately raises an objection. People say, “How can God select some but not others? Isn’t he condemning innocent people to hell?” If this is your objection, all you are doing is revealing your ignorance of the whole of Scripture. When God chooses to select someone to enjoy a relationship with, he does not do so to punish others but rather to bless them. Why? It is because the selection of one is designed to lead to the blessing of many. And secondly, God’s choices function in order to bring life and salvation to man — after man has already chosen hell for himself by his own free choices. We can say with certainty therefore that God’s choices always lead to life, never to death.

The crowning point of man’s dignity is that, like God, he is given the right to choose. The tragedy is that, even under the best of conditions, man chooses death rather than life, and his choices lead to establishing a hell on earth. But God offers life through grace. He comes down to clean up the mess that man has made for himself.

Let’s look at some biblical examples of this. In the Tower of Babel, man made his assertion against God, and God responded by dispersing mankind throughout the earth to live in idolatry and sin. Yet by grace God selected Abram out of that number. He told the patriarch, “I will make you a great nation and in you

all nations will be blessed.” God made a selection, and the nation of Israel was born. But Israel soon became as corrupt as every other nation. God responded to her idolatry by making another choice, instituting the office of prophet to overcome the corruption in Israel. God selected one tribe, Ephraim; and from that tribe one family line, Elihu; then one couple, Elkanah and Hannah (a barren woman), who at last became pregnant and gave birth to a child, Samuel, the first prophet of Israel. God made a selection to bring life back to the nation. Then when he wanted to establish a monarchy in Israel, God selected one tribe, the line of Judah; one family, Jesse; one son, David, the youngest and most insignificant of all the sons of his family. But even the monarchy went on to choose idolatry and hell, so the nation went into captivity in Babylon. But then God made another choice of a tiny remnant whom he restored to the land, and from that remnant sprang the Messiah, God’s choice to bring restoration and life to many.

When we come to the New Testament, we find Judaism corrupted by the different sects — the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Scribes, etc. But God did not begin his work of redemption by making a political appeal to the religious lobbyists or to the zealous masses to revolt. On a very special day, the Day of Atonement, God made a selection of a family from the tribe of Levi, and from that one family chose one man, Zacharias, to meet with the one God on this, the one day of the year when the priest could enter the Holy of Holies. To this one priest would be born John the Baptist, the last prophet. And John was the one who anointed the last King of Israel, the Messiah, who would bring life to all the nations.

Then when the Messiah at last was born, he did not set about establishing his kingdom by traveling around from tribe to tribe, making speeches and taking opinion polls, courting the movers and shakers to gain popular support. Instead, he chose for himself twelve men who would be his apostles. And all of these were selected individually. (Paul, the last of the apostles, was added to this group at the end.) These men were not selected to bring life to themselves, but rather to pour out their lives in order to bring life to the nations.

There is something intensely personal about the way God establishes his kingdom through personal selection, isn’t there? His kingdom is built on intimacy of relationship, not on impersonal doctrines or organizations. God is not ashamed to say that he selected you with the same kind of intimacy that he had in mind when he chose Rebekah in the OT. He chose you for himself to have an intimate relationship with you in order to bring life to many.

A choice, by definition, is self-limitating. By his choice, God limits himself in order to be intimate with his choice. We have an excellent illustration of this here in our own church. When God wanted to unite our church with the church in Romania, he did not create a huge mission organization with scores of officials, delegates and massive budgets. God selected one man from our church and one woman from the church there to come together in the intimacy of marriage and set up their home in the obscure village of Simbatin in Romania.

So choice means limitation, but limitation brings intimacy. While man invariably chooses death, however, God’s choices are designed to bring life. People will always choose hell of their own free will, not because God chooses hell for them.

(b) Choice implies forethought

If you ask, “When did God choose me?” the startling answer

from our text is, “*before the foundation of the world.*” These words, “before the foundation of the world,” are used just three times in the NT.

- “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world”
(1 Pet. 1:20)
- “You loved me before the foundation of the world”
(Jn. 17:24)
- “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”
(Eph. 1:4)

We are not told much in scripture of what went on before creation, but in these verses we learn three things. First, we are told that Christ “was foreknown before the foundation of the world.” Secondly, we learn that God the Father loved Christ before the foundation of the world. Christ was, and Christ was loved. But there was a third thing: there was you and me — “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.”

So, first, choice implies limitation, which leads to intimacy; and second, choice implies forethought.

Perhaps I can illustrate. A year ago, my 10-year-old daughter decided that on this Halloween she wanted to dress up as the Energizer bunny. Last week she saw her dream realized as the costume took shape in our living room. Someone had forethought and prepared to make her a gift. Here is another example. In Romania this year I was let in on a secret. During Ceausescu’s reign of terror, a brother named John had a dream about the map of Romania. On that map an arrow went from the village of Simbatin to the city of Simaria (where many of our close brothers live), and then the arrow travelled clear across the ocean to California. John never understood the dream, he said, until we arrived in a bus and met him in Simaria in 1988. I was humbled to think that God foreknew that our church would be blessed by having a relationship established between his Romanian family and us. That is what God’s choice does for us. He thought about us and planned for us before eternity.

So choice implies forethought.

There is a third thing.

(c) Choice implies commitment

Once God makes a choice, unlike man, he never aborts his choice. An archaeological dig in Phoenicia has uncovered thousands of urns, each one bearing the name and age of a child, and the cause of death. “Bad harvest” was the reason given for most of the children’s deaths. Apparently thousands of children were put to death to appease the gods for bad harvests. Parents were making choices to have children, and then placing them in the fire so that they themselves might have a better life. In other instances children were tossed over the city wall during a siege, also to appease the gods. The Jews picked up these practices and began to sacrifice their children in the valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem. But God pronounced judgment on that valley, renaming it “the valley of burning.” In the NT, this valley became the eternal, burning garbage dump of Jerusalem. It was renamed Gehenna, a euphemism for hell.

Man uses his freedom to abort his choices, sacrificing the innocent, and creating a hell on earth.

As we have seen, God does not abort his choices, but you may be surprised to learn that he once contemplated abortion — not of innocent children, but of obstinate adults who were deserving of judgment. We read of this in Exodus 32 where God said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obsti-

nate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make you a great nation” (Ex. 32:9-10). Then Moses said to God: “Turn from Thy burning anger...Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever’” (Ex. 32:12-13). This is a revelation of what goes on in the heart of God. He was horrified by what was happening, yet he remembered the oath he had made. God had already made a choice, and he could not deviate from what he had already chosen because he never aborts his choices.

We learn how true this is when we study the genealogy of Christ in the NT. In Matthew’s gospel there are listed four women of questionable background: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Look at the histories of these women. Tamar played the role of a harlot to manipulate her father-in-law, Judah, to have sex with her in order to carry on the line of her dead husband; Rahab was a former prostitute; Ruth was a foreigner; Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, committed adultery with David. But neither incest, prostitution, alien blood nor adultery could deter God from following through on his choice for the lineage of Jesus the Messiah.

God is pro-choice, and he submits to all the limitations inherent in his choices until he accomplishes what he set out to do in Christ, which is to bring blessing and life to many.

So freedom of choice means selection, limitation and commitment. Without these there is neither intimacy nor life.

Next we come to the second objection to God’s election in Christ. Some say, “If we are predestined, then everything in our lives is pre-determined and there is no freedom left, is there?” But this is not at all what the doctrine of predestination means.

II. The freedom of God’s choice (1:5a)

In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself...

(a) Expansive freedom within limits

Predestined means “to mark off, fix or set beforehand.” From the Greek word for predestined we get the English word “horizon.” Predestination means that God determines the horizons of your life.

It is helpful to note that in the OT, this word for horizon has two meanings. In Numbers 30:3,4,5,7,8,9,12, it is used of vows. One took an oath to do something, thus putting himself under binding obligation to carry out what he had promised. Secondly, the word was used of the fixed borders of the tribal lands of Israel (Joshua 13:27; 15:12; 18:20; 23:24). Thus the tribe was given tremendous freedom to live out their lives, but within the borders of their territory.

So our election leads us to a new land where we are to live in tremendous freedom.

And what are the horizons or borders to our lives? Paul goes on to write of these.

(b) Unlimited freedom in relationship

We were “{adopted} as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself.” We were predestined to adoption. Through adoption, God placed us into himself with the full status of sons. Now in the OT, we know that the term “son of God” meant Messiah or king,

so Christians are not just any sons — we have the same status as Jesus the Messiah who reigns as King. This is freedom indeed.

When my wife and I adopted our daughter, although she had neither blood lines nor legal status, she was immediately granted the full rights of a family member. This is how God regards each one of us who is in Christ.

Amazing things happen when this truth at last comes home to the heart. I observed this with Eddie Folsom, one of the men who went to Romania with us earlier this year. At a worship service one evening, Eddie was holding a contented, sleeping child in his lap, and he began to weep quietly as he looked at the child. Seeing this, I asked him to give his testimony. He shared that he had never found his father’s love although he sought it diligently. As he was holding the child in his arms on that evening, however, he knew that the heavenly Father was saying to him, “This child is like you, Eddie. I care for you just as you care for this little child. Give me your full weight. I love you.” He had found his Father’s love.

This is the horizon of the Christian’s life. We have been predestined for adoption as sons. We have expansive freedom, within limits, and unlimited freedom in relationship.

So God exercises his freedom of choice, and submits himself to the limitations of that choice so as to bring freedom to others.

What was the motive behind God’s action?

III. The motive of God’s choice (1:5b)

In love he predestined us...according to the good pleasure of His will...in the Beloved.

Some say that God was obligated to choose us because he foresaw that we would come to faith in Christ. The reality, however, is that Christ died for us, “according to the good pleasure of His will,” for if it were left up to us, not one of us in our free will would have responded. Even our faith was a gift. We would be doomed to hell if it were up to us to initiate our own salvation. God saved you because, before the foundation of the earth, he delighted in you.

“Good pleasure” is a powerful expression. It means that the inner longing and delight of God was to grant goodness to men. And that delight in his heart is so strong that it is the driving force of world history.

I will illustrate this from the book of Isaiah, from Luke’s gospel, and from the epistle to the Philippians. In Isaiah, God said to Israel,

“It will no longer be said to you, ‘Forsaken,’
Nor to your land will it any longer be said, ‘Desolate’;
But you will be called, ‘My *delight* is in her,’
And your land, ‘Married’:
For the LORD *delights* in you,
And to Him your land will be married.” (Is. 62:4)

This “delight” would change Israel’s history.

When Messiah was born, the angels sang, “on earth peace among men with whom He is *pleased*” (Luke 2:14). God’s delight was coming to pass. In Philippians, Paul wrote, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His *good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13). God did this because he delighted in us. Our response should be to work for what delights him.

When you see how much God delights in you, your heart will be so affected that you will begin to make choices and act like God. Over the past several years in my travels to Romania, I

have taken great delight in selecting two little girls to love. I take them gifts when I go there, and I make sure they are with us during the conferences. The last time I was there I was holding one of them in my arms as we were singing outdoors. Her mother asked me why I love her daughter so much. I told her I didn't know why, that I just delighted in loving her! It is the same with God. He delights in us, capturing our hearts, then we begin to delight in his good pleasure and we select people to love and serve.

So we have the motive behind God's choice.

There is one last thing.

IV. The glory of God's choice (1:4b, 6)

(a) Purpose of his choice: Holiness

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

The elect are "holy and blameless" before God. God elected you and he delights in you so that when you stand before him, in his eyes you will be morally perfect, without blemish. How can this be? It is because on that day you will be wholly his. He will own you fully. While we are on earth there will be areas in our lives where we struggle, where we are not fully his, but on that day we will be wholly God's, a trophy to his grace.

(b) The culmination of his choice: A trophy of God's grace

In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In the National Art Gallery in London recently, I found that my favorite room was the Rembrandt room. In his paintings, Rembrandt used the technique called chiaroscuro — arranging light and dark elements in his masterpieces and thereby transforming ordinary individuals or common scenes of everyday life into glorious portrayals. This is what God is going to do for Christians. There will be no cheap reproductions in his trophy room. The world will wonder at the lavishness of his grace upon grace as it is made visible in the saints.

So that is God's choice. Man might lay claim to be pro-choice, but how different is God's choice from man's! When God makes his choice, he limits himself so as to develop intimacy with the one. When man asserts his freedom of choice, on the

other hand, he deprives many of their intimacy so that the one might have pleasure. God's choice begins with selection of the one, but it leads to the blessing of life for the many. Man shuns the commitment to the one, leading to the destruction of the many. God's choice is conceived in love, birthed through pain, nurtured in devotion, crowned with glory. Man's choices are conceived in lust, birthed in pleasure, and abandoned on the streets.

V. What to do with our choice

What should Christians do when the world insists on flaunting its freedom of choice which, as we have seen, is really a perversion of the true dignity that God has bestowed upon us? What do we do when the world is in fact choosing hell and telling the church to go to hell when it dares to intervene? Let me suggest two things. First, before you do anything, be still and become lost in the love of God. You are worthless to this dying world unless you possess the love of God in the depth of your soul. Rejoice in God's selection of you from eternity past. God thought of you, cared for you, and sealed you. You are his delight. Become lost in that. May you experience the humbling, the joy and appreciation that my friend learned in Romania as he held that child in his arms.

And second, be God-like in your choices. Don't panic in the face of this battle over choice that is being fought throughout our nation today. Saul's army panicked when they saw the weapons of the Philistines. They had never seen armaments like that before and they became paralyzed with fear in the face of them. But then God selected one man, David, to fight the Philistine giant, Goliath, on behalf of the nation. Saul offered David his own armor, the weapons of the flesh, to assist him in his coming battle with the champion, but David refused. The Israelites had never seen weapons of iron, but the Philistine had never seen a slingshot. By redefining the battle and fighting as a civilian, not a warrior, David defeated Goliath.

So in the moral battles that we face today my advice is, don't shout at people from a distance or hide behind a group carrying slogans because you fear intimacy. Go down to the valley and choose someone to love. I am convinced that behind the enemy ranks there are hundreds and thousands of folk who are ready to admit that their choices have led them to a hell on earth. They are just waiting for someone to come down into the valley and talk to them and rescue them from their choices. God has made his choice; may we now make ours. Amen.

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THE PAYMENT

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 1:7-8

Third Message

Brian Morgan

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As I watched the Presidential election returns on television the other night, the commentators were holding forth on the many changes we should expect under the new administration. One reporter seemed to sum up the feeling of many when he said, "On the one hand, we have a Democratic President and Democratic Congress, thus for the first time in many years the Congressional log-jam is broken and they have a new freedom to implement any program they want; on the other hand, they have no money."

How quickly we become disillusioned with the promises of men! People commit to certain schemes and programmes, but they lack the resources and the will to follow through on their promises. However, when someone commits to do something, and then makes the choices necessary to follow through on what they promised, and in the process pay the price demanded, how that changes everything. A few years ago my wife and I began planning a vacation in England to celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary. I had two free round-trip tickets through one of the airlines' mileage programmes, and last Christmas I redeemed all of those miles I had travelled and gave the tickets to Emily. Our anniversary trip had been bought and paid for and there was no turning back. We both felt a great sense of satisfaction that what we had committed to do was coming to pass.

We have been studying in the glorious opening words of the book of Ephesians the blessings that Christians have in Christ. First, we learned that God the Father chose us from before the foundation of the world. Today we will see that he also secured the payment necessary to make our redemption possible.

I will begin by reading the opening statement of the blessing. Ephesians 1:3-6:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

And now the text that we will examine today, verses 7, 8:

In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us.

Thus we come to the second blessing that we have in Christ, redemption from our transgressions.

I. The Meaning of Redemption

(a) The Definition of Redemption

The word redemption comes from the background of the slave market. It was used to describe deliverance from the power of an alien force that had taken dominion over a life, tyrannizing it

with hardship and abuse. The process of redemption involved three steps: 1) The payment of a purchase price in order to "buy back" (redeem) someone from slavery; 2) the restoration of the slave to one who possessed a more fundamental right and interest in him than the slave owner; and 3) this was followed by a manifestation of ecstatic joy on the part of the slave because of his newly purchased freedom. So redemption involved a price to be paid, a restoration of relationship, and an intense joy that was experienced in new-found freedom.

Next we will seek to discover what the word redemption meant to people living in Paul's day.

(b) Its Significance to the Greek

This notion of redemption would have had a great impact on the Greek world of Ephesus. Slaves made up a large proportion of the population in the Roman Empire. Historians, in fact, estimate that approximately one-third of the population of Rome were slaves. In that world slaves were considered as non-persons even by the classical philosophers. Aristotle wrote, "A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave." Cato advised, "Sell worn-out oxen, blemished cattle..., old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is useless." But the message of the gospel was redemption through Christ. It was he who bought men and women out of the slave market, purchasing their freedom through his precious blood. Is it any wonder that many became Christians and found true worth and dignity through the gospel.

But another grouping in this first century world, although they apparently were free, were almost as enslaved as the slaves who toiled night and day in the empire. I am referring to women. The ancient Greeks thought very little of women. They treated them as chattel, and put them almost on the same level as slaves. Women seldom ventured outside the home; even household chores were done by slaves. In only two realms, as prostitutes and priestesses, professions highly regarded in Ephesus, could women rise to equal status or perhaps even surpass men in influence. We have already seen that the city housed a three-story brothel. Ephesus also was the home of the great temple of Artemis. Although prostitutes were the most emancipated of women, however, the price of their emancipation was the shame of their occupation: They bore the stigma of selling sex as a profession. But then, through the preaching of the gospel, came the word redemption. God was far more interested in these women than the union of pimps who used them for their own profit, and this God had given testimony of his love by sacrificing his own Son to purchase their freedom from sin and death.

This notion of redemption then would have had a profound impact on both slaves and women in the Greek world.

But there was another world where this word would resound with significance.

(c) Its Significance to the Jew

Israel, of course, was born in slavery in Egypt. The nation en-

dured 400 years of cruel, bitter servitude in that land, building cities for Pharaoh. But in Exodus 3, God told Moses, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.” God bared his holy arm and unleashed ten plagues on Egypt, the last of which, the death of their first-born children, was the purchase price of Israel’s freedom. Israel, of course, sprinkled the blood of an unblemished lamb on their doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over them and not strike dead their firstborn. For the Jew, therefore, this idea of redemption would conjure up a great show of power, involving nations and people, that they might have freedom to serve a new master who loved them.

But Israel soon fell into sin and was subjected once more to exile and slavery. That is when the prophet Isaiah promised another deliverance and new Messianic age of freedom. He wrote,

**“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives,
And freedom to prisoners...”** (Isaiah 61:1)

God would bare his holy arm once more to deal with the enemies who tyrannized Israel, redeeming her in the process.

Thus to the slaves of the first century, to women and to Jews, the word redemption would have great significance.

(d) Its Significance Today

As I prepared to preach this text I asked myself, to whom would this word redemption have special significance today? Who are today’s slaves, in other words? I think of a generation of children who suffered physical and emotional abuse as they grew up. As children, they forced themselves to block out the pain, but the deep aches in the soul are now resurfacing in their adulthood. Even though time and distance separate them from their abusers, tyranny lives on as memories still haunt and control them.

To dull this pain from their past, many seek to escape, using means which seemed innocent at first but have now turned into raving addictions and obsessions. Men become “workaholics.” They try to keep busy so that they will not have to deal with the pain of their past, or they become masters at controlling their environment so that they never have to risk anything. Others get caught in bouts with lust, pornography or alcohol, whatever it takes to dull the pain. But there is no escape. Occasionally these men themselves vent over their abusive past and become abusive in turn.

Abused women fall into some of the same patterns. At times their busyness may look like a passion for good deeds, but what they are really doing is withdrawing so that they will not have to communicate with those closest to them. They never sit still to hear the inner voice of the pain that is devouring them. Other symptoms take the form of eating disorders as a kind of self-protection, or licentious behavior to hurt and control men whom they see as tyrants.

The singer Madonna is much in the news these days. I watched a television documentary on her life the other day and I was interested to learn that she played a rape scene in a movie several years ago. The director complimented her on her acting, and asked her how could she bring such realism to the scene. “It was easy,” she replied. “I was raped once.” It occurred on me that her licentious behavior may well be a cover-up for that deep

hurt and pain which she feels as a result of that one childhood incident.

So it is to this class of people that the apostle Paul brings this good news of redemption: to the Greek, to the Jew, and to the modern-day slaves of Silicon Valley. There is Someone who cares far more about you and has a more legitimate claim on your allegiance than the current tyrant who is abusing you. Not only did this Someone think of you before time began, but he has paid the purchase price to free you, and in him you have redemption.

The question then logically follows, what was the cost to God to buy our redemption?

II. The Price of Our Redemption

Here is what Paul says (verse 7):

In Him we have redemption through his blood,

Ever since my daughters were born, I have been planning to send them to college. Recently, however, when I heard how expensive college has become, I discovered how naive I am about these matters. A friend who has a daughter in a college out of state told me that it costs him \$18,500 a year for her board and tuition! I was speechless. We can have the best intentions in the world, but we had better count the cost.

Man is almost as naive about his own soul as I was about the cost of a college education. The words of the psalmist are instructive here:

**No man can by any means redeem his brother,
Or give to God a ransom for him—
For the redemption of his life is costly,
And he should cease trying forever—** (Psalm 49:7-8)

One of our elders has had a problem with his kidneys for many years. He is a borderline case for a kidney transplant, but as of now his situation is not quite critical enough for him to be a candidate for a transplant. As I was thinking about his situation recently, it occurred to me that in order for my brother to be restored to normal functioning, it will cost nothing less than the life of an individual. Someone must die so that he can be healthy again. So it is with all of us in the spiritual realm. “In Him we have redemption through his blood,” says the apostle. How expensive was our redemption to the Father? We were worth the life of his Son. He had only one Son and he loved only one Son, and he gave him up for you and me. What does that say of how highly he thinks of us?

So we have the definition and the cost of redemption.

What then is the nature of our freedom?

III. Freedom for the Redeemed (Psalm 32:1,2)

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

It may strike you as odd that Paul speaks about redemption, about removing a tyrant from your life, in terms of forgiveness. “What has that got to do with redemption?” you ask. “I want to be freed from my tormentor!” But the apostle’s words are no more surprising than Jesus’ word to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). What kind of freedom was this? Well, it was, in fact, a much bigger thing than his merely healing the man. Jesus healed him to demonstrate to the Pharisees that he had the power to forgive sins. Why? Because sin was a far greater tyrant than Egypt to the Jew, than Rome to the slave, than

their abusers to the women and children in our own day. Sin is more enslaving, more abusive, more controlling, more damaging than any flesh and blood tyrant.

This text in Ephesians, I believe, may be a quote from Psalm 32:1-2. In that psalm we have a description of this tyrant of sin, which Paul merely summarizes in Ephesians. This psalm, which was written by David after he had committed murder and adultery, will be helpful in our study of the Ephesian text. David wrote,

**How blessed is he
Whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered,
How blessed is the man
To whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

Four words in these verses describe the tyrant of sin and its consequences. Then there are four words describing God's actions toward sin.

(a) The Cruel Tyrant: Sin

The Actions of Sin

The first word used to describe sin is *pesha'*, meaning, transgression. This word describes rebellion that results in a high-handed breach of relationship, a casting off of one's allegiance to God in order to do what one pleases. David, I think, could be said to have fallen into the sin of adultery in the heat of the moment, but his murder of Uriah was the premeditated, calculated crime of a rebel.

The word for sin is quite the opposite of the word for transgression. If transgression is high-handed rebellion, sin is not doing what one should do; it is missing the mark. In David's case, he withdrew from fighting a holy war to pursue personal pleasure, and then he summoned Uriah back from the battle-front as part of his scheme to cover up his sin. But David came under conviction when Uriah protested, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to dine and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing" (2 Sam. 11:11). David's suggestion would be like Prime Minister Churchill calling home from the front lines one of his commanders during the Normandy invasion and telling him to rest and enjoy an evening with his wife. This is sin: failing to do what we know we should do.

The Consequences of Sin

The next word David uses for sin is "iniquity." This word comes from the root "to bend or twist, to deviate from the way." David is saying that he distorted, perverted and made things crooked. The word is used not only of the deed but of its consequences. Misdeed and punishment, guilt and consequences are closely tied together in the OT. David perverted the office of king for personal pleasure. Even worse, he perverted his friendship with Uriah, one of his mighty men, a friend who had given him his loyal love, and then he perverted the office of holy war to murder him. So David admits in the psalm that he was a rebel, a sinner, and a pervert.

The Root of Sin

Deceit is the fourth word David uses here. He is referring to his treachery and lies. "Deep in my spirit," he admits, "I am more like the devil than God." Lying and deceit brings treachery

and destruction upon others.

What can we say to this? Let us agree with David when he says that blessed is the man or woman who comes to terms with their own depravity and admits they are rebels, treacherous liars and perverts. When we come to that place where we admit that we have been so tyrannized by sin that we make this confession, then the blessing opens up to us and we discover that God unleashes all the forces of heaven against our sin.

This is described by four verbs in the text.

(b) God's Breaks the Back of the Tyrant

First God is said to *forgive* transgressions. "How blessed is the man," says David, "whose transgressions are forgiven." "Forgiven" means, "to lift up and bear it." David's sin was a heavy burden that was weighing him down. What he is saying is that the hand of God was heavy on him, bearing down night and day, causing his body to groan and waste away; his vitality was drained as with the fever-heat of summer. Guilt is like a weight, and the greatest testimony of its weight is the amount of effort man spends to dull its voice. Why do we drink? Why do we take drugs? Why do we fill our lives with distractions? It is because we don't want to be alone with our thoughts. Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote the following powerful statement about guilt:

O believe me, guilt upon conscience is worse than the body on the rack. Even the flames of the stake may be cheerfully endured, but the burnings of a conscience tormented by God are beyond all measure unendurable... Give me into the power of a roaring lion, but never let me come under the power of an awakened, guilty conscience. Shut me up in a dark dungeon, among all manner of loathsome creatures —snakes and reptiles of all kinds — but, oh, give me not over to my own thoughts when I am consciously guilty before God!

The burden of guilt due to sin is too heavy for anyone to bear. This is why God mercifully lifted it from our shoulders and laid it upon his Son. And, as we know from the prophet Isaiah, the weight of that sin was so heavy it crushed our Lord (Isaiah 53:4,6,10).

So our transgressions are forgiven.

Next, says David, our "sin is *covered*." Not only does God deal with the guilt of sin, he deals with the shame we feel on account of it. When we sin, we hide ourselves from God and others because we feel dirty. Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover themselves after they had sinned, but God told them they needed a fur coat, not fig leaves, to protect them. In the shedding of an innocent animal's blood he clothed them so that the Holy God could look upon them and they would feel no shame before him. This is what God does with sin: he covers it with blood. And this is what gives us the freedom to be open and vulnerable.

Then, says the psalmist, God "*does not impute iniquity*." In the OT, once the guilty verdict was announced, the sinner was sentenced to slavery. But if we are in Christ we don't have to live under the tyranny of slavery to addictions. Why? It is because "the Lord struck Him with the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Not only are we forgiven, but also there is no condemnation. We do not have to continue living out the perversions which we have chosen for ourselves. We have freedom from our addictions and behavior.

Finally, says David, "Blessed is the man in whose spirit there is no deceit." How could he say that when he had just spent all his energies scheming to kill Uriah and steal his wife? It is because there was no deceit in his new spirit, for he had become a

new creation. This was the petition he made in Psalm 51: "Create [the same word that is used in Gen. 1] in me a clean heart O God, Renew in me a steadfast spirit." God had to do a creative miracle in David's life, on a par with his work in creation when he brought light out of darkness, in order to change David and answer his prayer. So David was not just forgiven, when he looked within himself he discerned that he had a new spirit. God's Holy Spirit seeks out truth, moving us to confession, to be open about our sins. This is why we can live with integrity: We have nothing to hide because we have been forgiven.

Are these not the greatest blessings in life: forgiveness of sins, freedom from guilt, shame, slavery, and hypocrisy? David says he was blessed, the same term that Paul uses in Ephesians, meaning that he had been restored to the joy of being spiritually productive. God did not set David aside. No, he used him mightily. Because he was open and vulnerable about his sin, we today read the scriptures that he wrote and we find them to be spiritually productive in our lives. If you repent of your sin, no matter what it was, and if you are open and vulnerable about it, God will bless you as he did David and make you useful in his Kingdom in the process.

So we are redeemed, and the fee for our redemption was the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ. This was the purchase price necessary to achieve the great freedom which is found in the forgiveness of sin.

Now we come to the final question. Having paid such an enormous price to free us from our sin, how does God feel about us? When we stand in glory, and when we see his face, what will we see?

IV. The Face of Our Redeemer

...according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us. (Eph. 1:8a)

(a) Unspeakable Generosity

Lest there be any doubt about your standing of forgiveness, look at the face of your Redeemer: it is a countenance of unspeakable generosity. If Israel rejoiced that the Lord spared no expense to rid them of their Egyptian servitude, so too God spared no expense to redeem us and lavish upon us forgiveness in Christ. This is not the kind of grudging forgiveness we receive at times from those whom we have offended, it is like the forgiveness extended by the father to his prodigal son in the beautiful NT story. The moment the father saw his boy on the horizon (it is obvious he had been looking for him daily), he picked up his skirts (a shameful thing in that culture) and ran to him (compromising his dignity as an old man) to embrace him and forgive him. His son didn't even have time to make his little speech of confession. Before the boy realized what was going on he was the guest of honor at a lavish party which the whole village entered into to celebrate his return. This is the face of our Redeemer — a countenance of unspeakable generosity.

Secondly, when we look upon him in glory, we will notice something else.

(b) A Strange Silence

Whenever godly men in Scripture lose a son we find a testimony about their deep grief. In Abraham's case, for instance, we

feel the piercing panic and terror of his anticipated grief as he hears the words, "Take now your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering..." But even these words, heartbreaking as they were, were not as painful as Isaac's question moments later, "My father, Behold, the fire and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:2,7).

And what of the grief of Jacob, who thought that Joseph, the son of his old age, was dead? Here is a description of his grief, from Genesis: "Then Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, 'Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.' So his father wept for him" (Gen. 37:34-35). Jacob was inconsolable in his grief over Joseph.

But I believe there is no cry in Scripture as piercing as the cry of David at the death of his son, the wicked Absalom. In one of the most beautifully poetic lines in the Bible, David cried,

**"O my son Absalom, my son,
My son Absalom!
Would I had died
Instead of you,
O Absalom, my son,
My son!"**
(2 Sam. 18:33)

I have been to that mountain, and I will never forget the sickening feeling of panic, the sense of terror I felt in my helplessness at the death of my son. It took 15 years of thinking before I finally wrote a testimony to my grief for a boy I had known but nine precious days.

How can we imagine the Father's grief when he ascended Mt. Moriah with the Son whom he had known from eternity? I find it strange that when he journeyed to Moriah, with his Son, his only Son, the one whom he loved, and placed him upon that altar and walked away, there is no word about his grief. There the forces of hell did what they pleased with Jesus. They stripped him naked. They abused him and spat upon him. They beat him to a bloody mass. Then they mocked him. Isn't it peculiar that there is no word of the Father's grief? Perhaps this was why heavens were darkened during those three hours — to cover his weeping face in order that his generosity towards us, not his grief over his only Son, would draw us to himself.

Wesley's hymn puts this so beautifully,

*Arise, my soul, arise.
Shake off thy guilty fears.
The bleeding Sacrifice
In my behalf appears.
Before the throne my Surety stands,
Before the throne my Surety stands;
My name is written on His hands.*

Whatever tyrant has been abusing you is now of no account, for the payment has been made in full in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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THE TEACHERS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 897

Ephesians 1:8-12

Fourth Message

Brian Morgan

November 15, 1992

In the aftermath of the elections last week, I asked a friend whose wife is active in the pro-life movement how his candidates fared in the voting. "I don't even want to talk about it," he replied. The very next day I received a letter from my friend Ioan in Romania. He, too, was discouraged with their election results, following the electoral victory of Ceaucescu's right-hand man in that country. Here is what he wrote,

Unfortunately, our people lost the test of the recent elections and chose a president and a leading team with a strong atheistic past and atheistic inclinations. Surely in the future political evaluations they will fail to take options according to the Lord's will, and will bring misfortune to our nation. A very sad situation indeed, after the great signs the Lord did perform here, when we witnessed together the fall and the punishment of the anti-Christ, just on Christmas Day...To choose now again as leaders men of this kind is really unpardonable, a total lack of spiritual maturity. Therefore we think that the judgment upon Romania cannot be avoided and that it will be necessarily severe, to purge at once a rebellious and stubborn people inclined constantly to evil. We do hope the American elections would have a more happy result...

There is sadness in both of our worlds as family values take a back seat to political expediency. But only time will tell what God is doing in the midst of these apparent political defeats.

A fascinating story from the gospel of Luke came to mind as I thought about this. The story, from Luke 24, concerns two disciples of Jesus who were walking to Emmaus, a little village outside Jerusalem. Certain political events of their day had saddened them, too. They had put their hopes in a young Jew whom they thought would become king and deliver Israel from her political enemies. But their leader didn't just lose an election, he was crucified! As they walked to Emmaus, Jesus in his resurrected body came alongside them and walked with them. They didn't recognize him, and when he asked them what they were talking about, they said, "Haven't you heard? We were hoping that it was He [this Jesus] who was going to redeem Israel." They found it hard to believe there was someone who hadn't heard about recent events. But Jesus rebuked their foolish minds and their hard hearts for failing to believe the Scriptures. Luke continues: "And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Later, when Jesus had departed, the disciples said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (24:32). Jesus did not make any change in the political circumstances that had caused them sadness of heart, but his presence with them and his words to them radically altered their understanding of events. His reinterpretation of these happenings in light of the Scriptures had caused their hearts to burn with hope and anticipation. Isn't this what the church desperately needs today — teachers who have the ability to cut through the confusion and depression of the day and give us a new understanding by faith, turning our *sad* hearts

into *burning* hearts? Just think of the many crises we are facing today: the aftermath of the Gulf War, the AIDS crisis, cancer, unemployment, divorce, death itself. Do we have the eyes of faith to see what God is doing?

And where do we go to get help concerning these things? In our study today in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we will see that God has made provision for just this sort of thing. We have been learning of the wonderful blessings that are ours in Christ through God who has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). We have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and thirdly, as we will see today, we are taught by the apostles.

I will begin by reading the entire text that we will take this morning.

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him unto an administration of the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:8-12)

A careful reading of these verses reveals that a subtle distinction enters the text here compared to what has gone on before. I am referring to a change in pronouns. Throughout the first 12 verses, the apostle has made use of the pronouns "we" and "us," but now, beginning in verse 13, he changes the pronoun to "you." It is very important that we take note of this. The "you" he is referring to here, of course, make up the Ephesians (and, by extension, Christians throughout the ages). Who are those, then, who make up the "we"? We have the answer in chapter 3, verse 5, in the apostle's reference to the "...mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy *apostles and prophets*..." The "we" is referring to Christ's apostles.

Throughout salvation history, when God reveals himself in mighty acts of salvation, he selects for himself eyewitnesses who record his acts in writing. Their task is not only to record events, but also to interpret them. Moses, for instance, wrote down the history and the implications of the Exodus; Joshua recorded the taking of the land; Samuel and David enlightened us as to the implications of the monarchy in Israel; and Nehemiah recorded the return to the land following the Babylonian captivity. God does not repeat these acts of salvation for everyone to witness, but these writings are valid for all time, for all generations.

The apostles stand at the end of that great tradition. To them fell the task of interpreting the implications of the coming of the Messiah, the greatest event in salvation history. This was not the task of the Roman press, of Josephus, Pilate, the scribes or the rabbis. To the apostles, and to them alone, was given that sacred

trust. They were personally selected by God to be his spokesmen.

In this text, therefore, Paul demonstrates the importance of the role of the apostles in the long line of salvation history. Here he deals with different aspects of the office of the apostles, and how important they were to the process of Christians receiving these blessings in Christ.

He begins by saying how they were selected in the first place.

I. The Selection Of the Teachers (1:9)

...He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure.

(a) God Initiated the Selection, Implying Authority

The apostles were chosen by God's will. This was what Jesus told them once, "You did not choose me, but I chose you..." (Jn. 15:16). The writer of Hebrews concurs, "No one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God" (5:4). These men did not aspire to the office. In fact, they were minding their own business when Jesus interjected himself into their lives, and to each of them he uttered the invitation which they found irresistible, "Follow Me!"

To emphasize his point that these apostles were selected by God, Paul repeats this idea in verse 11, using three different nouns, the *will* of God, the *counsel* of God, and the *purpose* of God: "in Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will..."

First, the word "will" denotes that God made a free choice. He was neither coerced nor bound by anything but his own good pleasure and delight. He made the choice freely. Secondly, the word "counsel" indicates that God brought about all of this with foresight and planning. His choices were deliberate, methodical, with not a hint of impulsiveness. Before he selected the men who were to be his apostles, Jesus spent a whole night in prayer, deliberating over those who were to be part of his intimate circle. And although Paul himself was a "Johnny-come-lately" in this respect, he implies here that even the choice of him had as much forethought as the choosing of the original twelve.

Finally, the apostles were selected "with purpose." There was a greater end and a greater design in view. These men were not chosen arbitrarily, or with some meaningless end in view. No, the purpose behind their selection was that their writings would lead millions to Christ. Here is the implication: If the apostles stood in that tradition, their writings and their teaching would be authoritative. To reject the apostles, therefore, is to reject Christ. Beware lest you give anyone like Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russell, or any modern-day guru, equal weight with the apostles in their teaching. This is why the writer to the Hebrews admonishes, "If the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Heb. 2:2-4). "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*"

If the selection of the apostles implies authority, it also implies intimacy.

(b) The Selection Was Few, Implying Intimacy

The New Testament was written by men who knew and loved Christ. They loved him, they walked with him, and they suffered with him throughout his ministry. This is what produced the intimacy of their writings concerning him. Reading the New Testament, therefore, will inspire your love for Christ. If you want to know Torah, read Moses, because God spoke to him face to face. If you want to know Messiah, read the writings of the apostles because they knew him intimately.

Last week, I attended the memorial service of a Christian woman who died suddenly at the age of 70. The only people who spoke were the deceased woman's seven children and their spouses, selected ahead of time. As each one shared of a different aspect of the love and care which their mother had for them, everyone present caught a glimpse of her godliness and love. By the end of the service all present were weeping and my own heart was burning with love for a woman I had never met. It was because I had heard from those who were closest to her. Such was the manner in which the New Testament was written.

The writings of the apostles are authoritative and love-inspiring. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else?

A second aspect of their teaching is that there is a reality about it that is found in no other source.

II. The Vitality Of Their Teaching (1:8b)

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will...

(a) Penetrating Insight

Their teaching had a ring of authenticity and reality to it. When God made known his will to the apostles, he did it not by means of boring, ivory-tower religious jargon but with reality and penetrating insight. In his teaching, Jesus laid bare the real issues underlying the fog of hypocrisy and immorality of his day. The undeniable reality of his teaching is what antagonized the religious theologians of his day, and it was this same gift of insight that he imparted to the apostles.

A number of years ago, I studied the Scriptures for a time with Bruce Rosenstock, a Jewish professor at Stanford University. Bruce, an Orthodox Jew and a classical Greek scholar, and I had an ongoing debate about the apostle Paul. Together, we translated Romans 9-11, using the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, and the Greek texts. At the end of a year's study, Bruce concluded that Paul must have been an absolute genius. As a Jew, my friend discerned the force and weight of the apostle's argument in a much more profound way than I as a Gentile could. In fact, he was so taken by Paul's theology that he brought me with him to a conference of scholarly rabbis and theologians, the kind of men who would violently disagree with the apostle, and to this group he preached the texts of Romans 9-11.

Having studied with Bruce, I now see even more clearly the impact of Paul's insights into the new covenant. For example, the Galatians struggled with the issue of circumcision. What was Paul's advice to them? Here is what he said: "If you receive circumcision, Christ is of no benefit to you." He was saying that in the new covenant, all religion was out because Christ had redefined Judaism. Speaking of the Judaizers who were enticing the Galatians to be circumcised, Paul said, "I wish they would castrate themselves...the real reason they compel you to be circumcised is that they don't want to be persecuted for the cross of Christ. The real religious marks on the body are not circumcision, but the brand-marks of persecution that I have on my back for the cross of Christ." Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision

mattered. The issue was the new creation. That is the kind of insight that cuts through to the crux of the matter.

The teaching of the apostles was vital in another way.

(b) Powerful Moral Implications

Their teaching had not just insight, but *wisdom* for the moral skills of living life. Through apostolic teaching, these ancient texts become applicable to our own age. The Jews of Jesus' day frequently became lost in the strictness of the letter of the law and often missed its spirit and application. But let us remember that the apostles had that same spirit as Jesus, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:12-13).

The apostles hold the key to the Old Testament texts, even texts like the obscure one in Deuteronomy that says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (Deut. 25:4). Paul said that this text was applicable to the church. The Corinthian church struggled with many things — licentiousness, incest, competition, etc. — but Paul wrote that if they knew the book of Numbers, they would not be in such a mess. The problem with much of the preaching and teaching we hear today is that most teachers who try to be applicable have no theological depth, and the ones who have theological depth are at times irrelevant. But the writings of the apostles are both applicable and theological. They deal with real issues and real situations. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else? When you have the experience of being taught in this manner, your heart begins to burn like it did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

On a pastoral staff visit to Israel in 1976, Dr. Bruce Waltke taught us from the book of Proverbs every morning. I confess I attended these sessions with a sense of reluctance at first because I was not excited about the writings of an ancient sage. But on that first morning I was captivated by the wisdom of our teacher and how he opened up these texts in a new and fresh way. I was junior high pastor at the time, and when Bruce introduced the opening teaching by saying, "These are ten lessons for the home," and then went on to expound on this subject, I saw for the first time how applicable this ancient material was to our own problems in the home today, and my heart burned with excitement as I learned how relevant these texts actually are.

So the apostles were selected by Jesus, and their teaching had penetrating moral insight. What, then, was the content of their teaching?

III. The Crux Of Their Teaching (1:9-10)

...the mystery of His will, ...which He purposed in Him unto the administration of the fullness of times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

Here, Paul shares two secrets about the apostles.

(a) They Knew What Time It Was

Some Christians are forever watching for signs such as "wars and rumors of wars," the last days, earthquakes, famine, etc. But when you hear someone say, "The end must be coming soon," you can nod and say that the apostles knew that 2000 years ago. The end times was the subject of the apostle Peter's first sermon in Acts, when he said, "The signs are here. The Spirit is being

poured out. This is the last event before the second coming of Christ." But the apostles knew also that the last days could last a long time, a thousand years or a day, because God is patient, "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

While many in the church today may know what time it is, most don't know the second secret that the apostles knew.

(b) They Knew the Secret Of the Time

The apostles knew the secret of God's administration. Everyone knows that a new administration will enter office in Washington in January. As a result, many are scurrying around trying to discover what this administration will do so they can plan accordingly. But God has told his apostles what he is up to in these last days. And what is that? Paul tells us that it is "the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth." What changed the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? Speaking of Christ, they said, "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel." Then Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, interpreting them in light of himself. The disciples were looking only at earthly things and circumstances, but he opened their eyes to see heaven. They were disappointed that Israel had not been redeemed, but Jesus showed them the heavenly throne, the new world order (that he in fact was Israel, and redemption had indeed begun), with universal dimensions, unbounded by time and space.

I will try to illustrate. Imagine you are a Jew, living in the year 5 B.C., and the Emperor Augustus is announcing his new tax policy. "Read my lips," says this candidate, "no new taxes!" You subscribe to a Jewish lobbying group in Rome which sends out a weekly newsletter ("Roman Watchdog"), and their report says Augustus can't be trusted. There are rumors of an upcoming census, and the results will certainly mean a tax increase for the Jews. Send your shekels to us instead, says this lobbying group, support our anti-census campaign and no new taxes. So you send your few shekels. Augustus, however, is reelected. His corrupt government proceeds to hold a census, and a new tax is the result. Your worst fears are realized, and you are depressed by the fact of your own powerlessness.

Then you read the apostolic version of these same events, from the gospel of Luke. Here is Luke's account of this census which was designed to squeeze more tax money from the Jews: "Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth...And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem..." (Luke 2:1-4). At last you see the reasons behind the whole census and tax-hike scam: God was using the machinery of the Roman government to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5 that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem!

Let's take another example, this time from the life of King Herod. This wicked man slaughtered every male child under the age of two, causing great lamenting in Israel. Herod was not "pro-life" by any means. But the apostolic version of events, this time from Matthew's gospel, says that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt, to fulfill the prophecy that said, "Out of Egypt did I call my Son." "Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying,

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;

And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more.” (Matt. 2:17-18)

Even during the terrible slaughter of innocent blood, God was in control. The next line in the text says, “But when Herod was *dead*, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt...” The angel of the Lord appeared at the beginning and at the end of this account. What was he doing in between these two events? I think he went and killed Herod. If you read the text in this light, your heart will burn, too. Even in the midst of human tragedy, God can accomplish his purposes to bring everything under the dominion of Christ.

Finally, supposing you were a Christian in Philippi, and you read the news of an itinerant Jew, a tentmaker, who had been placed under house arrest in the midst of religious controversy, there to await trial, without legal counsel. How depressing, you would think, to have the best evangelist in the young church locked up in prison. But then, a few weeks later, a letter from Paul gives you a radically new perspective on this event. He is not Caesar’s prisoner, but Caesar’s household, amazingly, is his prisoner as he proceeds to convert the Roman Praetorian guards who are chained to him! Nothing is outside God’s rule. While Paul is taking new ground in prison, his being locked up encourages the saints to be bolder in their witness to the gospel. This was the perspective of the apostles. God was doing all these things in order to bring everything under the dominion of Christ.

This apostolic view gave the early church a great boldness in evangelism. The problem with the modern church is that it has a fortress mentality. We build big churches so that we may hide from the world, but the early church had an advantage over us in that they had no buildings to worry about. They became an army of liberation, going around freeing captives and taking new ground for the kingdom. They met in homes to encourage one another. They didn’t build buildings for ministry because they knew that Christ as Lord had dominion over everything. So don’t consider yourself chained to your work, but rather consider who is chained to you. This was how the apostles responded to the seeming hardships and tribulations they faced.

So when you read the writings of the apostles, your hearts will burn because they alone have the key to enable us to see what God is doing in this age. Why would you trust your souls to anyone else?

This brings us to the apostles’ final qualification.

IV. The Authenticity Of the Teachers (1:11,12)

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

(a) First-hand Experience

When I wanted to learn more about the cross a few years ago, I picked up a copy of *The Cross of Christ*, by John Stott. It is a wonderful, passionate book on the implications of the cross. Shortly afterwards I traveled to Romania, and there I met Traian Dorz, the leader of the Lord’s Army, a man who spent 16 years in prison for his faith. He looked at me and said, “You teach about the cross, we live under the cross.” I felt my heart burn within me. I have a passion to get this man’s autobiography and to publish it so that we, too, might feed on what the life and ministry of Traian Dorz meant to his people. He had a first-hand experience with the cross of Christ.

This is what qualified the apostles for ministry. They obtained this inheritance; they were the first to hope in Christ; they were pioneers who plowed the new ground; and they had first-hand experience of what they were teaching.

(b) Authentic Hope

Did they really believe it? you ask. And how much did they invest in their hope? The answer is that these early teachers forsook everything they had for that new heavenly inheritance. They invested all their resources. Paul lost his wealth, and he learned to live in poverty. In Philippians 3, he tells us that he lost something else that was very precious to him — his Jewish citizenship. Because he understood that Jesus had redefined Judaism, he knew that to be a Jew merely in the flesh availed him nothing. He lost everything, but he gained Christ. He may have lost his wife, too. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and a qualification for that group was that one had to be married. Some scholars think that when he converted to Christianity, his wife may have left him. And he lost his health. On the first missionary journey, he probably contracted malaria. An eye disease pained him greatly all his life. (This may have been the thorn in the flesh that he mentions in his writings.) Worst of all, I feel, he lost his reputation. He was regarded as the scum of the earth. He had to depart every city he visited for fear of his life. He was so radical in his faith he was not even fully accepted by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In many ways he was an outsider all his Christian life because he so clearly saw the new reality, the new order of things. And the final price he paid for the gospel was his own life.

These teachers paid the same price as their Teacher, risking everything for that hope that lay before them. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else?

Are you sad? If you are, you should ask yourself if perhaps you have allowed someone else to usurp the teaching of the apostles. May God grant each one of us the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “And they said to one another, ‘*Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?*’”

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THE SEAL

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 898
Ephesians 1:13-14
Fifth Message
Brian Morgan
November 22, 1992

During a staff meeting last week, I discovered an interesting paradox about myself. The deepest longing of my soul, my desire to be intimate with people, is also my greatest fear. We are committed to building relationships in our church. If we do well in this area, we feel, many other things will follow. To help build our relationships as a staff, we occasionally take a day and go on retreat together. On these occasions we try to avoid any other agenda items and concentrate solely on communicating with one another. Last week, we took one of those days, and Gary Vandret brought along a personality profile test, built around 24 questions relating to how each one of us perceived himself or herself in our peer group. We all felt a little nervous, and there was some self-conscious giggling going on as we read the probing questions. I was forced to ask myself whether I really wanted people to know me. When I was about halfway through answering the questions, Joel Werk stood up and walked behind me, and I found myself covering up my answers lest he see them. Here I was, committed to intimacy, yet I was acting like Adam, who hid among the trees in the Garden of Eden when God called to him. Adam and Eve were created to be intimate with each other, yet, because they had made an illicit reach for knowledge, and their action had clothed them with shame, now there was tension in their relationship so they hid themselves from God. The trees which God gave to them were designed for their good, but now they were hiding among these good things so that they could not hear the voice of God.

Isn't this what many of us do in life? We hide ourselves behind a screen of good things so that we cannot hear the voice of God. But God is persistent. He will not allow us to remain hidden. Gary, too, was persistent. He kept asking searching questions until at last I said, "All right. I'll tell you how I feel when I'm among this group." I shared that I probably don't communicate as well, or confront as well, among them as I do in other groups because I'm fearful, or I'm ashamed of being put down. But I needn't have feared. The day turned out to be a rich time of sharing that was very edifying for all of us.

One thing we can be sure of as Christians is this: If we are hiding among the trees, God will not leave us there. He will not let us keep him at a safe distance because he is committed to intimacy with us. He tenderly speaks to us to woo us out of hiding, and then he hides his face from our sins through the blood of Christ. It is when we feel open and exposed that he reveals himself to us.

In our opening studies in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians we have been looking at the blessings of God that are ours in Christ Jesus. So far we have seen three things: the Father chose us; the Son redeemed us; and the apostles teach us. Most Christians, I find, never go on to the fourth blessing, which we will discover in our text today. They are content with head knowledge, with the facts of the gospel, and that's as far as they go.

We find this fourth blessing in the words of the apostle from the 13th verse of this opening chapter: it is being sealed with the

Holy Spirit. God will not rest until the whole program that he has inaugurated from eternity takes root in your soul, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Let us begin by reading our text, Ephesians 1:13-14:

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

There are two prerequisites to, as Paul describes it, being "sealed" by the Holy Spirit. Let's look at the first one, found in verse 13.

I. Prerequisites to the Seal (1:13a)

In Him, you also, after hearing the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,

(a) A Hearing of the Word

First, Christians have heard the word of truth. God worked in history, orchestrating things so that a messenger came to you at just the right time in your life, a time when you were open to hearing what God had to say to you. This messenger then spoke the word, and when you heard it, it rang true to you. It was "the word of truth." There was a reality about it that satisfied your mind.

(b) A Believing With The Heart

But this word of truth was far more than mere doctrine; it also was announced as good news. Hear how the prophet Isaiah describes this good news in the beautiful chorus,

How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7)

The good news, of course, is that our oppressor, the tyrant who had been controlling us, has been defeated. A brand new administration, offering a new world order, is now in place. Our God is King! Once the divine light had broken into your mind your heart began to burn and you believed. Though God chose you, yet he did not violate your will. He sent the messenger, and the message was so powerful it enlightened your mind and burned in your heart and you believed.

Now, as a consequence of your hearing and believing, you received the fourth blessing: You were sealed by the Holy Spirit. What do these words, "sealed by the Holy Spirit" mean? First, they are the fulfillment of a long-awaited promise.

II. The Fulfillment of a Past Promise (1:13b)

...you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,

In the OT, we find that the Holy Spirit was active in both creation and redemption. In creation (Gen. 1:2), he is portrayed as a hovering eagle, brooding over the waters, awaiting the creative word of God. In redemption, we find him working among God's people. But in the OT, the Spirit played a more limited role than he does in the church age. Then the Spirit was given only to selected leaders, to prophets, priests and kings who mediated God's will to the people; and he was given at times in a limited capacity to certain individuals to perform certain tasks. The Spirit came upon Samson, for instance, in order to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. But the Spirit didn't necessarily change the character of the individual to whom he was given to carry out a task. Disobedience could result in the departure of the Spirit, as was the case with Saul (1 Sam. 16:14). David keenly understood this. This is why he prayed in Psalm 51, "Do not take your Spirit from me."

But throughout the OT, we hear many voices longing for a day when the Spirit would be given in broader scope and measure.

(a) The Longing Of Moses: The Spirit Given To All

Moses, who had the Holy Spirit, had this to say when the Spirit came upon two other men in the camp, Eldad and Medad, who began prophesying. We pick up the story in the book of Numbers: "Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, 'Moses, my lord, restrain them.' But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!'" (Num. 11:28-29).

(b) The Dream of the Prophets: The Spirit Given To All Without Measure

A glance at the writings of the prophets reveals that this prayer of Moses was their desire too. Jeremiah foresaw that the longing of Moses would come to fruition one day: "And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them..." (Jer. 31:34).

The prophet Joel's words intensified the vision. Listen to his familiar prophecy:

"And it will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
(no sexual distinctions)
Your your old men will dream dreams,
(no age distinctions)
Your young men will see visions.
And even on the male and female servants
(no social distinctions)
I will pour out My Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)

There are two concepts here: The Spirit would be given a) without measure, and b) without distinction. Everyone who believes, men and women, grownups and children alike, even male and female servants, would one day be given the full measure of the Spirit.

But other prophets took this one step further: The blessing would go out beyond Israel to all the nations.

(c) The Blessing of Abraham: The Gift of the Spirit to all Nations

God promised the patriarch, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

What was promised to Abraham, longed for by Moses, and envisioned by the prophets was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

The Jews were filled with the Spirit without measure, as were the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, even the Gentiles. This is why Paul would write to the Galatians, "in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14).

This then is the promised Holy Spirit. My prayer is that when you give testimony, you will have a sense of awe that God kept his promise. You and I are living in an age of unprecedented privilege. We were born at the right time, in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of everything that Moses longed for.

So the first thing we learn about this notion of being sealed with the Holy Spirit is that it is the fulfillment of a past promise.

There is a second thing.

III. A Present Delight To the Soul (1:13b)

...you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,

"Sealed" is the verb that Paul uses to describe the ministry of the Spirit in our lives. All who believe in Christ are sealed by the Spirit. In the OT, the noun form of this verb was often used of the signet ring of the king (Jer. 22:24), which was used to seal important documents. This seal had a three-fold purpose: 1) to guarantee the authenticity of the documents, 2) to name their rightful owner, and 3) to protect them from being tampered with or harmed (in fact, tampering with them was a capital offense). This then, in effect, is what is in view here in Ephesians when it says that Christians are "sealed" with the Spirit.

Let us look at these three things individually — authenticity, ownership, and protection.

(a) Authenticity: Brings Assurance To the Soul

When Paul was asked to produce a document authenticating his apostleship to the Corinthians, here is what he said in reply: "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:2-3). In 1 Corinthians, he wrote, "You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord" (1 Cor. 9:2).

How do you know you are a Christian? Is it because you have an official document, perhaps a baptismal certificate or a letter of church membership? In the new covenant, however, no external ritual, whether circumcision, baptism, church membership or anything else can guarantee authenticity. Here is what actually happened to you. When you became a Christian, the Holy God took his signet ring and pressed it against your soul, leaving his image indelibly stamped upon it by the Holy Spirit. This is why your spirit can now cry out "Abba, Father." This sealing by the Holy Spirit brings authenticity and assurance that you are a believer, transcending anything that is merely external in nature.

Here is the second mark.

(b) Ownership: Brings A Sense Of Value To the Soul

The king's seal in the OT was used not only as a mark of authenticity but ownership also. When God does this, he does it with extreme care and at much expense, resulting in great value being bestowed on the owner of the seal. This is why the high priest wore a band of gold on his head, engraved with these words: "Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as a seal: HOLY TO THE LORD" (Ex. 28:36). Look at how much attention to detail God engaged in to indicate that the sons of Israel were his: "Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal. Then mount the stones in gold filigree settings...There are to be twelve stones,

one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes...And Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment over his heart when he enters the holy place, for a memorial before the LORD continually” (Ex. 28:11, 21, 29).

Such care and expense assures the individual of the extraordinarily high value God places upon him or her, doesn't it?

When my wife Emily and I were first courting, I bought a seal for her in the form of a ring of pearls and a little diamond. Next, I gave her my fraternity pin, an even more expensive token. Later, when we studied together in Switzerland, I wanted us to become engaged. We found a ring, but just as we were about to buy it we decided to wait a bit and think things over. We finally agreed that our parents would probably be upset if we came home engaged at 19, so I bought Emily a consolation seal, a blue enamelled watch, to show that I was committed to her. The following summer I worked for two dollars an hour painting houses and I spent all my savings on the final seal, an engagement ring. But all those seals mean nothing when they are compared to three other seals who demonstrate our commitment, our three daughters.

When God wants to show how highly he values you, he does not demonstrate his love by presenting you with a piece of jewelry. Instead he sends a person, himself, the Holy Spirit, who takes root in your soul and seeks to give birth to many spiritual children. This is how great is his love for you.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the king's seal prevented official documents from being tampered with or harmed.

(c) Protection: Sense Of Security To the Soul

The seal was irrevocable. In the OT story, King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked” (Esther 8:8). This is what God is saying when he stamps your soul with his signet ring: He has done something that cannot be revoked. He owns you. So when we fail, we do not have to pray the prayer that David uttered following his failure, “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51). Once you have been sealed, it cannot be revoked.

How comforting it is to know that our security is guaranteed in dark times of judgment and apostasy. In the OT, the seal is often used as a protective marker upon the righteous in the face of upcoming judgment, as these words from Ezekiel demonstrate: “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst” (Ezekiel 9:4). When the wrath of God comes...

“the flame of fire and anger against the unrighteous shall not touch him...

For God's mark is on the righteous for (their) salvation...

They (the wicked) shall be overtaken as by those experienced in war,

for on their forehead (is) the mark of destruction.” (Psalms of Solomon 15:6, 9)

In the NT, the word “seal” is found 21 of 31 times in the book of Revelation. That book, of course, was written not just about the final tribulation but about the forces going on behind the scenes during the entire period of “last days” before the second coming. During these tribulations and the final tribulation, when Christians will be facing suffering and apostasy, many will fear whether they will make it or not. The angel will seek out those

who have the mark of the anti-Christ, the number 666 on their foreheads. (Don't look for a literal explanation of this; what it is saying is that those who do the deeds of the anti-Christ are those who think like the anti-Christ.) But those who have the seal of the Holy Spirit will not be touched, even during the darkest tribulation. They will be protected. Concerning apostasy, Paul wrote, “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness’” (2 Tim. 2:19). It is texts such as these that we hold onto in times of distress like those we are experiencing in our own day.

I was horrified to see on a television news programme last week the chaotic condition of our schools here in America. The programme reported on one young man who murdered both his teacher and the principal of the school. He shot them because he was angry that his life was falling apart, and in his rage he had no one to talk to. Just last week, an eight-year-old boy was murdered by his teenage friends in San Jose. Our own high school department was especially shocked by this tragedy because the boy who is charged with the murder accompanied our high schoolers on the Mexicali ministry last year. So our own children are being forced to deal with murder. How can we hope to make it in this day, in this place? We need the seal of the Holy Spirit. This is what will protect us, even in times of darkest apostasy.

When we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, God, in effect, is making the statement “This is my authentic son, whom I own and am committed to protect for eternity.” The seal is a fulfillment of the past promise; and it gives a sense of security in the present.

Finally, this seal of the Spirit looks ahead to a future inheritance.

IV. The Pledge Of A Future Inheritance (1:14)

...who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

(a) A Pledge That Delights the Soul

The Greek term for this word “pledge” means “down payment.” God's handing over this first installment of the whole is a guarantee that there is more to come. When we give a down payment we might feel reluctant to give the rest, but God is not. He has obligated himself to give us the full inheritance. Everything he is obliged to give to Christ — his rule and reign, the new heavens and earth — he is obliged to give to us as well. And the Spirit allows us to taste of that glory to come even in the here and now. This is what eternal life means. It is the quality of life of the age to come, of which the prophets wrote, that the Holy Spirit imparts to your soul now as if you today were living in that future age. When Emily and I finally became engaged, we exchanged letters every day (I still have hundreds of them, all numbered). I flew her up here every week from San Diego, and she arranged her college schedule to make this possible. She was here so often some people thought she was attending Stanford! We did this because we wanted to participate in what lay ahead for us. This is what the Holy Spirit does for Christians.

And his ministry is a self-effacing one. He shines a floodlight on the person of Christ, and when you see this light, you are drawn not to the Holy Spirit but to Christ himself. J.I. Packer wrote, “To know that God is your Father and that He loves you, his adopted child, no less than he loves his only begotten Son, and to know that enjoyment of God's love and glory for all eternity are pledged to you, brings inward delight that is sometimes

overwhelming; and this also is the Spirit's doing" (J.I. Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit*).

And the Spirit's work is not merely to impart intellectual understanding of the facts. His ministry is meant to grant us such an experience of love in our souls that we become melted with love for Christ. In ancient Greek, as we have seen, this word for pledge meant down payment, but in modern Greek it is used of an engagement ring. The Holy Spirit is a matchmaker! This is what the Holy Spirit does for Christians. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Years ago, after I had shared Christ in a little discotheque on the island of Mykonos in Greece, I walked outside to find the full moon sitting in the night sky over the Aegean Sea. I remember feeling very strongly the presence of Jesus with me, so strongly, in fact, that I said to myself, "Why would I ever want to sin? This tastes so good." This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Something else happens when you taste this pledge of the Spirit.

(b) A Pledge That Leaves One Longing for More

Do not be afraid of this love relationship with God. In Romania this past summer, we sealed our ministry with the Lord's Army with the gift of a person, Jim Foster. As we all were taking communion together one day, the children went first, and afterwards one of them began to weep. Slowly, one by one, all the children began to weep. The Holy Spirit came upon the meeting through the children who were in love with Christ and who sensed the privilege that was theirs through partaking in communion. That meeting had the effect of making us long for an even deeper relationship one with another.

When you have experiences like this, the only language that is adequate to describe your relationship with Christ is the language of the Song of Songs. Although this is a book about love in marriage, the mystics used it to speak of their relationship with Jesus because they felt it was the only language that was adequate to describe their love for him. Listen to these words, for example:

"O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
In the secret place of the steep pathway,
Let me see your appearance,
Let me hear you voice;
For your voice is sweet,
And your appearance is lovely." (Song of Songs 2:14)

"Put me like a seal (signet) over your heart,
Like a seal on your arm.
For love is as strong as death,
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
The very flame of the LORD." (Song of Songs 8:6)

This kind of holy love is cultivated by the union of two things which we see in our text, the Word and the Spirit. I find that many Christians today fear intimacy, so they remain satisfied with the Word only. We evangelicals are keen students of the Bible, but our study often is not much more than dry, head knowledge. For fear of being loved we sometimes hide behind trees. What evangelicals need is more of the Spirit, in tandem with the Word. Others, eager for the experience of the Spirit, neglect the Word, but their experience is not much more than emotional froth. When I look for help in combining these two elements of the Christian life, a sound theological footing and a

deeply intimate walk with Christ, I find little help in our present-day Christian writers. I find I have to glean from writers from the past who combined a deep theological understanding with their love for Christ. I will conclude by reading from one of these writers to demonstrate the intensity of this kind of love. Elizabeth Rowe, writing in 1737, was enraptured with Christ. She wrote, in *Devout Exercises of the Heart* (1737),

One glance from thee, one piercing ray,
Would kindle darkness into day,
The veil of night is no disguise
Nor screen from thy all-searching eyes;
Thro' midnight shades thou find'st thy way
As in the blazing noon of day.

But will the Lord cast me off forever? Will He be favourable no more?...

Is it a dream, or do I hear
The voice that so delights my ear?
Lo, he o'er hills his steps extends:
And, bounding from the cliffs, descends:
Now, like a roe, outstrips the wind,
And leaves the panting hart behind.

"I have waited for thee as they that wait for the morning," and your returns are more welcome than the springing daylight after the horrors of a melancholy night, more welcome than ease to the sick, than water to the thirsty, or rest to the weary traveller. How undone was I without Thee! In vain, while you were absent, the world has tried to entertain me: all it could offer was like jests of dying men, or like recreations to the damned. On your favor alone my tranquility depends; deprived of that I should sigh for happiness in the midst of paradise, for "thy loving-kindness is better than life." And if a taste of your love be thus transporting, what ecstasies shall I know when I drink my fill of the streams of bliss that flow from your right hand forever! But

When shall this happy day of vision be?
When shall I make a near approach to thee?
Be lost in love and wrapt in ecstasy?
Oh, when shall I behold thee all serene,
Without this envious cloudy veil between?
'Tis true, the sacred elements impart
Thy virtual presence to my faithful heart;
But to my senses still unreveal'd thou art.
This, though a great, is an imperfect bliss,
To see a shadow for the God I wish:
My soul a more exalted pitch would fly,
And view thee in the heights of majesty!

(From *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David L. Jeffrey [Eerdmans, 1987] 105-6).

My friends, God has a ring for you. I fear that many of you may be satisfied with the first three of these blessings that are yours in Christ, and you have not yet received the fourth. He is calling to you, wanting to become intimate with you, but you are hiding in the trees. Don't be afraid. He will speak tenderly to you, and he will hide his face from your sins so you need not feel ashamed. Once you become truly intimate with him you will never have to fear being open with anyone ever again.

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IN THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 899

Ephesians 1:15-23

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

November 29, 1992

Two years ago, I asked a good friend to plan a trip for a group of men from our Wednesday morning men's group to one of the most beautiful parts of his home state of Colorado. Eleven Californians and a recently arrived brother from Romania decided to make the trip. I gave each of them a teaching assignment from the Old Testament. They had to pick a character from the OT whom they resembled, and their assignment was to teach the rest of us the life of the character they had chosen and why they felt they were like him.

We set off in a van on a 1,000-mile journey to Colorado. It was an odyssey of breathtaking beauty. Our destination was a 5,000-ft. bluff overlooking the plains near Grand Junction, and on our arrival Christian friends had a feast prepared to welcome us. Next day we set up camp at 10,000 feet by a roaring river in a grove of Aspen and pine trees, while behind us stood the 14,000-foot high Mt. Snuffles. Our cook set up the kitchen, and, because it was the weekend of the Fourth of July, he hung a huge American flag between two trees, right over our table. Following a wonderful steak dinner, while we were sitting contended in our chairs, he brought out an ice chest and produced gourmet ice cream for dessert — at 10,000 feet! Next day we climbed almost to the top of Mt. Snuffles and, following our descent from the mountain, immersed our aching bodies in a local hot springs resort.

Then the men began to share from the Old Testament and from their lives. One said he was like Isaac, and he described himself as a timid person; another compared himself to Samson, and so on. As we began to open up to each other the sharing became more intimate. At last, when one man told his brother-in-law, who was part of the group, how much he loved him, we felt that the Lord had come into our midst. We were so moved we began to weep. Towards the end of our time together that evening our cook shared that he had recently come to Christ, and as a result his wife had left him. We had the privilege of baptizing this new brother in the roaring river at the end of our time of sharing. On our return home we all agreed that we would never be the same again because of that journey we had taken together up the mountain.

The problem with a journey like this, however, is that it is not repeatable, and, of course, everyone can't go. But this morning I want to tell you about a journey which the apostle Paul once took, and which everyone who is in Christ can likewise take. In the text to which we come today from the apostle's letter to the Ephesians we will learn that Paul, too, ascended a mountain, a peak much higher than the 14,000-ft. mountain our group climbed in Colorado. There, underneath the throne of God, the things that Paul saw and heard changed him forever. Don't you find it encouraging that the journey that he took is open to all Christians through the gift of the Holy Spirit who transports us to heaven in prayer? The book of Acts tells the story of Philip witnessing to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the next moment the evangelist was transported to an entirely different location. In the same way the Holy Spirit transports Christians, not geographically, as was the case with Philip but, more importantly, he takes

us to heaven, bringing the heavenly Zion to earth so that we can enter into it through prayer.

In the opening verses of this first chapter of Ephesians we have already seen that Paul has been listing the great blessings that are ours in Christ: We were chosen by the Father; redeemed by the Son; taught by the apostles; and sealed by the Holy Spirit. In our text today, the apostle prostrates himself in prayer, beseeching that the Holy Spirit transport Christians to the throne room of God in the heavenly Zion.

This morning therefore let us imagine that we are pilgrims taking a journey up to Mount Zion. The first thing Paul tells us is what prompted his prayer.

I. What Prompts Our Prayer? 1:15,16

For this reason, I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ...

As I grow older in the faith, I find that my thoughts want to be in communication more and more with God, but when it comes to talking to the Father, at times I feel like a rusty pump: nothing issues forth from my soul. Even while I am saying grace at meal-times I often feel empty and dry. I find I need motivation, something to prime my pump for the purpose of prayer. Here Paul tells us that there is something that does this for us. It is this: As we are going up the mountain to pray to God, we will notice that the route is thronged with worshipers; and as our eyes are opened to what God is doing in their lives, the report of that grace motivates us to pray.

(a) Their Faith in the Lord

This is what happened to Paul. The report of the faith in the lives of the Ephesian Christians, who had turned from idols to the living Christ and made him Lord, was what motivated him to pray. When we remember that the economy of Ephesus depended upon idolatry and sexual licentiousness, we can see that it was at great cost to themselves that the Ephesians embraced Christ. The book of Acts records that at one point a number of magicians in Ephesus who had come to faith burned their magic books, at great expense and risk to their lives. Here is how Acts describes that scene: "And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver" (Acts 19:19). At that time a drachma was equal to a day's wages, so if we calculate that the average wage in 1992 is \$100 per day, we see that these new believers in Ephesus destroyed property worth half a million dollars in their new-found zeal for Christ.

There was a second thing about the Ephesians that motivated Paul to pray.

(b) Their Love for the Saints

Their faith was accompanied by love. Like our twentieth cen-

ture world, there was not a lot of love demonstrated in that Greek world, yet these new Christians began to open their homes and share their meals and belongings without regard to wealth, age or race.

So it is the report of God's grace that prompted unceasing thanksgiving on the part of the apostle. This means that we must be part of a body, linked together with other Christians so that we may know what God is doing. Every time I meet Renee Russo, a member of our congregation, she says to me, "I pray for you every day!" When I heard her saying the same thing to someone else the other day, I began to wonder what motivated her to do this. At our Thanksgiving service last week I learned the answer. She told us that 11 years ago she was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors were not optimistic, and she began to pray for her recovery. When she had surgery, however, they discovered that she had hardly any cancer at all. They gave her a clean bill of health and, because she had been given a second chance, she began to pray for others. The grace of God shown to her was what motivated her to pray for the saints.

So God is the one who initiates prayer; it is not up to us. Rejoice therefore if your pump is rusty. Listen to the reports among us of what God is doing and then you will be motivated to enter the throne room in prayer.

Notice next the title Paul gives to the one to whom we should pray.

II. The One To Whom We Pray 1:17a

...the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory...

(a) The God of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem on a feast day were immediately struck by the reminders on every side of God's absolute holiness in the many barriers used to keep sinful man at a distance from God. When God first appeared to Moses, he gave explicit instructions to create barriers around the mountain lest anyone touch it and die. In Jerusalem, the city wall was erected to protect the sanctity of the place, and beyond the wall stood the various courtyards. Gentiles, for instance, could not pass beyond the court of the gentiles. Then came the court of the women and the inner court for men. Beyond these barriers lay the sacrificial altar. This was as far as Jewish males could go. Only the priest, dressed in holy garments, could go further. Only he was allowed to enter into the holy place, with its three pieces of furniture. But beyond that stood another barrier, a curtain hiding the Holy of Holies, and no one except the high priest ever ventured beyond that point; even he could do so on one day only, the Day of Atonement.

But now everything is different. When you make the journey to Zion, it is as if a limousine picks you up and the driver races by all the barriers. To your amazement and uneasiness he goes right to the altar. There you are greeted by a priest dressed in glory, and his first word to you is, "Brother." He dresses you in the garments of a priest and takes you by the hand, past the altar, past the laver, and directly into the Holy Place. Now you are really feeling uneasy. No longer is there a curtain guarding the Holy of Holies — it has been torn in two. Then you see at last that the priest who has been escorting you is Jesus himself. Through his sacrifice, the temple has been eternally changed. Once it was off limits, with the penalty of death for violators, but now the sign says, "Open access via the Son." To whom are we praying when we come to Zion? It is to "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory." His sacrifice altered forever the heavenly architecture.

When we get there, we are at the ark, and underneath the

wings of the cherubim we behold the Father of glory.

(b) The Father of Glory

In the OT, Uzzah once merely tried to steady the tottering ark and he was killed as a result. But now you are standing in a place, underneath the wings of the cherubim, where only a handful of OT prophets stood. As we know, when this happened these men were never the same again. Listen to the words of Ezekiel following his experience: "Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I saw from the appearance of his loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of his loins and downward it was something like fire; and there was a radiance around him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking..." (Ezekiel 1:26-28)

This was what Ezekiel saw, and this is what we enter into when we pray today.

David also experienced a state of ecstasy when this happened to him, as we read in Psalm 63:

When I remember Thee on my bed,
I meditate on Thee in the night watches,
For Thou hast been my help,
And in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to Thee;
Thy right hand upholds me. (Psalm 63:6-8)

And in Psalm 27, we have his words as he beheld the beauty of the place:

One thing I have asked from the LORD, this I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to meditate in His temple. (Psalm 27:4)

I feel that my problem in prayer is I am too quick to speak. I don't take time to watch and listen. I get but a glimpse of the glory of God, and then I hurriedly write my petty requests like memos and leave them in the Holy Place to return down the valley. I never really enter in to the Holy of Holies.

Now, as we stand beside the Son, underneath the throne of the Father of glory, we are free to make requests. And what do we ask for? When we see this kind of glory, our requests tend to undergo a radical transformation.

Let us see what the apostle prayed for.

III. The Focus of Our Prayers 1:17

...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

(a) Revelation in the Inner Man

Paul is so taken by the awesomeness of God's glory that he wants others to see what he sees. He wants God in his generosity to give to the Ephesian Christians the same gift of a spirit of revelation that he himself had (1:8-9), and to do so with the same measure of wisdom and insight.

Recently I heard a tape by Larry Crabb in which he shared that it was suffering that caused him to change his counseling methods. A few years ago, he was terrified with the thought that

his wife had cancer. When the biopsy showed that she did not, he went out rejoicing and praising God. Three days later, however, he was told that his brother was killed in an plane crash, and he wept with grief for days. His grief, he said, tapped a deep root of grief which he had never felt before, but through the pain he got to know God better. "Now," he says, "I don't use God to solve people's problems. I use their problems to help them get to know God." If you want God to solve your problems, don't ask for counseling. But if you are hurting, and if you want to find God in your hurt, then we can help you. This is what prayer is all about — getting to know God.

(b) To Know God Intimately

Paul prays that the Ephesians would come to know God as intimately as the apostles did. Though they were the first to hope in Christ, and they alone as eyewitnesses of the risen Christ were uniquely authorized to write Scripture, the apostle says they had no corner on the market of intimacy with Christ. Thus, as every generation of Christians feeds on the writings of the apostles they can become as intimate with Christ as the apostles themselves. How thrilling this would have been to the Ephesians! They had forsaken the high-priced mystery religions where knowledge was something to be kept secret, a practice that is continued today with many of the self-help groups who charge high fees for their weekend rituals and then demand secrecy from their gullible followers. But it is not so in Christ. While the apostles occupied unique positions, their word leads us even today to the throne room of heaven where we too may know Christ.

This then is the general purpose behind our prayers.

Paul lists some specifics in the verses that follow.

IV. The Specifics of Our Prayers 1:18-19

**...having the eyes of your heart enlightened,
so that you may know
what is the hope of His calling,
what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in
the saints,
and what is the surpassing greatness of His power
toward us who believe...**

In this phrase "having the eyes of your heart enlightened," Paul is praying for knowledge that is deeper than mere knowledge of the mind. He prays that the minds and hearts of the Ephesians would catch fire.

He continues with three things he desires for them as they enter the throne room.

(a) The Hope of His Calling For Us

In these words, "what is the hope to which he has called you," I think Paul is asking Christians, "How certain is your calling?" This speaks to our greatest need, doesn't it? When we pray, we see ourselves as sinners, always in a rut. We tend to think that God is standing there saying, "Oh it's you again. Are you here with the same problem?" We wonder if God's call is effectual, and will he be faithful to truly change us. Is he committed to us? in other words. Paul assures us that when we are underneath the throne of God, in the presence of his glory, our doubts will melt like wax before the burning flame, and we will begin to have expectations of perfect holiness one day. This is what gives us assurance.

There is a second thing.

(b) The Wealth Of His Glory In Us

Over the holidays I saw that movie "Far And Away," the story of an Irish couple who dreamt of a new land in Oklahoma.

They followed their dream to that land where they heard that unlimited acres were free for the taking. The story played out all the hardships and disappointments they went through until at last they reached the starting line for the great Oklahoma Land Rush. They discovered that the promise was real: the land was rich, beautiful and free. As my wife watched the film she grew a bit nostalgic. Her great-grandparents got their section of land in that land rush, but when her grandmother died, the government took it all back in inheritance taxes. Inheritances in this world are very uncertain, aren't they?

At times we wonder if God will be generous to us. Will he give himself completely to us or will he hold something back? We wonder if perhaps, like the IRS, he will take everything back. When we begin to see the glory of Christ in the temple, however, and we realize that all the riches that God gave to him are intended for us, then at last we become contented; our grumbling and complaining ceases. We can put up with whatever comes our way for the moment, for the fact that God holds nothing back from us makes us a quieter people.

Knowing this would have been extremely meaningful to the Ephesian Christians. As we have already seen, many of them lost their livelihoods due to their commitment to Christ. They were forced to eke out a living while Ephesus thrived, while the investment bankers and the maritime traders profited and the Temple of Artemis enriched people through idolatry. Yet they were the true heirs of the world to come, and already they could observe the beginning of this new construction in the lives of the saints; thus they had the assurance of knowing for certain that their hope was not in vain.

Here is the third thing.

(c) The Greatness Of His Power Toward Us

...and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...

The majority of this text amplifies this thought of God's power, thus we may conclude that the problem of intimidation probably posed the most serious threat to the faith of the Ephesians. As they surveyed their situation, things did not look very promising. They must have wondered if God was capable of following through on what he had promised as the whole pagan world seemed to be uniting in its opposition to Christ. The gospel not only had spiritual implications, it had strong moral implications as well in its declaration of an end to idolatry. The story in Acts 19 demonstrates that the gospel so threatened the business of idolatry that a riot broke out in the stadium where 40,000 people raucously chanted slogans for two hours. Unlike Judaism, which had legal sanction, Christianity had no protection from its intimidators. We are seeing more and more of this in America today as the world seems to unite against the gospel. Our world is more open to idolatry, and as the pure message of the gospel attacks these strongholds, they unite in their hostility to Christ.

Now when the entire world comes together in this way, what measure of power can Christians count on? Paul tells us in these words,

...according to the surpassing greatness of His power, which He brought about in Christ, raising Him from the dead, seating Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:20-23)

Here Paul is saying that the measure of power that is given to us is the same measure that was given to Christ; and the demonstration of this was in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The first thing we see about this power is that it was unconquerable: “which He brought about in Christ, raising Him from the dead.” Man can boast in a lot of things he has conquered, but no one except Jesus has the power to overcome the grave. His life conquered death and opened up a new world order with a new kind of life — resurrection life. As we utilize this life we must expect to be put to death often. Our response, however, should be to rejoice when we are made to feel weak because this gives God opportunity to use his power in us.

George Ni shared last week on his trip to China to teach English, about how miraculously his financial support was raised, etc. But the Chinese authorities specifically told him that he could not share his faith in Christ, and they took steps to watch him and listen to him to ensure that he complied. George wondered why he was even in China as he could not see how he could fulfill his purpose. Then he became very sick, so sick that he thought he was going to die. He began to pray, and God restored him to health. Afterwards a young woman came to him secretly and said to him, “I am interested in this Jesus. Has he done any miracles for you lately?” George, of course, took the opportunity to tell her of God’s unconquerable power.

Secondly, God has given Jesus *carte blanche* authority to use this power, as was demonstrated in our Lord’s ascension — “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” In the ascension, Jesus was given David’s throne, but it was an even better throne than David’s, for Jesus entered a new dimension, the highest rule, “above all.” So whether they are earthly or spiritual, whether they are nations, kings or governments, Jew or Gentile, not one of these powers is strong enough to pose a threat to Jesus. He is not like some local monarch; his rule is universal.

And his authority is for all time: “not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” So Jesus’ rule is not a temporary one. We don’t have to wait for another party to come into office; he reigns and rules for all time.

Thirdly, the power that was given to Jesus does something that no other power could ever do: it restores mankind. Paul says, “...and He put all things in subjection under His feet...” In the Garden of Eden, man was crowned with dominion over all things to be like God. But in the fall, he lost that dominion. He lost more than that: he lost his humanity in the process. In Christ, however, God restored man’s dominion. Now when Jesus gives forth his resurrection life, it does not abuse or coerce you; it makes you human. You begin to feel things you never felt before, things like gentleness and compassion for others. Why? It is because you have had your humanity restored. Part of the reason Christians don’t make much of a stir in the world today is that we don’t present Christ in the proper light. This is why we hear responses like, “Well, that’s fine for you, but it’s not for me.” But, as Tom Wright has pointed out, in the first century, no one else was going around making the exclusive claim that they were the new human race! How does that strike you? Have you ever made that claim while you were witnessing to someone? One of the finest tributes paid to Ray Stedman at his memorial service, I felt, was when someone said Ray was a man — a complete man. This is what resurrection life does: it makes you fully

human.

Finally, where is this power to be found? Paul’s answer is that the exclusive power brokers are the saints.

[He] ...gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.

Where is his rule and power manifest in the present age? It is not found in Washington D.C., in IBM, Hewlett Packard, the IRS, the Pentagon, nor in Israel. It is found only in the church, in the body of Christ. The fulness of that power is in his body, so go out and take new ground. Don’t be intimidated by anyone or anything. If you understand the vision properly, in the new heavens and the new earth the life of Christ will fill out the temple; the temple will fill out the whole city of Jerusalem; and the New Jerusalem will fill out the whole creation, until Jesus fills “all in all.” Meanwhile, in this present age, Jesus has given his power in the church, and Christians are his power brokers. We get to occupy the starting place in the war for the liberation of mankind.

David in the OT saw that the next event following the ascension of Jesus was the unveiling of the dawn:

Thy people will volunteer freely in the day of Thy power;
In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
Thy youth are to Thee as the dew. (Psalm 110:3)

The Lord’s people, says David, will be “like dew” — an innumerable army “suddenly, silently mobilized” (Derek Kidner). They will be glistening, having been cleansed in the holiness of the King. This is why Jesus could say, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth, therefore go make disciples of all nations...I am with you...”

So this is the prayer of the apostle for the Ephesians and for us. And the evidence that we know Christ is that we have assurance when we doubt; there is contentment for the discontented; and confidence for the fearful.

My Romanian friend John was the man most deeply moved by our trip to Colorado. He was affected by the new land and the new resources that he saw, but most of all, although his English was not good, he was moved by the testimonies and the outpouring of love he felt from the men. “I thought I was a Christian,” he said, “but I saw something different here.” On the Fourth of July, two of the men took the American flag and wrapped it around him and we rejoiced together. One Sunday a few weeks later I was surprised to discover that John had returned to Romania. But my surprise turned to joy when I heard the reason for his return: he was going home to get his family. All he had was a 1,000-mile glimpse of the new land that we had shown him, but it was enough to assure him that this land was a certainty. And because he knows this, I am sure he lives differently in his own land, as he now knows that it is only a temporary dwelling for him and his family.

The heavenly Father wants to transport you to a new land and for you to catch a glimpse of its glory. When you do this, he will wrap you in the mantle of his glory, and he will send you back to earth to tell your family and friends to come with you and rest in the shadow of his wings.

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HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 900

Ephesians 2:1-10

Seventh Message

Brian Morgan

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Seven centuries before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah foretold of the first Christmas to a people living in gloom and darkness:

“But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on he shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.” (Isaiah 9:1-2)

The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were the areas hardest hit by the devastating Assyrian invasion, and to these people the light would come. The testimony of the glorious advent of Emmanuel would be appreciated most by those who were walking in deepest darkness. This was why Jesus settled in Galilee of the Gentiles.

At our men’s Bible study last week, a man who had been living in this kind of darkness shared his testimony. When he was five years old, he told us, he was molested by his father. His parents divorced as news of this surfaced, but he suffered further physical abuse, resulting in 14 broken bones, through his mother’s two subsequent marriages. These traumatic experiences made him angry, bitter and unforgiving. He found he could mask his pain by becoming an over-achiever in school, and he became a straight “A” student. After he graduated, he decided to become a policeman so that he might help people. He joined a local police department, only to discover that almost 40% of his fellow-officers had been molested when they were children. He threw himself into his work, laboring 70 hours a week, and was awarded with a promotion to train the SWAT teams. But even this could not suppress the pain he felt inside, so he founded a business on the side and became rich.

Then one day his life fell apart. It was Thanksgiving Day, he said, and he answered a police call saying a man was brandishing a gun in a residential area. As he was driving to the scene he surmised what this man was probably going through. He had been fired from his job, or lost his girlfriend, he imagined. It was 2 a.m. on Thanksgiving morning. He was probably depressed, and in all likelihood he wanted the police to shoot him. When my friend arrived at the scene, he saw the man sitting on the sidewalk, a 44 magnum by his side, a gun so powerful that a bullet fired from it could penetrate a car engine. The man picked up the gun and pointed it at him. My friend said he should have shot and killed him, but he couldn’t pull the trigger. Eventually he succeeded in talking the man into putting down the gun. Later he discovered that the gun was not loaded. It was apparent that the distraught man wanted to be killed, and it turned out that he had indeed lost his job and his girlfriend had left him.

Although my friend had spared his life, on the way to the police station in his car the man cursed him and spat at him. When

my friend got home later that morning, he knew he had failed at his job. He had jeopardized his own life and the lives of others. If he had to face a similar situation again, he himself would probably be killed. When he realized this, he told us, he felt that his whole life had just come apart.

I watched 70 men glued to their seats as they listened to this man’s testimony. Many of them were moved to tears. How profitable, I thought to myself, are testimonies. When someone is vulnerable and freely speaks of his gloom, anguish and contempt, our hearts empathize with the frailties of the one sharing his weaknesses. As this former policeman spoke of the light of Christ coming to one who had walked only in deepest darkness, our hearts were enlarged for the love and the glory of Christ that is able to restore and rebuild lives that seemed beyond hope.

The testimony of the Ephesian Christians is the apostle Paul’s subject in the text to which we come today in our studies in his letter to the Ephesians. In the opening verses of the letter, we have already seen that Paul wanted Christians everywhere to comprehend the blessings that were theirs in Christ. The first way we comprehend these blessings is through the Scriptures; then, secondly, prayer takes this knowledge and places it in the heart. The third element, as we will see today, is listening to testimonies of the lives of others. Hearing testimonies of how Christ invaded the lives of people and changed them utterly helps enlarge our hearts with the love of Christ. I feel that this is one of the neglected aspects of the Christian life. If we study the apostle’s writing pattern, however, we will discover that the sharing of testimonies is extremely valuable to help us comprehend the depth of our blessings in Christ.

As we begin our text, Paul is describing the condition of the Ephesians before they came to faith.

I. Highway To Hell: The Walking Dead 2:1,2a

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

(a) Symptoms of Death

Paul is quite blunt about the spiritual condition of the Ephesians before they met Christ. “You were dead,” says the apostle. They were the walking dead, totally unresponsive to the life of God. The evidence of this was that they “walked in trespasses and sins.” They were rebels and failures. “Trespasses,” as we have already seen, are rebellious offenses against God that are done in a high-handed way; “sins” convey the idea of missing the mark, of being frustrated by failure.

In the past couple of weeks, I have had ample evidence of how badly I miss the mark, despite my best intentions. Recently I asked Gary Vanderet to teach our men’s group, and when he appeared on the morning scheduled, I forgot I had asked him. Gary was very sensitive and kind. He didn’t embarrass me; he

just slipped out quietly. Later he told me, “When I looked into your eyes, I knew you had forgotten.” Then on Monday morning last I had a vague feeling that I had a breakfast appointment. When I telephoned the restaurant, I found that I had, but I had missed it. On Tuesday morning I had another breakfast appointment, but I missed that one too because I had confused it with my Monday appointment. I finally set a date for Thursday morning with one of the men I had offended, but when I arrived in the restaurant, I saw two of our elders sitting there and I knew I had missed an appointment with them! Despite my best efforts, I was missing the mark. My “sins” had found me out.

Those who doubt the depravity of the human heart should ask themselves, why is it that when we desire to do good, it takes all our effort and resolve and we still fall short? When we do evil, on the other hand, it feels like we’re giving ourselves over to what we could not help doing, and we needed little or no resolve to do so. For instance, we say we suffered “an outburst of anger.” I have yet to hear someone say, however, that he had an “outburst of patience.” It is because our desires alone are not good enough.

So Paul says that the Ephesians were the walking dead before they came to Christ.

(b) The Forces of Death 2:1,2a

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course (age) of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

When you undergo a physical examination, a good doctor, after he evaluates your symptoms, will take a blood test to determine if there are any foreign substances in your bloodstream that are exerting a destructive influence on your body. In the same way, says Paul, the symptoms of rebellion and failure in the lives of the Ephesians before they came to Christ, were indicators that certain forces were at work in their souls. He identifies these forces as the world, the flesh and devil. The Ephesians thought they were free, but upon closer examination it was evident that they were, essentially, acting just like marionettes — someone else was pulling their strings, exerting a powerful force over them. When this happens in inter-personal, family relationships, our generation labels this syndrome “co-dependency.” For example, we think we are free and independent, but when we gather for family occasions, we find we are not free at all because others exert a negative influence upon us, causing us to respond in ways we do not like. At times like this I find myself withdrawing into a shell and reverting into old patterns of behavior.

How vigorous is this disease that is caused by “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience”? “Working” here means, highly energized. Like AIDS, this is a vigorous disease. Although it may lie dormant for a time, the day will come when it will take over your body completely and destroy you.

Idolatry is a strange thing. We think that when we indulge an idol we can control it, but we soon find that our indulgence, far from satisfying us, only whets our appetite for more. Soon we begin to long for the idol again, so we indulge ourselves once more, but now pleasure is more difficult to achieve so we go farther than we wanted to. Before long we are going beyond limits we thought we would never allow ourselves to come to. So our appetite becomes voracious. It even makes new demands, longing for perverse things, taking over more of our thoughts. We end up with less and less pleasure and more and more indulgence.

How vigorous is the disease that Paul is referring to? Our brother shared on Wednesday that after he had come to the end of himself on that Thanksgiving week, the pain of an unforgiving spirit gnawed ceaselessly in his soul. He began to gamble, but this new idol soon took over and he allowed himself to go way beyond what he had ever imagined. Through gambling, which was how he began dealing now with the pain he felt inside, he lost everything — his job, his wife, and all his riches, more than \$300,000.

What is the source of this deadly disease? Knowing its origins perhaps will help us.

(c) The Hereditary Nature of Death 2:2

Its source is “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” The point here is that we are all “sons of disobedience.” The disease is passed down from family to family. Victims of abuse are consumed with anger toward their abusers, but then they often discover that their abuser himself was abused, and so on back the line. Like marionettes, someone is plucking our strings, making us do their bidding, and this goes on from family to family in an unbroken cycle.

People who are racing down this road, this “Highway to Hell,” as I call it, finally have to face themselves and their pain. They begin looking for an off-ramp, a way of escape. Finally they see an apparent way out, a road sign that says “Religion.” But will religion change their situation? Paul answers this question in verse 3.

(d) Death’s Universal Destiny 2:3

Among them we {Jews} too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The sign says “Religion,” but it is not an off-ramp; it is a dead-end.

What is Paul saying here? “You Gentiles live in the lusts of the flesh,” says the apostle, “but so do we Jews. Our religion is of no value in this regard.” Paul himself is an excellent example of the dilemma that he illustrates. He lists his qualifications in Philippians 3. He was born of the choice tribe of Benjamin; he had a privileged education, having studied under Gamaliel; and he had a passionate zeal for his religion. Yet with all of those physical blessings, he confesses, he was still ruled by the lusts of the flesh. He was just as helpless as any pagan — even if he had a more polished religious veneer. Remember Jesus’ indictment of the Jews who were convinced that their qualifications (due to their physical birth) were enough to get them into heaven. Said Jesus, “I know that you are Abraham’s offspring; yet you seek to kill me, because My word has no place in you...You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (Jn. 8:37,44a).

So here Paul indicts his own people, saying that the Jews “were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” There is no case to be made for “us” versus “them.” “We are all,” says the apostle, “whether Jew or Gentile, by nature children of wrath. And our destination is the same: ‘by nature we were children of wrath, even as the rest.’ Our whole natural bent and disposition as Jews was the same as rank pagans. We were destined to fall under the same wrath.” This statement would have had him stoned in most synagogues, yet Paul has no hesitation making it here.

Perhaps I can illustrate. My daughter had to have a blood

transfusion when she was born in 1982. A couple of years ago, we got a letter from the hospital saying that she now needed to be tested for HIV because blood was not screened for the AIDS virus back then. We were very thankful that she tested negative, but sobered by the knowledge that although she was a pure and innocent child, she could very well have contracted the disease through a blood transfusion and suffered the same fate as thousands who have died because of their high-risk behavior.

No, there is no off-ramp on this highway. No matter what kind of car we are driving, a beat-up VW or a brand new BMW, we will all end up at the same place. There is no off-ramp for the walking dead.

But why is the apostle reminding the Ephesian Christians of their depraved condition before they came to faith? When we remember that the economy of Ephesus was based on idolatry, we have the answer. Paul was reminding them so they would not become self-righteous and clothe themselves with a phony religious veneer. When they saw the priestesses doing their seductive dances, and the greedy merchants using idolatry to exploit others, they would be quick to see that this was how they were before they came to Christ. They would have compassion on sinners, knowing that they were not enemies but victims.

It was this kind of humility and appreciation that former slave trader John Newton expressed in the opening verses of his famous hymn, "Amazing Grace":

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound —
That saved a wretch like me!*

This is why Paul reminds the Ephesians of their former ways — so that they would remain humble and freely confess to others what they themselves had been delivered from.

So we have the apostle's word about the human condition: We are "dead in [our] trespasses and sins." Where is God in all of this? you ask. Many people have a mental picture of God as a policeman roaming the streets looking for sinners to pounce on. When he catches them, he slams them against his patrol car, handcuffs them, and throws them in jail. But this doesn't change anything, does it? The problem still remains.

There is no off-ramp on the highway to hell, as we have seen, but there is an overpass.

II. The Overpass of Mercy: "But God" 2:4,5a

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions...

Here Paul comes to the heart of his text. His whole argument lands on the two opening words of verse 4: "But God..." The apostle speaks to three aspects of the Father's heart.

(a) But God Has A Mother's Heart

The word for "mercy" which Paul uses here is the Hebrew word for womb. God has a wealth of mercy toward people who are trapped on the highway to hell. Like a nursing mother, he is easily moved to come to our aid because he knows our helplessness and he is grieved by it. No, God is not a policeman, he is more like a weeping mother.

(b) But God Will Go to Any Length to Save Us

"...because of His great love with which He loved us,..." Like a mother, he will go to any lengths to save the life of a dying child.

(c) But God Is Undaunted By Lack of Response

"...even when we were dead in our transgressions." God knows that we are spiritually comatose, that we cannot respond, but even this does not thwart him. His compassion moves him to change everything that stands between us and him.

Thus when we give testimony to God's grace in our lives, our vulnerability accomplishes two things: a) it exposes our frailties and keeps us humble, and b) it reveals the true face of the Father, a countenance that is radiant with mercy and compassion toward the walking dead.

"But God..." There is the overpass of mercy.

"But," you protest, "God is up there, and we are down here on the highway to hell. How can we get off the highway if there are no off-ramps?" The answer is, God provides a ladder.

II. The Ladder To Heaven 2:5b-10

God's ladder awakens us to four new things: a new life, a new destiny, a new spirit, and a new walk.

(a) To A New Life 2:5b,6

But God...made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly {places}, in Christ Jesus,

Notice that the three verbs that Paul uses here describe vertical, not horizontal movements. The preposition "with" is found before each verb: made alive *with* Christ, raised *with* Christ, seated *with* Christ. There is a ladder, and the ladder is Christ! Jacob once was on the highway to hell. He sought his own prideful way in life, not caring whether he destroyed people along the way, but in a dream one night he saw a ladder descend from heaven. This was what he needed, a ladder, not a new route to help him flee from his brother Esau. This is what God does to save us, too: He sends a ladder to rescue us.

God did three things in order to accomplish this, says our text. First, he "made us alive together with Christ." We are all familiar with Michelangelo's famous ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel of God bringing Adam to life by a finger touch. But this touch was not quite intimate enough. God actually breathed life, like a kiss, into Adam in an intimate, self-sacrificial act. In the stories concerning Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37), when the prophets restored life to a child, they did not do so with a touch or a word. They placed their mouth on the child's mouth, their eyes against his eyes, their hands on his hands, and then breathed life into the dead body. We can only marvel at the degree of intimacy involved when the Father sent the Holy Spirit to resurrect Jesus and make him alive in the tomb. How awesome it is to think that he must do the same for you and me when he rescues us from the highway to hell.

Secondly, God "raised us up with Him." God raised us to a new place, a new geographical setting (heaven itself), far above all other influences (our lusts and other negative behavior) that were controlling us.

Thirdly, we are "seated with Him." Now we are reigning with Christ, sharing in his rule, so that we might overcome our earthly passions, conquering new ground for the gospel in the process. And we are given new heavenly appetites that transcend the old.

When we finally grasp the enormity of this mercy of God that places us in Christ, then we can sing with John Newton,

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,*

The hour I first believed.

(b) To a New Destiny 2:7

We are no longer destined for wrath.

in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

When I was in Italy as a student, I was surprised to see displayed along the walls in the Academy in Florence some half-finished sculptures by the master sculptor Michelangelo. He believed that the task of the sculptor was to liberate the figure from the block of marble that imprisoned it. J. W. Jansen, in *The History of Art*, comments, "but sometimes the stone refused to give up the essential part of its prisoner, and Michelangelo, defeated, left the work unfinished, as he did with his St. Matthew, whose every gesture seems to record the vain struggle for liberation." Believers are destined to be displayed in a much more exalted place, the Academy of Heaven, and God will beckon the angels to come and study us like some great work of art. When they look at us, however, they will not see us as half-way liberated people. Even though we fight against the chisel, God's kindness is so great he will never stop working on us and with us until we are a finished and glorious work.

(c) With a New Spirit 2:8,9

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

If we ask what part did we have in all this, Paul replies that our salvation is not accomplished by works, but by faith. And even our faith, says Paul, was a gift of God. When we finally realize this, it brings an end to our arrogance once and for all and we become truly humble. A man said to me last week, "I have a wonderful wife, four lovely children, and 10 healthy grandchildren. In a way I am waiting for the second shoe to drop." He can't get over the fact that he is so blessed by God. But this is nothing compared to the awe we will experience when we get to heaven. It is merely a taste of what is coming.

This, too, was Newton's thought:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

We will never cease singing God's praises. Because we were once dead, we will never get over the awesomeness of what God has done for us in Christ.

(d) For a New Walk 2:10

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Notice here that we are not saved *by* works, but *for* good works, "that we should walk in them." Our text began by saying that we were the walking dead; it ends by describing a transcen-

dent new walk. The midpoint of the text is the heart of God — his mercy which changes everything. We began as the walking dead, and we end as transformed new creations, walking in liberty.

And if you ask what is your role in doing good works, Paul would say that the first priority in our walk as Christians is not to struggle to do good works for God, but to enjoy the privilege of God working in us. We are *his* workmanship, *his* new creation.

The more I observe life, the more amazed I am at the expense and effort that God went to in order to make us a tribute to his beauty and grace. And the greater the task he has in mind for the sinner, the longer he takes. When he chose Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, he put his program back 40 years in order to teach Moses humility. When he wanted David to be king over Israel, he first sent him out to the wilderness to teach him humility. And he sent Paul away to a wilderness for 10 years so that he might be fit for his ministry to the Gentiles.

And here is another amazing thing. When God has done his good work in us, then he prepares good works for us "that we should walk in them." He brings both work and workman together, and in a beautiful moment in time they unite. In my office last week, a married couple who were having difficulties both received Christ at the same moment. I didn't do anything to cause this to happen. This was a good work which God had prepared for me to walk in for a brief moment.

So in our new walk, rather than being tyrannized by evil forces and responding like marionettes, with the world, the flesh, and the devil pulling the strings, God has liberated us so that we become life-givers to others, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

My policeman friend ended his testimony last week by saying he had a spiritual blockage in his life because he would not forgive his father. God had to do a work in him, he said, so that he would have to face up to the bitterness that was eating away at him. So God took away his wife, his job, and his riches. Last week, after years of bitter feelings, he telephoned his father and told him he had forgiven him. It will probably take a long time for their relationship to be completely restored, but he has made the beginning that God wanted him to make. Such was the good work that God had prepared beforehand that he should walk in it.

Parents, during this holiday season, don't just tell your children the story of Christmas. Tell them your own story, too. Be vulnerable about your own depravity, and who pulled your strings before you came to Christ. Tell them about your highway to hell. Then tell them of that overpass of mercy where you saw the face of God for the first time; and of the ladder that came down to take you up to heaven; and the work of grace that made you alive; then together you can sing of God's amazing grace.

*Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound —
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

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ONE NEW MAN

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 901
Ephesians 2:11-22
Eighth Message
Brian Morgan
December 13, 1992

Every Christmas Eve, it is traditional in our home for one of my daughters to read the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke. I am always moved when I hear again the announcement of the angels to the shepherds on that wondrous night when Christ was born:

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord...Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.” (Luke 2:10,11,14)

When we are children, that longing for peace on earth resonates within us. But as we grow older, we find ourselves asking, “What peace?” Today, as we are singing “Peace on earth,” American troops are landing in Somalia. Hatred is so widespread in that famine-stricken land that a huge army is needed to feed the starving population. In Bosnia, a racial war that is being fought without quarter has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands, without discrimination as to their age or sex. The Gaza Strip this past week has seen the fiercest fighting in 10 years in that troubled land. Two Israeli soldiers said on television last night they that feel like throwing up their hands. It’s a mess in that part of the world, they said.

But we don’t have to look to faraway lands to see turmoil and hatred. Much closer to home, even within our own families, we must confront enmities of long standing. Walls that have taken years to construct are especially apparent during the holiday season. Family occasions, which should be opportunities for joy and thanksgiving, instead become times of stress and argument. Many will identify with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s carol, composed in memory of the death of his son, who was killed in the Civil War:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play —
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought of how the day had come
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head,
There is no peace on earth, I said,
For hate is strong and mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

Where can we find this peace among men that we sing about at this time of year?

A careful look at our text this morning will show that the word “peace” is the key expression in this section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In our last study, as the apostle reviewed the testimony of these Ephesian Christians, we saw that it was grace, and only

grace, that drew them up out of the dungeon of hell and reconciled them to God, thus establishing peace, as it were, in the vertical dimension. But the cross of Christ did more than this. The cross accomplished something far more significant than a mere legal maneuver designed to accomplish forgiveness for sin. Today we will see that the cross of Christ, amazingly, created a new society. The apostle refers to this new order as “one new man,” and its primary characteristic is peace.

Our text has three divisions: 1) a portrait of the old society, characterized by alienation (2:11-12); 2) the “one new man,” established through the work of Christ (2:13-18); and 3) the new society, founded in Christ (2:19-22).

I. The Portrait Of the Old Society 2:11,12

Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” {which is} performed in the flesh by human hands — {remember} that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

(a) We Were Alienated 2:12

Four statements used by the apostle describe the spiritual condition of the Gentiles before they came to Christ. First, they were “separate from Christ,” who was the source of all spiritual blessing. Second, they had no citizenship: they were “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel.” Third, they had no hope: they were “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope.” And fourth, they were abandoned: they were “without God in the world.” They had to live in God’s world, yet they were “without God.”

A few years ago, a fellow-pastor and I went to minister for a couple of weeks in Honduras. On our flight down there, we saw in a news magazine article that CIA agents were at that time infiltrating into that politically sensitive part of the world. The article pointed out that these agents were easily recognizable because they all wore the same kind of clothes — blue jeans and plaid shirts — and they all had short hair. My heart sank. Both my friend and I were wearing exactly the clothes described — and we had short hair, too! When we got to Honduras, there was no one to meet us at the airport. It seemed that the man who was supposed to pick us up thought we were arriving the next day. So there we were, in a strange land, with no place to go, not speaking the language, without a friend to greet us. Things looked even grimmer when the military began shutting down the airport later in the evening. We had no advocate, no citizenship and no hope; we felt totally abandoned. What we experienced during those hours was similar to how the Gentiles felt before they came to Christ. They were, in William Hendricksen’s words, “Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and Godless.”

To make matters worse, they were given labels of ridicule, based on fleshly distinctions, by the Jews.

(b) We Were Scorned and Ridiculed 2:11

Following the Babylonian captivity, this sense of estrangement between Jews and Gentiles became ever more pronounced. The Jews divided the world in two categories — Jews and idolators. William Barclay writes that this division ran so deep that “it was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was equivalent to death.”

In the Talmudic teaching, the rift became even deeper. The words of one tormented Jew during the Emperor Hadrian’s reign capture the spirit of the time: “the best of the Gentiles should be killed,” said this man.

These labels were reminders to the Gentiles of the contempt they were held in by the Jews. The word “Uncircumcision,” which Paul uses here, is really a euphemism for “foreskin.” The Jews addressed their Gentile neighbors with this derogatory, insulting epithet, “You foreskins!” How contemptuous! The Gentiles, of course, began to respond in kind. Down through the millennia, to this very day, the Jews have been the most hated of all races. Never in history has there been a division as great as that between Jews and Gentiles. It is the source of the Arab-Israeli conflict today, the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, and the many pogroms through the ages.

How critically important is our text today, therefore. It does nothing less than tell us how God brought about peace between these two great enemies. He brought peace to these warring races through the work of Christ in the “one new man.”

II. The One New Man 2:13-18

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both {groups into} one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, {which is} the Law of commandments {contained} in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, {thus} establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

(a) The Goal: “formerly far off, brought near” 2:13

From this text we can see that it was the purpose of God to bring near these Gentiles who were once far from him. But, under the Old Covenant, this presented a problem.

(b) The Problem: Enmity 2:15

The deep and long-lasting enmity between Jews and Gentiles was symbolized by the barrier of the dividing wall.

The temple in Jerusalem was set on an elevated platform. Around the temple was the courtyard of the priests. East of this court lay the court of Israel for the men, and further east was the court of the women. John R.W. Stott writes, “These three courts...were all on the same elevation as the temple itself. From this level one descended five steps to a walled platform, and then on the other side of the wall fourteen more steps to another wall, beyond which was the outer court or Court of the Gentiles.”

Thus the Gentiles could look up to, but not into the temple. Nor could they approach the temple, for the surrounding wall cut them off, and warning signs kept them away. Josephus describes the wall as “a partition made of stone all round, whose height was three cubits. Its construction was very elegant; upon it stood pillars at equal distance from one another, declaring the laws of purity, some in Greek and some in Roman letters, that ‘no foreigner should go within that sanctuary.’ A sign three feet across said, ‘no foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple, anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.’”

The Ephesian Christians themselves had personal experience of this kind of separation. Some years earlier, Paul had brought a love offering to the saints in Jerusalem, and he was accompanied on that mission of mercy by a group of Gentile Christians. When a rumor spread that a Gentile named Trophimus, who was from Ephesus, had entered the temple area, although the story had no basis in fact, a riot ensued. This riot, which ended with Paul being thrown into prison, had caused hard feelings in Ephesus, sentiments that still were present when Paul wrote this letter.

I confess I had disdainful feelings myself when I came face to face with fleshly distinctions in London earlier this year as I witnessed the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. A huge gate outside the palace separates royalty from the common folk, who press up against it in an effort to view the pageantry. I began to feel disdain for all the pomp and circumstance, and even enmity toward some VIPs who were allowed through. Later, when I viewed the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London, I felt even more disdainful of royalty. They are, after all, mere mortals, flesh and blood like you and me (as recent events have sadly shown), but they take honors to themselves that belong only to God.

In light of this enmity and division, therefore, we are forced to ask the question, why then did God constitute his people “according to the flesh” in the first place? The answer is that through one man, sin entered the human race. The promise was given to the woman that it was through her seed, in the weakness of human flesh, that God would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:16). And Israel would be the vehicle through whom that seed would come. The entire Old Testament looked forward to the coming of that seed, God-man in the flesh, which is the story of Christmas. In his coming, he instituted a whole new creation, born not “according to the flesh,” but “according to the Spirit.” From this point on there were to be no distinctions in the flesh.

This what the apostle declares in 14-16.

(c) The Solution: A New Creation 2:14-16

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both {groups into} one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, {which is} the Law of commandments {contained} in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, {thus} establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

God destroyed the old order and replaced it by creating “one new man.” We can illustrate this by saying that the Gentiles wanted to be admitted to this exclusive country club (God’s chosen people), but rather than sneaking them through the back door, God abolished the club entirely and established in its place a new society in Christ.

Three verbs describe God's actions in Christ: "He *abolished* in His flesh the enmity"; he "*broke down* the barrier of the dividing wall"; "*having put to death* the enmity." The sinless Christ was the only one who in his flesh was privileged to approach God in the temple. He took the enmity and the hatred upon himself and bore it for us. This was why he suffered and died, not inside but outside the city, outside the barrier wall, outside the camp. He "put to death the enmity," making it ineffective. This is how the barrier wall was broken down, rendering it totally ineffective. As a matter of fact, if Paul had written these words after 70 A.D., following the destruction of the temple by the Romans, he might have said that God's plan was to tear down not just the wall, but the whole temple complex.

This then is the message of Christmas. God came in the flesh, to bear the enmity in his flesh, to put to death in his flesh all distinctions of the flesh. He destroyed the old order to create one new man: "in order that in Himself He might make (literally, *create*) the two into one new man" — a transcendent new creation, in other words. It is noteworthy that the word "create" here has the same theological significance as the word used for creation in Genesis 1:1. This is referring, not to a reconstruction of the old order, but to the new creation — a brand new thing — the creation of one new man out of two. Is it any wonder the apostles were so thrilled that Jesus had reconstituted the people of God around himself, a new humanity born of spirit?

And what was the result of this new creation?

(d) Result Is Peace 2:14a,17,18

For He Himself is our peace...And he came and preached peace to you were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

Instead of having to become a Jew in the flesh in order to approach God, God says that Christ, who is Israel, personally invites those who are far away and those who are near to come, and he announces peace to them, inviting them to be part of the people of God, through himself.

We see both groups becoming one as early as the Christmas story in the gospels. In the announcement of Christmas, of peace to those far away, the wise men responded to the star which appeared and to the prophecy of Micah. This was why they bypassed Jerusalem, going straight to Bethlehem by the word of the prophet to approach the God-man himself in the flesh. And peace was also preached to those who were near: the shepherds came to see the Babe of Bethlehem, availing themselves of this declaration of "peace among men with whom He is pleased." Thus in the Christmas scene, we see the Jews (the shepherds who were *near*) worshiping side by side with the Gentiles (the three kings who were *far away*). They were at peace one with another because the wall had been broken down, the enmity had been done away with.

We find the same thing in the story of the prodigal son, related by Jesus. This is the tale of two brothers, one of whom had strayed far away, while the other remained nearby, at home. Like the Gentiles, the prodigal spent his inheritance, yet the father sought him out and preached peace to him. The older brother was near, yet he too had to repent (he was outside the house as well) in order to be invited to the party which the father was planning for the returning, repentant son.

So there are no longer any fleshly distinctions. Had the church understood this, they would have never instituted worship of the virgin Mary. She, of course, had every physical privilege. She

conceived Jesus, gave birth to him and nourished him at her breast. A woman said to Jesus once, "Blessed are the breasts that nourished Thee." But Jesus replied, "No, blessed is he who does the will of God." Intimacy in the flesh gave Mary no spiritual advantage. She had to come to faith, just like everyone else. As a matter of fact, in the gospels she was rebuked for her desire to direct the ministry of Jesus. And after the resurrection, we find her worshipping Christ alongside the brothers as equals in the upper room.

And what would this new society look like?

III. The New Society

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are {members} of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner {stone}, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

(a) All Have the Same Status 2:19

In this new society, all are fellow-citizens with the saints and all are members of God's household. Everyone has full status. There is no trial or waiting period where Gentiles are given a "green card" while they wait for their heavenly citizenship. There are no second-class citizens in the new society.

This is why we have no membership requirements here in this church. Everyone who comes to Christ instantly becomes a member of his body. If we insist on membership, we have, in effect, erected a wall of division that includes some and excludes others. But, as we have seen, all, those who are far away and those who are near, are now included in this new order. We would also encourage you not to assert denominational distinctions. We go by the names, "Christian, brother, sister," because we all have the same status and standing in Christ.

**(b) All Have the Same Heritage:
Roots and foundations 2:20**

When we decorate our Christmas tree, part of our tradition is that I hang the first ornament. (I hang the "Snoopy" ornament in the top right hand corner of the tree. He is wearing antlers because he thinks he's a reindeer.) Then we hang hand-made ornaments for each one of my children, including the two who died as infants, and one for my wife's mother. As we proceed, the children relive all the stories one by one and we are rooted and joined together more closely as a family. Now these traditions go back only about 15 years, but in Christ, our traditions as Christians go back all the way to Abraham. We are sons and daughters of Abraham, children of the royal line of David. His psalms, which became the prayers of Christ, now become our prayers, too. If we feel we don't have roots, it is because we don't journey with the patriarchs and the prophets and live in their writings. Reading and studying the Bible is the answer to rootlessness.

So we all have the same status and the same heritage.

There is a third thing.

(c) All Enter A New Place 2:21,22

We might expect the text to say here that now we are welcome to approach the temple in Jerusalem, that a guard will be placed there so we may come without fear of a riot, etc. But, we don't have to approach the temple now because *we* are the tem-

ple, a heavenly building that is growing into a holy temple, joined together by the Spirit. Notice in our text that what began in the flesh ends in the Spirit. It is a glorious place, a holy place, and what makes it glorious is the integration together of all of its parts. When you finally see this, your heart will be enlarged for the love of Christ.

I will conclude by drawing three implications from this marvelous text.

IV. Implications Of One New Man

(a) This Peace Is Found Nowhere Else

The text from Isaiah which Paul quotes from goes on to say,

**“Peace, peace to him who is far
and to him who is near,”
Says the LORD, “and I will heal him.
But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
For it cannot be quiet,
And its waters toss up refuse and mud.
There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”**
(Isaiah 57:19-21)

Now we know why Henry Wadsworth Longfellow could write these words,

*And in despair I bowed my head,
There is no peace on earth, I said.*

It was because he was looking for the heavenly temple in the wrong place. Peace, as we have learned from our text today, is found only in this one new man, the church.

(b) Don't Build Walls

But peace is destroyed when we build walls of enmity, based on fleshly distinctions. The blood of Christ bore the enmity and destroyed that wall, so we must never do anything to rebuild it and thereby create enmity between people.

In this new man, there are no age distinctions. Let us keep it this way. Let us welcome young and old, the child and the pensioner alike.

And there are no racial distinctions. First century Christians left their safe kosher circles to minister in Samaria, a dangerous place where they could have been killed for interacting with the hated Samaritans.

There are no political distinctions. God is neither Republican nor Democrat. There is “one new man.”

There are no nationalistic distinctions. God is not pro-American. He is not a Zionist, either. He does not take sides in the Israeli-Arab conflict. He has made “one new man,” who is neither Greek nor Jew, in Christ. An Arab brother who visited our Bible study asked me if I considered him a second-class citizen. No, I told him, Galatians actually regards him as a son of Abraham through his faith in Christ. Now I believe that God will convert the Jews at the climax of history, but when he does, he will not reconstruct the whole fleshly order of things again. Like us, the Jews will enter the new transcendent dimension of the heavenly temple. They will love Christ in that great day, and fi-

nally become what they were intended to become all along, the light of the world.

There are no social distinctions. Rich and poor alike will be participants in the “one new man.” This Christmas, you may invite someone to your home who comes from a different social category than you, perhaps someone who is suffering from AIDS. If you do, when you look across your table, you will see the temple of God. AIDS sufferers are the social outcasts of our day. A couple of weeks ago, a friend called me to say that a man wanted to come to our Wednesday morning Bible study and be baptized there. When Kirk came on the following Wednesday, he shared his testimony with us. He had lived with two other men, he said, one of whom had died, the second had full-blown AIDS, and he himself was HIV positive. He was scared to death, he told us, and he wanted to repent. I wondered if our men would embrace this new brother, so I asked anyone who wanted to come forward and lay hands on him to do so. One after another the men came forward to embrace him and weep with him. There were no distinctions.

(c) Worship In the New Temple

In order to have your heart enlarged for the love of Christ, you must see him in the fullness of his temple. Let God take you on the *complete tour* of this new temple and your heart will burst with appreciation for the glory of it! As I look back on my own life, I feel like the wise men who were filled with awe and appreciation as they beheld the glory of God on earth. Who am I, a Gentile, that I should see this Baby? When I was a boy, I played golf in a country club that did not allow blacks to join. Then, after I had come to Christ, God took me on a journey to Africa, in 1978. In Nigeria, I heard thousands of brothers and sisters worshipping Christ in song, worship like I had never heard before. There I saw the glory of God

As a boy, I lived among the exclusive rich. But then I came to Christ, and God taught me that it was the poor who had the true spiritual riches. He took me in his chariot to Romania, the most oppressed country in Eastern Europe, and there I saw the glory of God in a suffering people who sacrificed everything for Christ.

As a boy, I lived in all-Jewish neighborhood. I was the only Gentile on the block, yet I never understood the Jews. Then I came to Christ, and he took me to Israel. There I discovered that my real roots were not in California or in Wales, but in Bethlehem, in the city of David. Ten years later, I met a Jew. This man in his brokenness placed no confidence in the flesh, and I had the joy of leading him to Christ. The one who was far away preached peace to the one who was near. Through him and his family, his father, his wife and children and his ministry, my eyes have seen the beautiful courtyards of the heavenly temple, the glory of Christ himself.

The saying was true. He “preached peace to him who was far away, and peace to him who was near,” and the two became the “one new man.”

*Glory be to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.*

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THE MYSTERY REVEALED: NO OUTSIDERS!

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 902

Ephesians 3:1-13

Ninth Message

Brian Morgan

February 21, 1993

Have you ever asked yourself what it is that drives you to do most of what you do? A brother shared with me at a recent men's retreat for a church in the East Bay. He was troubled by deep depression which manifested itself in frequent job changes. This continual need for change indicated that he was running from something, he felt. When I asked him to share a little about his background, he said that his father had rejected him as a boy, and this rejection greatly damaged his sense of worth. Later in life, his own nine-year-old son died from leukemia, and this tragedy resulted in the break-up of his marriage. He confessed he had never truly grieved over the loss of his son, but rather had continued his habit of running away from problems. Even after he came to Christ and was remarried to a Christian spouse he still made frequent job changes.

This man's story is typical of so many in our generation. It has been my observation that pain from our past is behind much of what drives us. How ironic, to think that the source of our pain is the feeling that we are outsiders in our own families. We respond to this rejection by building walls of protection to block out the pain and distance ourselves from people. But, rather than protecting us, these walls form tombs that deny our souls passion and feeling. We continue living and coping as best we can, of course, but we stop feeling. In the prison that we have constructed to protect ourselves, we fall into despair and begin to loathe our very existence.

The New Testament has a term for this condition: it is called "*losing heart*." I prefer the phrase used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, however: it translates a Hebrew word meaning "to have a sickening dread," "to loathe something," or "have long-standing revulsion towards something." Rebecca used this phrase when her son Esau married outside the covenant: "I loathe my life because of the daughters of Heth!" said the heartbroken mother (Gen. 27:46). The very thing she dreaded had happened, and she loathed her life as a result. She had lost the desire and determination to go on.

As we resume our studies in the book of Ephesians, beginning this morning in chapter 3 of Paul's letter, we will see that the circumstances in which the apostle found himself — he was imprisoned in Rome — could easily have led him to lose heart. Actually, he was keenly aware that because of his situation, others were losing heart. His rejection by his own people, following his decision to follow Christ and take the gospel to the Gentiles, had hurt him deeply. He was cast into a prison, from where he wrote this letter. He harbored no expectations of justice or release. Yet he wrote, "I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory." What was it about Paul's understanding of his circumstances that caused him to feel, not loathing, but glory? He tells us in this text that he had acquired a revolutionary understanding of a certain mystery. This knowledge set him free from despair, and placed him on a stage to play a role that would have eternal significance in the drama of human history.

In our text today, therefore, Paul shares, first, biographical material regarding his calling as a preacher, and second, the purpose and meaning behind all of history, what he calls the "mystery."

This mystery that Paul refers to is revealed in three movements. It is rather like a play in three separate acts, and this is how I propose to take this text. There are some unusual things about this drama, however. Each act has different actors, and each act is played before a new audience. Furthermore, as the play progresses, with each act the mode of communication changes.

It is essential that Christians come to an understanding of these matters, for if we don't comprehend our part, and which of the three acts we are to play in, then we will have no sense of the divine purpose for our lives. In this drama, therefore, we will discover the key to history, the key to our own significance, and the key to not losing heart.

In the first act, which covers verses 1 through 6 of this third chapter of Ephesians, God himself takes the stage. He is the only actor on the boards as the play opens. The audience, present by invitation only, is quite limited — just Paul and the other apostles.

I. Act 1: The Mystery Revealed To Paul 3:1-6

For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,— if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you, that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, [as I wrote before in brief, referring to which you can by reading understand my insight into the mystery of Christ], which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as now it has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; (3:1-5)

(a) The Definition of a Mystery

The English word "mystery" commonly refers to something that is obscure, secret and puzzling. In the Scriptures, however, the mysteries of God are secret in the sense that they cannot be discovered apart from divine revelation. They are shut up to human wisdom. But these mysteries are absolutely essential to our existence, since they reveal the answers to the great questions of life: Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the purpose of life, of history? Can we be certain of the outcome?

(b) The Mode of Communication:

Direct Revelation

Paul says that God, in a direct revelation, had made known to him a mystery which had never before been revealed to the sons of men: "in other generations was not made known to the sons of men" (5); "which for ages has been hidden in God" (9). And he had received this mystery as a gift of God; it was not a product of his learning or upbringing.

Next, the apostle goes on to explain the mystery, in verse 6:

(c) The Content of the Mystery

...that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...

It is hard to grasp how shocking these words would have seemed to a Jew, especially a Pharisee, in Paul's day. The Pharisees came into existence in Israel during the Hasmonean rule, around 63 BC. They were a pressure group who were deeply troubled by the compromise of purity in Israel. Though the exile was over, and Israel had returned to the land and was in control of the temple, the Pharisees abhorred the corruptness of the ruling priestly classes. They feared paganism from without and assimilation from within. The restoration which followed the exile was not yet complete, they felt, thus they summoned Israel back to the great ancestral traditions, insisting on the purity regulations and the study of Torah. If Israel would live up to these exacting standards, they taught, the Messiah would come to liberate the nation, punish her pagan enemies, and rebuild the temple.

The zeal with which the Pharisees sought to impose their agenda took on revolutionary overtones on occasion. Whenever there was a power vacuum in Rome, for example, they took part in Jewish revolts against the Roman conquerors. Before his conversion, Paul himself, by his own admission and by the evidence of others, demonstrated this kind of revolutionary zeal. He was outraged at the message of the early Christians announcing Jesus as Messiah. These heretics welcomed not only the outcasts of Israel, but the hated goyim — even their Roman oppressors! As far as Paul was concerned, saying that the Gentiles were fellow-heirs of the promise would be as shocking as telling a survivor of Auschwitz today that God would freely offer forgiveness to Adolph Eichmann; or to a Jew who survived the Gulag in Russia, that God would lay out the welcome mat for the hated secret police, the KGB. No wonder Paul tried to hunt down and imprison all who professed the name of Jesus.

But all that changed on the Damascus Road when this zealous Pharisee had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. It was then he learned, in a new revelation, that the Servant Messiah had come to earth to take on the role of Israel. And his shed blood had such efficacy that it would cleanse not just Israel, but all the nations of the earth.

This then is the mystery of which Paul speaks in these opening verses of chapter 3. Henceforth, the Gentiles would be regarded as “fellow heirs,” “fellow members of the same body,” and “fellow partakers of the promise in Jesus Christ through the gospel.”

As “fellow heirs,” they would partake in the same blessing that was given to Abraham and to Israel. The Gentiles, who once had trodden under foot the Holy Land and defiled the temple, were now welcome to possess the land and enter into the temple. Actually, the New Testament declares that the Gentiles, through Christ, would *become* the new temple.

And second, they were now “fellow members of the same body.” In the OT, it was theoretically possible for one to lay claim to an inheritance through adoption and still not be regarded as a full family member. But it would not be so in the body of Christ. In this new organism, every fellow member had full status, and they would function in very significant ways.

A study at the OT shows that none of the prophets went so far as to say this. For example, the vision of Isaiah 66 describes the

Messianic age, when the Gentiles would come to Jerusalem carrying their offering. Some of the Gentiles would even function as priests— some, but not all. In the NT, however, the apostles Peter and Paul declare that not just some, but all members of the body are priests and full family members. William Hendrickson, describing this alliance between Jew and Gentile in the new arrangement for living, says this is “not an alliance, or friendly agreement, or outward combination of the two in partnership, but a permanent fusion, a perfect spiritual union.”

Third, says Paul, the Gentiles have become “fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The “promise” here is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We discern this from his letter to the Galatians: “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14). So Gentiles had equal status with Jews who are sons of Abraham.

Paul amplifies this, also in Galatians, where he wrote, “If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise.” Gentiles, therefore, have significance as full family members. The prophets, of course, did refer to Israel being a “light to all the nations,” and of the whole earth being blessed through Abraham's seed, and that all nations would come to Jerusalem to find the Messiah. But they never spoke of the mystery of the new creation, the new humanity called the church.

Here is how John Stott describes this, in his commentary on Ephesians,

But what neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be ‘the body of Christ’, organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new, and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice (*The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 118).

It is my opinion that God is still relentlessly pursuing Israel and that they will finally repent and turn to Christ. But when they do so, God is not going to set about establishing another creation. We are not going to go backwards, into the past, again. Rather, he will graft the Jews into this new creation, the body of Christ (which Paul describes in Romans 11). This is why Paul does not despair. He had been given a unique foreview from his place among a very limited audience as history was played out before him. God himself had opened the apostle's eyes to show him and his fellow-apostles something no one had ever seen or even dreamed of before, the unveiling of the new creation, the new humanity.

So here in Act 1 of this play God himself is the main character. Paul and the other apostles make up the audience in this private showing of history in the making.

In Act 2, we find that Paul and his fellow apostles, the audience of Act 1, are now invited to come on stage as participants. Preaching, not direct revelation as in Act 1, is now the mode of communication. And, as the curtain rises, all the nations of the earth are seated in the audience.

II. Act 2: The Mystery Revealed To the Gentiles 3:7-9

...through the gospel, of which I became a minister, ac-

according to the gift of God's grace given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things;

(a) Paul's New Obligation

Having heard the mystery explained by God himself in Act 1, Paul, together with the other apostles, now takes the stage. He has already made reference to "the stewardship of God's grace given to me" (3:2), thus he now sees his role as a servant to make the gospel known to all the nations: "I was made a minister" (3:6b).

The entire focus of his life had changed. Instead of adopting a defensive posture and battling to preserve the purity of Judaism against the inroads of the barbarian Gentiles, he now lives for their salvation. He saw himself as a privileged servant, under obligation to dispense this mystery in full, just as an executor of an estate is charged to administer the whole inheritance to the heirs for their benefit and advantage, and to make sure they possess it in full. And not only is the apostle given the obligation to preach, he receives the resources to do so.

Paul welcomes this obligation, not from a sense of duty, but appreciation. "To me, the very least of all saints," says the apostle, "this grace was given..." The former persecutor of Christians, the zealot who watched as Stephen was stoned to death, cannot fathom why he was chosen to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. So appreciation became the driving force of the apostle's life.

I have noticed that our most significant ministries here at PBC/Cupertino are ministries to outsiders: unwed mothers, abused women, refugees from foreign lands, the poor, AIDS sufferers, etc. It is significant, too, that none of the leaders of these valuable ministries are working because they feel bound to do so. They are involved because they feel privileged to share the good news of salvation to outsiders and help lead them into one family in Christ.

(b) Mode of Communication: Preaching

In Act 1, as we have seen, the mode of communication was direct revelation. Here in Act 2, the mystery was to be communicated through preaching to all the nations: "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." To preach the good news which is "unfathomable" ("not to be tracked out"), inscrutable, incomprehensible ("like the sea, too deep to fathom, or the earth, too vast to explore") (John Stott).

When the gospel is preached, according to Paul, a miracle occurs. Preaching "enlightens all men with the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things." The Creator God, the one who created light out of darkness (Gen.1:1) is the very one who enlightens the minds of sinners to behold the wonderful mystery of salvation in Christ. Just as the eyes of the blind man were opened through the miracle that Jesus performed, so Paul himself would see miracles accomplished as God enlightened the minds of sinners who had been living in darkness.

So the God who created all things is now in Christ restoring his creation and uniting all things in Christ. This is why Paul does not lose heart. His suffering results in our glory. The focus of his life has changed from a persecutor of the Gentiles to a preacher of the gospel of grace. Although he is writing these verses in prison, he does not regard himself as Caesar's prisoner.

On the contrary, he is a prisoner of Christ, and Caesar is his captive!

Two weeks ago I led a memorial service for Sheri Almborg who died of cancer at the age of 30. She had been part of our congregation for just a few months, and I first met her when I visited her in the hospital before she died. Sheri wanted but a few things in life: to be married and to have children, and to have her life count for Christ. Most of the four hundred people who attended her memorial service did not know the Savior. At that service her father read a letter that Sheri had written to him when she was a high schooler, telling him how much she loved him. Then he read a letter he had written to her, telling her of his love for her. He told the assembled crowd that Sheri's dearest wish for them would be that they come to know Christ. Her suffering, their glory. I am convinced that in the end, we will yet see Sheri's wedding, and we will behold her spiritual children who were born through her suffering.

In Act 3, the stage changes once more.

III. Act 3: The Mystery Revealed To the Angels 3:10-12

In order that now might be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies through the church the manifold wisdom of God, in accordance with the purpose of the ages which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.

(a) The Recipients Of the Mystery: The Angels

Here, the stage is enlarged to accommodate all the new people of God, Jew and Gentile alike. The curtain rises, and as you and I and all the church look out over the audience, we see that it is made up of angels, the silent heavenly beings.

(b) The Mode of Communication: The Church On Display

The actors do not speak directly to the audience this time. Rather, the angels are watching as the church speaks, not to them, but to God in prayer. The most beautiful scenes in the drama *Les Miserables*, I think, are not when the actors sing to the audience, but when the hero sings his prayers directly to God, at his conversion, when he intercedes for a son, and finally at his own death, when he prayed, "forgive me all my trespasses, and take me to your glory." This is what the angels are doing in Act 3 — listening to the prayers of the faithful.

In a sense, the angels are attending graduate school as they observe the saints and listen to their prayers. In the OT, the angels took a course which I will call *Division and Separation 101a*. Then they learned of the holiness and transcendence of God. All through the OT, barriers were established to guard the holiness of God, the sanctity of the temple and God's people. Only Jews were allowed to enter, and they had to be priests who were purified and cleansed, who observed the right dietary laws, etc. But in the NT, the angels study a new course, which I call *Demolition and Access 101b*. Now, through the blood of Christ, all the walls have been broken down and the saints enjoy immediate access to God. Thus Paul describes these silent heavenly beings watching us in awe as we freely come to the Father, "in whom we have bold and confident access through faith in Him." And the glorious news is that this precious blood of Christ is so powerful it not only cleanses the outcasts of Israel from their impurity and sin, but even the Gentiles are welcomed into the temple, entering freely into the holy of holies. The cleansing is so complete, we even become the new temple! Seen in this light, Paul's sufferings, which might look like a defeat to the Ephe-

sians, are actually the blessed tool that drives him to the throne room of grace in prayer. And when he prays, the watching angels are awed by the access which is his through the blood of Christ.

(c) The Grand Finale

Paul says that this manifold wisdom of God, which is to be displayed by the church to the angels, was in accordance with the eternal purpose of God. (Or, literally translated, it was “the purpose of the ages.”) What a privilege to be living in the age that Paul says was the whole goal of history, the creation of the church, a new humanity under Christ where all things are united. The church is not some temporary arrangement; it will endure forever.

“So don’t lose heart because of my tribulations on your behalf,” says Paul, “for they are your glory.” In the OT, Joseph’s tribulations saved Israel and preserved his nation during a time of famine. His sufferings had national significance. Paul’s sufferings were even more significant. They were to have international and eternal significance: he suffered for you and me.

Let me draw four implications from this text.

IV. Implications of the Mystery

(a) Protection From Imposters

First, this mystery of which Paul speaks protects us today from impostors who would try to mislead us. The mystery, as we have seen, was revealed in a three-act drama. There were three different modes of revelation, different actors, and different audiences. We have learned that we are now in the third act. If someone comes along, therefore, claiming to have received a secret revelation from God, you can rest in the knowledge that this mystery about the culmination of all of history has been public domain for 2000 years. Everything has already been revealed by God to his apostles, and they in turn passed it on to us through the preaching of the word. There is no more to come.

(b) Get Into the Play!

Second, this text challenges us to become involved in the play. Sitting in the audience is not good enough; every Christian is invited to be on stage and to partake in the drama. The play cannot continue without you. There is a special role for you that no one else can play. What a tragedy when some, because they feel unworthy, insist on trying to remain in the audience! Remember, you will have capacity for ministry to the degree that you have been hurt in life (2 Cor. 1). If you have been rejected, as Paul was rejected by his own people, that very rejection is your entree to ministry. The man whom I mentioned at the beginning of this message felt free to share with me because he had been invited, despite all his problems, to be involved in the music ministry at the retreat. This filled him with such a sense of

his own worth that he felt free to share his vulnerability, and his openness encouraged the other men to do the same. So, walk confidently on to the stage, knowing that God has designed your part specifically for you. Notice, too, that the stage keeps growing. Resist the temptation to hoard ministry to yourself. Keep welcoming others to come onstage with you.

(c) Know Your Audience and Play Your Part

Third, know your audience, and play the correct role. Paul was rejected by his own people, but he did not insist on forcing himself and his teaching on them. His rejection created a stage for another audience — the Gentiles — who themselves felt rejected. Although he was reluctant at first to go, he went before them to preach the good news and welcome them as fellow-heirs. The most receptive audience to the gospel are the outcasts, so the Christian’s task is to find them and preach the message of salvation to them. Seek out those by whom you are most threatened. Then, rather than building walls to keep them out, welcome them — unwed mothers, victims of sexual abuse, AIDS patients, political refugees, the homeless — and share the gospel of salvation with them.

And know your role. The method of communication in Act 2 was public preaching, but when Paul faced suffering and opposition, he prayed in private. I think at times we reverse these. When Christians get upset at the world, they preach privately to each other and to opponents of the gospel. Then, when we face opposition, we pray publicly, organizing public prayer marches to demonstrate how pious we are. We pray in public and preach in private. But I think we’re aiming at the wrong audience. People are not impressed by our public prayer. What convinces them are our tears of acceptance in the gospel. Thus I think this text is saying we should pray in private and preach in public.

(d) Be Motivated By Appreciation

And finally, be motivated by appreciation. This is what keeps the play moving throughout the ages. As a young man I was pursuing a wonderful pagan life, I thought, but God drew me into the audience to watch the great drama of salvation unfold. Then, after I came to faith, he introduced me to the best teachers of his word, men and women filled with integrity and truth. I contributed nothing to their message; everything was handed to me as a gift. Today, as I turn 42 years old, I have to ask myself, who am I that I now search the unfathomable riches of Christ and preach them to you and to the nations, you who are so valuable in the eyes of the Savior? Who am I that so many people from across the world, persecuted outcasts, have become my dearest friends? I find it hard to believe that I, the least among all the saints, have been allowed to play a role in this great drama, this “mystery ... as now it has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” I can only respond in humble appreciation to God who gave me all of this as a gift of his grace.

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DEPTHS OF LOVE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 903

Ephesians 3:14-21

Tenth Message

Brian Morgan

February 28, 1993

If we are honest, we have to admit that prayer is a puzzling topic. We readily grant the supreme importance of prayer, yet we are often ignorant as to its working and bankrupt as to its quality.

Prayer has always fascinated me, since it was through the vehicle of prayer that I made my five-year journey to faith in Christ. When I was 11 years old, I saw a John Wayne movie, "The High and the Mighty." The Duke's airplane was running out of gas and ready to fall from the sky, and he began to pray, saying, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." The thought occurred to me that I ought to begin praying too, so that very night I got down on my knees and prayed to God to bless my family. I have continued praying every night since. In junior high school, I uttered that well known prayer, "Help!" in the midst of various crises. In high school, as I felt more freedom in my prayers, I began asking God for things like good grades, a girlfriend, and success in athletics. In my junior year, I reviewed my life one day and concluded I was the luckiest young man on the face of the earth because God had heard my prayers. I prayed for about half an hour, enraptured with the love of God. Later that year, at the first Bible study I attended, held on the 12th floor of a Union Bank building at the intersection of Highways 101 and 405 in the San Fernando Valley, I found Christ.

That was 31 years ago. Now I am set apart as a servant of Christ, and I must confess that I find prayer a tough discipline. I thrive on activity. For me, being still and quiet is about as hard as teaching my dog to stop wagging her tail. Even when I find time for prayer I am easily distracted. And my mind often comes up blank as to what to pray for.

In this great letter to the Ephesians, where Paul expounds on the wonderful mysteries of Christ, I find it instructive that the apostle pauses to pray three different times. In the text we will study this morning Paul will help us overcome three of the difficulties we face when it comes to prayer: our motivation to pray, the content of our prayers, and the confidence we should have in our prayers.

We will begin by looking at the apostle's motivation.

I. The Motivation For Paul's Prayer 3:14-16a

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, by power...

(a) The Revelation of God's Plan

Ignorance, I find, is what stifles our motivation to pray. We are not sure what God is up to, and this makes us timid when we bring our requests to him in prayer.

In the words, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father," Paul is referring to the revelation of verses 1 through 13 of this chapter, which refer to the mystery that unlocks the gateway to prayer. Knowing what God is up to — he is calling out a people for his name from among the Gentiles — Paul is motivated to pray. In the OT, David prayed, "...you have made a revelation

to your servant, therefore your servant has found courage [literally: "heart"] to pray this prayer to Thee" (2 Sam. 7:27). God is the one who initiates prayer. The way to motivate yourself to pray, therefore, is to read the Bible and see what God is up to, and listen to the testimonies of Christians and discover what God is doing.

There is a second thing that impedes us in prayer — a wrong view of God's character.

(b) The Revelation of God's Character

Ignorance impedes motivation, but even more damaging to our motivation is a wrong view of God's character. How we view our Father in heaven affects how we approach him. Our access to him is often hindered by a damaged relationship with our earthly father because we tend to think of God in terms of our natural fathers.

When I was growing up, my own father was the silent type who never said much. My mother used this to her advantage in disciplining us. Whenever we got in trouble, the word that instilled fear in us was, "Wait till your father gets home!" On one occasion my sister and I accidentally scratched a beautifully lacquered table top with Christmas ornaments. My mother sent us to our rooms with the cry, "Wait till your father gets home!" ringing in our ears. After what seemed like an eternity, we heard my father's car arrive home, and then the sound of his steps in the hallway. A few minutes later, my mother put her head in the bedroom door and said, "I didn't tell him!" As a matter of fact, she never told him anything we did wrong. But this led to my practice of always approaching my father indirectly, through my mother. This carried over to school also. I could hardly approach a teacher or a coach to ask for anything without breaking into tears. I find this is what many people do in their relationship to God: They approach him like they approach their fathers.

This leads to many wrong views of God. Let's look at a few of the more common caricatures. Some people think of God as a Scrooge-like character — a crotchety, penny-pinching book-keeper who is forever reviewing accounts, concerned only for what is owed him. People who think of God in these terms tend to avoid him because they don't want to hear about their debts.

Others view God as a busy executive who lives by the book, The One-Minute Manager. If they manage to get his ear for a moment, they had better be brief, because they are but a very small cog in the vast machinery of the universe. They pass on their requests in short memo form, never taking the time to probe his mind and heart, let alone adore him.

Others view God as an irrelevant, ethereal pope who is occupied with other-worldly concerns like harps, organs, angels, choirs, missionaries, stained glass and the like. They never share with God the details of their life. Their prayers are businesslike: "Bless us this day. Bless my wife and children. Amen."

And some view God as a hard-as-flint, righteous judge whose sole concern is upholding his holy law without showing partiality to anyone. They think God is like Javear, the Constable in Les

Miserables, a compassionless lover of law and order. Their role as lawbreakers, of course, is like that of the fugitive, Prisoner Number 24601. Javear's words hound them as they seek to escape once more,

*"There out in the darkness
A fugitive running
Fallen from grace
God be my witness
I never shall yield
Till we come face to face.*

*And so it has been and so it's written
On the doorway to paradise
That those who falter
And those who fall
Must pay
The price.*

*Men like you can never change,
Number 24601."*

Worst of all, perhaps, some of you have grown up in homes ruled over by alcoholic fathers. Rather than protecting and loving you, your fathers abused you. Naturally, you find it hard to come to the Heavenly Father in prayer.

With images like these in our minds, no wonder we lack motivation to pray.

The very good news of this text, however, is that God is none of the things we have described in these caricatures. God is not a miser, a busy executive, an ethereal pope, or a severe judge. Most certainly he is not an abusive father. What is he like, then? He is our Papa, says Paul, a caring and generous Father: "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named."

To a Jew, this imagery would evoke fond memories of Israel's days in the wilderness. Describing this Father, Moses wrote,

**"He found him a desert land,
And in the howling waste of a wilderness;
He encircled him, He cared for him,
He guarded him as the pupil of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
That hovers over its young,
He spread His wings and caught them,
He carried them on His pinions."** (Deut. 32:10-11)

These beautiful verses describe the great scandal of history: the fact that the Creator God humbled himself and came down from heaven to dwell in a tent in order to care for Israel in the wilderness. He carried them, fed them and delighted in them as the apple of his eye.

But this relationship, once unique to Israel, is now open to all the families of the earth. Knowing this should motivate us to pray to God: He named us; he cares for us. I enjoy watching some of you high tech engineers changing diapers and wiping slobber off your jackets, proudly smiling all the while over your newborn. This is what our Heavenly Father is like. He has named us, and he cares for us as a doting father cares for his newborn.

And he is a generous Father, too. Paul prays, "May he give you power 'according to the riches of His glorious might...'" God is not a tightwad who scrimps on his resources. He is generous, even lavish, sparing no expense with those whom he loves. Don't just ask God for a loan when you want something, there-

fore. Ask him to underwrite everything. He will give you "according to the riches of His glorious might," not "out of" his riches. Knowing this should motivate you to go to him in prayer for everything you need.

It took me 23 years to discover that my father was a generous man. Following our marriage, Emily and I saved about half the amount we needed for a car. After much hesitation, I drummed up the courage to write and ask my father for a loan of \$1,700, the amount we needed. I promised to pay him back \$70 a month until I had paid off the loan. He called me on the phone and said no problem. So I bought the car and paid him back as we had agreed. A couple of years later I asked him to lend us half the amount of a down payment on a condominium, under the same conditions. Again he agreed. Some years later we wanted to move to a house and I called him up again. I asked him if we could use the money he had lent us to get into a new home, thus postponing my repayment plan. "What loan?" he asked. "Just keep it!" And all the while I had been pressuring myself about that loan. I need hardly say I never again called my mother to intercede for me!

How many years we waste before we learn that our Heavenly Father is a kind and loving Papa! Have you discovered that your Father is generous and he wants to lavish his wealth on you? Or do you still have a wrong view of him?

What is it that draws us in prayer to God? The Father has revealed what he is doing, and he has revealed his care and generosity toward us.

This brings us to the content of the apostle's prayers.

II. The Content of Paul's Prayer 3:16b-19

(a) Strength and Stability: For Christ To Take Residence In You

...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; being rooted and grounded in love...

The apostle desires that the full measure of God's power be given to believers by the Holy Spirit.

Where is the power of God manifest? We hear much today about the Spirit "coming in power." Some hold that the sign of the Spirit is wonders and miracles. This, of course, was true in the miracles of Jesus and his disciples. But Paul does not pray here for these signs because signs are only the first order of things. The miracles of Jesus were visual aids from the old creation that merely picture for us what he wants to do in the new creation. If we remain in the old, we will grieve him.

God still does miracles, yes, but we should be seeking for the reality that these miracles portray. I want the miracle that was done for the blind man — the restoration of his sight — to be done for me because I am blind spiritually. I want my lameness, my enslavement to my addictions healed. I want to hear the words, "Rise up and walk," so that my will can be set free to live in newness of life. I want my leprosy of sin, which makes me an outcast, to be cleansed by the blood of Christ so that I may be welcomed into the Holy of Holies. Paul himself had a physical "thorn in the flesh," an ailment that he asked to be delivered from. Yet he was not healed. This was why he wrote that God's power was perfected in his weakness, in his human frailty. So here the apostle prays that we will experience the full measure of God's power in the inner man.

And through what means? The apostle says, "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith..." It is the task of the

Holy Spirit to make the person of Christ more and more at home in our hearts until they become his permanent abode. The Spirit reveals to us the glory of Christ in order that we might cease living for ourselves and allow him to live in us. John Stott puts it this way, “may He settle down in your heart, and from his throne there both control and strengthen you.” We cannot experience the full measure of Christ’s strength if we have not made him Lord. We can’t have his strength without ethics. Allow him to enter every part of you so that he can make you his permanent abode.

The result will be stability in your life as you are “rooted and grounded in love.” You will have deep roots and firm foundations. Stability comes from where you place your center of gravity. Where is yours? The paranoid Saul in the OT, says one commentator, “placed his center of gravity outside himself, thus he could not retain his equilibrium and made himself completely dependent on what took place outside himself.” Saul’s equilibrium was dependent upon how David was doing at any given time. Psychologists call this “co-dependency.” Paul’s counsel is, cut the strings and let Christ take up full residence in your heart. Then others cannot affect you because your center of gravity is in the Lord.

Do you want the power of God? Do you want stability? Then let go and let Christ enter into every area of your life. His strength is available only in the midst of holy ethics, so allow him to have full Lordship in everything.

This leads to step two.

(b) Comprehension: For You To Take Your Place In the Temple

...being rooted and grounded in love that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...

Have you ever thought you needed strength in order to comprehend something?

The word “comprehend” is used as a military term in the Greek translation of the OT. It means “to overtake, seize or capture an enemy.” The word conveys the idea of active pursuit with a single focus until you reach or attain something (cf. Josh. 8:19; 11:10, 19:47; Psalm 7:5; 18:3). For example, the psalmist wrote, “I pursued my enemies and overtook them, And I did not turn back until they were consumed” (Psalm 18:37).

Paul is saying that it takes tremendous inner strength to comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, just as it takes a huge telescope and a knowledge of physics to begin to comprehend the size of the universe.

How can we comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, which is an abstract thing? I used to ask one of my daughters when she was little, “How much do you love me?” She would say, “This much,” throwing apart her arms, the only equipment she had for measurement, to demonstrate her love for me. “Only that much?” I would respond. Then she would wrap her arms around me and squeeze me until I would stick out my tongue. But that, of course, did not begin to measure her love for me.

We have the same problem understanding Christ’s love for us. We lack the capacity to measure it. This is why Paul helps us here by giving a measuring standard to give the “breadth and length and height and depth.” We find the same terminology in Ezekiel 40. The prophet had a vision of the new temple and the new city to come, and a man with a measuring rod was measuring the width, length, height, and depth, the wall, gates and entrances, the whole city. In the book of Revelation, we find the

same concept: “And the one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall” (Rev. 21:15). In the NT, we discover that this new city is made up of living stones, as the apostle Peter wrote, “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). Putting these two concepts together, it may be that the dimensions of the city hold the secret to the dimensions of God’s love in Christ.

If you want to comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love, examine one of those living stones. You will discover that God’s love has length: He has patience with people; he waits a long time for them to repent. God’s love has depth: He went into the depths of hell to rescue sinners. God’s love has height: His love lifts us all the way to heaven. As you examine one of these living stones your heart will begin to be enlarged as you see the love of Christ. So measure the temple. Go into every room. Examine a stone. Then examine another and another. Travel to a foreign country and examine other living stones. Then you will have an idea of the breadth of God’s love for the people of all the nations. Then add to it all of history. As you do, your heart will keep expanding with the love of Christ.

I have a friend named Arthur whose testimony of the love of Christ has touched me deeply. He told me that one night he awoke to find what he felt was the presence of Christ in his room. Christ’s love was so real and so sweet that at that moment he gave his life to the Savior. He became a free, stable man. In 1989, we traveled to Romania to minister together. One afternoon we were sitting in a tent on a hillside with some Romanian brothers and sisters, all of us hiding from the secret police who wanted to question us. There in that tent God came among us. As we looked into the eyes of our Romanian friends we were melted in holy love. I asked Arthur to say something, but he was so overcome all he could say was, “This is love twice.” The love that he had found that night in his bedroom a few years earlier he now found multiplied in the faces of our friends.

But we were to experience this love yet again. In 1990 we went on our church’s men’s retreat together. Among the 500 men attending was my 82-year-old father, who committed his life to Christ at the end of the retreat. The following week we had a celebration dinner with 20 men. During the dinner, I looked at Arthur and saw that his eyes were filled with tears of joy. “There is a third heaven,” I said.

So God takes up residence in us; then we take our place in the temple; and finally, God fills all in all.

(c) Glory: For God To Take His Place In the Temple

...that you may be filled up to all God’s fullness. (3:16-19)

In 1 Kings, we read that when the construction of the glorious temple was completed and every last stone was in place, the ark was brought into the Holy of Holies, then “the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10-11). This is a visual aid of what is going to happen on the great day when the temple will descend from heaven and God will take his place in it. He will fill out the whole temple; the temple will fill out the whole city; and the city will fill out the whole creation, until God fills all in all. Then the words of Isaiah will be fulfilled,

**“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)**

C. S. Lewis wrote about this in *The Weight of Glory*,

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side

of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.

What should Christians pray for? We should pray for the full measure of the strength of the Spirit, to comprehend the love of Christ, in order to be filled with the fullness of God.

Lastly, we come to the apostle's confidence in prayer.

III. The Confidence of Paul's Prayer 3:20,21

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power working within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

(a) The Omnipotence of God

Paul says he had confidence in his prayers because the omnipotent God is able to do more than we ask or even think.

In 2 Samuel 7, David's prayer was to the effect that he wanted to build a house for God. But God appeared to him in a dream and told him that he was going to build a house for David instead, a house that would endure forever. And he promised David a line of sons which would come to a climax in the Messianic King. He was the one who would build God's house. The stunned David could only respond, "God, you have made a revelation to your servant. What you said, do according to your power."

This is what prayer is: finding out what God is about, and asking him to do so according to the full measure of his power.

(b) The Commitment of God

...to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

The second thing that gives Paul confidence is God's commitment to what the apostle is praying for.

When I picked up my daughter from a neighbor's house last week, my neighbor said, "Do you want to touch my hand?" "Why?" I asked. "Because I shook his hand," she said. "I shook President Clinton's hand!" She is the wife of the chief financial officer of Silicon Graphics, a company visited by the President last week during his visit to this area. This is the kind of company (4,000 employees and no layoffs) that the President and his administration want to promote in his plan for economic recovery. Wouldn't you be excited to work for a company that is backed by the commitment of the President himself and his new administration? But long after Silicon Graphics has come and gone, the church will remain in glory.

God is committed to the church through all the generations. This is no temporary arrangement. For all of history and all of eternity the church will remain the display-case of God's power. Knowing that this is God's commitment ought to give us confidence.

Last night, I opened up a little book of my prayers, a 14-year dialogue which I have had with God in prayer. As I read it, I confess, I still seem beset with the same weaknesses. In fact, in one place I wrote, "As I read my prayers past, my yearnings are deeper, but I feel my will is no stronger. By your redeeming grace, bind my heart to you. Keep me tender in my affections."

My weaknesses have not changed. Yet God keeps strengthening his commitment to me by revealing more and more of the beauty of this temple in ways I could not ask or think.

I would like to conclude by reading a prayer of thankfulness, built around Psalm 27. I wrote this after my friend and I returned home from Romania, where he discovered love twice.

*Who am I, O Lord
And what is my house,
That you have brought me thus far?*

*To take me on chariot's wings,
Down into your greenest pastures,
Where You give your people
A feast in the wilderness.*

*Was it not enough of your grace,
To see love Divine in the Book
And in the eyes of those simple ones
From upon the shores.*

*But to drink from the river,
To know its tracking over the earth;
And to wade deeply in distant lands,
O Lord, this is too much for me!*

*Who can forget their faces,
Their eyes full of pure light,
Their hearts swelling with love,
Their voices in sweet song.*

*Then when our adversary came
To devour our flesh,
And a host encamped against us,
He stumbled and fell.
But You hid us in the secret place
Of your tent, weeping
You lifted up our heads above our enemies,
And we offered sacrifices of praise to Thee.*

*The intensity of our love
Could find no words
But as we gazed into each others eyes,
Our hearts spoke freely.*

*Though the enemy forced us to leave in tears
We turned back and saw your saints
Lifting their hands in praise
Anticipating the morning victory.*

*O this is to dwell in your temple,
To meditate on your glory,
Living stones in Antimony!
To probe the dimensions of Christ's love.*

*Who am I, and what is my house Oh Lord,
That in your secret plan
Of saving the world
You found it in your heart,
That we could support each other
Along the road to salvation.
And maybe pass together,
Embraced at the gate of Eternity.*

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CREATING COMMUNITY

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 904
Ephesians 4:1-10
Eleventh Message
Brian Morgan
March 7, 1993

Ari L. Goldman, an Orthodox Jew, was a reporter for the religion department of the *New York Times* newspaper. At 35, he entered Harvard University Divinity School on a year-long sabbatical. In his book, *The Search For God At Harvard* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), Goldman wrote about his family's Sabbath table where, he said, childhood dreams were fulfilled:

Friday night. It was a time when, by the magic of the Sabbath candles, we were transformed into a happy, picture-book family. The recriminations and bickering would cease and the music would begin. The children would sit at the gleaming white table in our "Sabbath outfits," dark blue pants and white cotton shirts open at the collar. Our hair was still wet from our pre-Sabbath baths, and it was combed neatly across our foreheads. Yarmulkes were bobby-pinned to our heads. My mother waved her hands over the lighted candles and covered her eyes as she stood in a silent moment of meditation. Afterwards, she took us into her arms and kissed us, lingering an extra moment to drink in our freshness. She told us that we looked like the two angels that tradition says accompany the men home from the Friday-night synagogue service.

When, a little while later, my father returned from the synagogue, we lined up in front of him for the Sabbath blessing. "May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe," he said...Bending down to reach us, my father cradled our heads between his strong hands as he recited the blessing. "May He bless you and keep you...and give you peace."

My father, who worked hard all week managing and selling real estate, became our rabbi and cantor on Friday night. He took us through the meal singing the joyous melodies of the Hasidim and the resolute songs of the Chalutzim, the Israeli pioneers who, we were told, were singing the same songs as they worked to turn the desert green (pp. 54-55).

This harmony and peace among the Goldman family was shattered when Ari was five. His parents divorced and his home life disintegrated. Ari was put on a train to Jackson Heights, a working class neighborhood. He began living with his in-laws, sleeping on a couch in the waiting room of a doctor's office. He writes about his parents' divorce in his book:

To my mind, divorce is a deplorable breach of contract, and I say without humor that children should be allowed to sue (p. 57).

All sons and daughters of divorce blame themselves. In their minds, the only way to expiate the guilt is to re-create that which was lost. That is why each of us harbors a dream, the dream of bringing our parents back together again. On a subconscious level, this becomes our life's work. For me, the mission was to re-create the serenity and harmony of the Sabbath table. That was all I needed to do to restore our fall from Paradise (p. 56).

Can the dream of community that has been destroyed by rejection, divorce, abuse and loneliness be re-created? There is

good news in the text to which we come this morning from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Here is what Paul says: Jesus Christ re-created the dream by the sacrifice he made in the shedding of his blood. He created a new community whose bonds are stronger than flesh, stronger even than death itself.

We come now to the apostle's first command in this letter, one that is used five times in the course of the book (4:1, 17, 5:2, 8, 15). It is the command "Walk." (The NIV renders this word "live," but this is a poor translation.) This word was used in the Garden of Eden where, we are told, Adam *walked* with God, in complete harmony. In that garden there was intimacy and vulnerability in all relationships. Paul is implying that Christ's work in behalf of his church has, in a sense, re-created the Garden of Eden. According to Paul, unity should be the outstanding characteristic of this re-created Garden of Eden, the church of Jesus Christ. This is demonstrated in his use of the word "one" nine different times in just seven verses. The point is obvious: Christians should take pains to avoid damaging the unity that Christ has created in his death and resurrection.

Verses 1-10 of chapter 4 divide neatly into three sections.

I. Expressions of Unity (4:1-3)

Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(a) Unity Begins With Attitudes, Not Structures

While some might resort to structures and meetings in order to establish unity, the place to begin, says Paul, is with attitudes, not structures.

The apostle illustrates his call by listing some character traits that should be apparent in Christians. The first two are humility and gentleness. This word "humility" means "to think low, take a lower place, be lowly, undistinguished." This was a despised trait in the Greek world of Paul's day, of course. To the Greek mind, humility meant having an abject, servile attitude. But in the NT, humility is always used in a positive, godly sense. It is the very word spoken of Christ. Philippians says of him that "...although He existed in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men" (2:6-7). Humility was what drew people to Jesus. Pride, of course, has the opposite effect. Pride is the note of all discord. Pride repels; it does not draw people

The second trait, "gentleness," does not mean weakness, but rather describes one who is humble, considerate, meek and unassuming. In his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus presented himself as King in a most unassuming way. He did not make a pompous show, but rather rode into the city mounted on the foal of a donkey, his feet dragging in the dust of the streets. "Gentleness" can be used of a strong personality who nevertheless is mas-

ter of himself and a servant of others. This quality, says Paul, is an indispensable tool in disarming the devil (2 Tim. 2:25).

And gentleness is a quality required of God's leaders. Numbers 12:3 says of Moses, Israel's great leader, when he came under attack by Miriam and Aaron because he had married a Cushite woman: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." Moses did not utter a word in his own defense. He had learned gentleness through forty years of living in the wilderness. The unpleasant circumstances that you may now be chafing under, far from denying you what you vainly think of as your potential as a leader, are in fact working in you the characteristic of gentleness — the very thing you need to develop in order to be considered great.

So unity, according to Paul, begins with attitudes, not structures.

Secondly, says the apostle, unity is expressed in how we react toward others.

(b) Unity Is Expressed In How We React Toward Others

"...with patience, forbearing with one another." Being patient means "choosing to have a long fuse." Patience does not demand instant change. It puts up with people, choosing to wait upon God to change them. "How much longer must I bear with you?" said Jesus to his disciples on one occasion (Matt. 17:17). He would wait until God changed them — and that did not happen until after his death and resurrection.

Some people have such high expectations in relationships that if any little thing goes wrong, they explode. They are touchy and moody. Like peacocks, you dare not ruffle their feathers. You have to take a detour around them. When you live in the context of a family, of course, you expect failure. Parents don't take long to discover that there is no such thing as a perfect vacation or outing or romantic weekend. Something invariably comes up to dampen the fun, but this is how patience is learned. So remember, the church is a family. Lower your expectations of people.

Thirdly, Paul says that unity is expressed in how we pursue others.

(c) Unity Is Expressed In How We Pursue Others

When you are wronged, you should respond with patience, showing forbearance. But when you have wronged others, you should take the initiative to clear up the problem. This is what Paul means by "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is such a priority in the church that Jesus said if we have a problem with someone, we should leave our gift at the altar and go and reconcile with our brother or sister before we come to church. Love and unity among Christians are much better gifts than money.

For years, I had been close to a Christian brother, but something came between us that in time became a wedge that drove us apart. Whenever I tried to talk to him, I became so emotional that I usually had very little to say. As a result, the wedge between us, far from being removed, was driven deeper. I was encouraged, however, when another brother told me that he had been praying for a year that this problem could be worked out, and that he was personally committed to working toward that end. Then the brother from whom I was estranged wrote me a letter which pained me deeply. I shared it with the brother who was committed to working out the problem and he responded by immediately going to talk to my brother. He became my advocate, doing what I could not do for myself. When he returned from his meeting, he said to me the very words I wanted to hear,

"He loves you." The joy I felt upon hearing this could be compared to the joy that Joseph felt, following his years in Egypt, when he saw his brother Benjamin: "...then [Joseph] fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept on his neck." My friend was committed to the apostle's appeal here that Christians "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Walking in a manner worthy of our calling cannot be accomplished in isolation, therefore. In order to experience God we must walk with him and with fellow-Christians, either putting up with them or pursuing them. This is hard work certainly, but this is what we are called upon to do, and the rewards for faithfulness in this area are many.

Paul now moves from the expressions of our unity to the theological basis for it.

II. The Theological Basis For Our Unity (4:4-6)2

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

This verse is as important in NT theology as the Shema is in OT theology. The Shema, "*Hear O Israel, The LORD is our God, the LORD is One,*" is the life verse of the Jews. What it is saying, of course, is that there is one God, and Israel is his people — monotheism (one God), and election (he has chosen Israel to be his people). This is the bedrock of Judaism. And these Jewish people were given one law, Torah, through Moses, the essence of which was as follows: Since God was One (he was a God of integrity, with no division in his heart), his injunction was to love him with a whole heart (without division in your heart), and love your neighbor as yourself. This was how the one God would be made visible, through love in one community, the people of Israel.

But Israel's record in the land into which they entered was one of failure, tribal jealousies, civil war and corruption. Thus the prophets looked ahead to the New Covenant, when God would put the law into the heart of every Jew, by the Spirit; then there would be one united family. Paul is saying here that the dream of the prophets had now become reality in the work of Christ who established the new community (where "the wolf would lie down with the lamb," as Isaiah prophesied). So the apostle rewrites the Shema, saying it has been fulfilled in Christ. There is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons have made one community, one people of God, who have "one hope, one faith, one baptism," etc. This is why this text is just as important to Christians as the Shema is to the Jews. What the Jews longed for became a reality in Jesus Christ, an even better reality actually, because the family of God is now open to all the nations of the earth.

Let's look now at the implications of the Trinity in this text.

(a) One Spirit Implies...

Because there is only one Holy Spirit, there is only one body of Christ (filled with the life of that Spirit), and there is only one hope (of which the Spirit was a pledge). In the OT, when the Jews came to unity, they sang the beautiful words of Psalm 133, recognizing that their unity was a special anointing of God's Spirit:

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together as one!
It is like the good oil poured on the head,
Running down on the beard,
Running down on Aaron's beard,**

Down upon the collar of his robes. (Psalm 133:1-2)

Paul is saying here, however, that now the Spirit is given without measure to all, Jew and Greek alike. The Spirit transcends all fleshly distinctions. The unity that Christians have in the church, therefore, is stronger than the unity that was the portion of the Jews of the blood line of Abraham.

We cannot divide the body of Christ any more than we can divide the Holy Spirit. We must never refer to local assemblies of Christians as though they alone are the body of Christ. I have a friend in Oregon who refers to the church where he gets his sustenance from as his “feeding trough and watering hole.” This description puts local assemblies in their proper perspective. They are merely feeding troughs and watering holes where Christians get their spiritual sustenance.

There is only one body of Christ.

Second, there is “one hope.” The hope of the Jews is clearly stated in Leviticus: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 20:26). The people of Israel were called to holiness. The dietary laws, sacrifices, etc., were saying that they were set apart to God to be wholly his. But Christians live in an age when the Spirit does what Moses could not do: The Spirit writes the law on our hearts, making us holy. This is a down payment on the promise that God’s holiness will one day encompass the whole earth. All Christians long for the same thing, and this hope will one day be consummated in New Heavens and the New Earth. Do not set your hope on anything short of this.

In this country today, nothing divides Christians more than eschatology, the subject of last things. Christians are asked whether they are pre-trib, post-trib, a-mill, pre-mill, or post-mill. The older I get, the less certain I am about all the details of how everything is going to end. But I have become more certain for that to which it shall end, and that is *holiness*. Christ will reign over the entire New Heavens and the New Earth. We are going to be fully holy, without sin. This is our hope. If we emphasize this, we will not be party to division among the brethren.

(b) One Lord Implies...

Paul writes there is only one Lord, one faith and one baptism. In the Old Testament, the one God gave one teaching, the Torah, through Moses. In that Torah Moses wrote in Deuteronomy, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it...” (Deut. 4:2). Now in Christ, the law is not set aside, but rather is fulfilled. Christ is the true temple, the true Israel, the true priest, the New Adam, the Davidic King, the One Prophet, the Great Sacrifice.

The apostles set forth that faith in the NT, and the same thing is said about their writings as was said of Moses in Deuteronomy. For instance, John wrote in Revelation, “...if anyone adds [to the words of the prophecy of this book] God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19). So much for the book of Mormon. Don’t add to the word that God has given. On the other hand, if you take away from it, God will take away your part from the tree of life.

The apostolic teaching is the only teaching for Christians and the church. There is no other. The apostolic teaching alone is what makes Christ Lord in the human heart.

Some people today, of course, don’t care for the apostles’ teaching on certain subjects — things like divorce, homosexuali-

ty, pride or servant leadership. So they delete or misinterpret these matters in the mistaken impression that doing so will foster unity. They are like Linus, the cartoon figure, whose theology holds that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” The apostle, however, declares there is only one faith — the apostolic faith. If we compromise that, we compromise the Lordship of Christ.

And there is one baptism. In Judaism, circumcision was the initiation rite that permitted entry into the family of Judaism. In Christ, however, baptism — circumcision of the heart — is the rite of initiation, symbolizing that the Holy Spirit places the person who was baptized into the body of Christ. Do not add to this one baptism, is Paul’s implication. If that initiation rite was good enough for the apostles, it should be good enough for us. This is why we don’t have church membership here. We don’t want to create divisions within the body of Christ. Everyone who belongs to the body of Christ is considered a member.

(c) One Father Implies...

Then Paul concludes his theological treatise with the words, “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” This international family has only one Papa. He is the source of all life and its sole authority. Authority does not rest in you. Do not let it be said of you what Winston Churchill said of an arrogant colleague, “There but for the grace of God goes God!” The highest title you can acquire in the church in terms of your identity in the family is “brother” or “sister.” Even titles like elders and deacons refer to people of gift and godly character who have the privilege of serving meals at the feeding troughs, dispensing spiritual and physical food. But they are still just “brothers” and “sisters.”

In the church, we are all brothers and sisters. And we all worship one Father. This is the basis for unity. Notice the lengths to which God has gone to establish this unity — how deep it is: as deep as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, as deep as the Lordship of the Son, as deep as the life of the Father. Unity has already been divinely created; our task as Christians is to maintain it.

Does this mean that all Christians should look and act the same? Does unity imply sameness, in other words? No, says Paul. On the contrary, our unity is enriched by the diversity of our gifts.

III. Unity Is Enriched By the Diversity of Our Gifts (4:7-10)

(a) The Universality of Gifts

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

Some people insist on jumping into the middle of things and competing for position when they want to become involved in a work. But that must never be allowed to happen in the church. Competition destroys unity. In the church, each one has been given a gift, and when they respond in harmony one with another, all of these gifts play together, like an orchestra of many instruments. And, furthermore, each one has been given a measure of grace so that he or she may use the gift. This is why different gifts come with different capacities to bestow love upon one another. So we are free to be different.

If we liken spiritual gifts to the instruments in an orchestra, I like to think of myself as just an oboist. We have a number of preachers in our church because the elders think it might be boring to hear the oboe played every Sunday. I think John Hanne-man sounds like a trumpet. There is a ringing, piercing clarity

when he preaches the gospel. Gary Vanderet reminds me of a cello. His deep, resonating tones with their wide range move my spirit.

Discipleship then is the process of setting people free to serve with their unique gifts and unto their own capacities. It is not coercing them to look and sound like their favorite teacher.

And where do these spiritual gifts come from?

(b) The Origin of Gifts

When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men. (Now this “He ascended,” what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) Eph. 4:8-10

These gifts, says Paul, are bestowed as a result of Christ’s ascension into heaven. Psalm 68, which he quotes here, is filled with the imagery of a battle. God is pictured like a general with an invading army. He has entered into battle and won the war. He returns to his capital city with a host of captives and there he dispenses the spoils of war among his people.

The original context of Psalm 68 was the Exodus. God went down into Egypt and dealt with Pharaoh. Then he took his captives in train and led them out. The spoils of war were the riches of Egypt, and he gave the people his law. Paul says that what happened in the Exodus is now fulfilled in Christ. Our Lord came to earth to battle with the forces of hell itself on the cross, and he defeated them. He now comes to his throne, the heavenly mountain, as Victor, with a train of captives (of whom Paul was one), carrying the spoils of war, a booty of gifts to distribute to his people. As Isaiah 53:12 says, “He will divide the spoil with the strong.”

(c) The Importance of Gifts

Where did Christ “ascend” from? Paul says that “he who ascended” is also the one who “descended.” Let us not forget what these gifts cost. They cost Christ humiliation and death on the cross. They were infinitely expensive, beyond what we could ever imagine; therefore we should value them.

Second, says Paul, the distribution of these gifts signified victory over the enemy. This clearly indicates that Jesus is Lord. Gifts are the vehicle by which God is going to fill out the heavens and the earth, that he might “fill all in all.” If we want to have victory on earth over the power of the devil and the power of evil in the world, we should not take up the sword or envy the mantle of the politicians. The true power to defeat evil is found in these amazing divine gifts. So use them! Play your instrument. As you do so, harmony and love will issue forth, creating a community of love that will overpower the evil one and demonstrate to the world that Christ is Lord.

I was reflecting last week on the great reformation which changed not only the church in the 16th century but the history of the world ever since. In his book, *I Believe In Preaching*, John Stott has a word on what was the one element that accomplished this great work of renewal:

It was preaching of this divine Word, not political intrigue or the power of the sword, which established the reformation in Germany. Luther put it later: ‘I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the word so greatly weakened the Papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The word did it all!’

What a wonderful illustration of spiritual gifts in action, changing the very history of the world!

Spiritual gifts demonstrate the dominion of Christ and bring victory over evil in the world. The mission of Ari Goldman to recreate his dream has been gifted to all of us in Christ.

Ari Goldman was so grieved by his parents’ divorce, which destroyed his family’s Sabbath table unity, that he thought perhaps at his bar-mitzvah everyone would set aside family animosities for a time. But to no avail. The occasion was a disaster. He wrote,

I harbored a fantasy. I dreamed that someday I would get married and invite all of my relatives, on both my mother’s and father’s sides, to a festive wedding banquet. I would have them all together in one room, and it would be up to me to make the seating arrangement. My mother and father would be at the same table. My aunt who filled my ears with ugly gossip about my grandmother would be seated next to her. The people who disliked each other the most, that is, would be forced to smile and be polite. The main course would be rib steak, and the table would be set with steak knives so sharp that they would catch the glimmer of the chandeliers. In the middle of the meal, just as all the family, exercising the greatest politeness, would be lifting their knives to cut into the steak, I would sneak outside and pull the main power switch so that the hall would be cast in total darkness. Would anyone survive, I wondered, or would it be like the last scene in Hamlet, where hatred triumphs and no one lives? (pp. 62-63).

Aren’t you glad that you have been placed in a new family whose bonds are stronger than flesh, stronger even than death? And this family is moving towards the dream of a wedding, the day when the trumpet shall sound and we shall make our way to Heavenly Zion, where peoples from all over the world will assemble to worship the King of kings. God grant that on that day it will not be said of any of us that while we walked on earth we disrupted the joy of the Bridegroom. Let us walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called, therefore, maintaining the precious unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Then on that great day, we can sing with all of Israel,

Behold, how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together as one.

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GROWING UP!

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 905

Ephesians 4:11-16

Twelfth Message

Brian Morgan

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Our text today, Ephesians 4:11-16, is one of three texts of Scripture that form the touchstone of our philosophy of ministry here at Peninsula Bible Church. These verses from Ephesians were the foundation of Ray Stedman's widely read book *Body Life* (Glendale: Regal, 1972), a work which revolutionized the church in our generation.

This text answers the frequently-asked question posed by new converts: "Now that I have become a Christian, how do I grow in Christ?" But the text is applicable to older Christians, too. It is easy for us to drift away from the things that keep us spiritually healthy.

We have already noted that the first three chapters of Ephesians describe how the work of Christ created a new community with no divisions between Jew and Greek. The apostle's first command, which we looked at last week, was that Christians walk worthy of that calling. We do this by maintaining that unity that Christ has already created. Believers should be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," says Paul.

The primary characteristic of the body of Christ, therefore, is that it is a unified organism.

In this text today we come to the second characteristic of the church: it is to be a growing body. One of the things that grieved the apostle was the fact that some Christians, especially those of the congregation in Corinth, had been believers for many years, but they were still babes in their thinking; they were not growing in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Today, therefore, we will look at three aspects of growth in the body: the foundations for growth, the goal of growth, and the means of growth.

I. Foundations for Growth (4:11-12)

And he gave some as apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints unto the work of service, unto the building up of the body of Christ;

We have already seen that, following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God through the Holy Spirit liberally distributed spiritual gifts to his church. He did this in the way that a victor distributes the spoils of war, and in the distribution established the foundation for his church. God did not begin with programs, but with a liberal distribution of gifts, thereby endowing gifted leaders to build his church.

Paul lists four of these offices, beginning with apostles.

(a) Gifted Leadership

The word "apostle" means "he who is sent." It carries with it the idea that the sent one possesses the authority of the one who sent him. In the NT, "apostle" is used to describe three different levels of apostleship. In the broadest sense, all Christians are "sent ones." All believers are sent into the world by Christ to be his representatives. But in a more limited sense, some of the apostles in the first century were sent out as the representatives of one church. Paul and Barnabas, for instance, were sent out from the church in Antioch to accomplish the task of planting new churches. When they returned to home base, they gave a report of their mission.

In its most restricted sense, the title "apostle" applied to that inner circle of the twelve apostles, to James, the Lord's brother, and to Paul. These men had one thing in common: all of them were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord. And they were personally authorized by Jesus to set forth the implications of his life, death and resurrection. From the hands of these apostles, therefore, came the New Testament. Of this inner circle, Paul confesses that he was the last. We learn this from his

own word to the Corinthians, "...then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles..." (1 Cor. 15:7-9).

And these men have no successors! This is critically important. The New Testament revelation is complete. The foundation has been laid. What remains is for every generation of Christians to master the text and to obey and pass on what the apostles have written.

In his book *Body Life*, Ray Stedman utilized the functioning of the human body as a metaphor to describe the work of these spiritual gifts with which the Lord has endowed his church. (I will be referring to Ray's method of illustrating the functioning of spiritual gifts as I go along.) Thus, the ministry of the apostles, according to Ray, can be likened to the functioning of the skeleton and the muscles of the human body: they give foundation, support and shape to the body of Christ.

Next, Paul refers to the prophets. In the OT, God raised up the office of prophet simultaneously with the office of king. Prophets were the king-makers, in effect. Samuel was the prophet who anointed Saul and David; later, Nathan anointed Solomon. Prophets were anointed both to appoint kings and to challenge them when they were wrong (as Nathan did when David sinned). They were men and women who stood in the counsel of God and received from him direct revelation. This is why we read phrases like "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" — or Micah, or Isaiah. Their ministry as God's spokesmen was to bring the nation back to the center of revealed truth. Their role became more important and their office more numerous as the nation drifted into apostasy.

John the Baptist was the last in line of these Old Testament prophets. It was he who anointed the last King, Jesus Christ. In his well known prophecy, Joel declared that this anointing of the last King would give birth to a new age. Then every Israelite would, in a sense, prophesy and become a spokesman for God:

**"And it will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;
And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions."** (Joel 2:28)

As we now know, this word of the prophet Joel was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

In the NT, all Christians are, in a broad sense, regarded as prophets. In Acts 2:17, the apostle Peter quoted these words of Joel in his sermon in Jerusalem: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...[they] shall prophesy." All believers speak for God to a blind and darkened world. In a more restricted sense, in the first century there was an inner circle of prophets who received direct revelation. Paul links their office with that of the apostles in laying the foundation of the church: "...having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets..." (Eph 2:20). The church, therefore, was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And that foundation is never to be laid again.

In a secondary sense, however, the ministry of these men (and women) continues, although not in the sense that Christians receive direct revelation from God. God at times will lay upon an individual a burden for some aspect of revealed truth which the church has neglected. This ministry often is much broader in scope than the ministry of pastor-teacher. Francis Schaeffer, for instance, had a prophetic ministry to the church. Ray Stedman had a burden that the church had departed its foundations in the areas of spiritual gifts, the new covenant ministry and expository preaching. Charles Colson is another contemporary Christian

who comes to mind in this regard.

In *Body Life*, Ray Stedman likened the ministry of prophets to the work of the body's central nervous system: the prophets make the body sensitive to its Head.

Evangelists form the third category that Paul identifies in this text. Though all Christians as witnesses of Christ are under obligation to evangelize, some are especially gifted in making the gospel clear and relevant to non-believers. Evangelists have a passion for the lost. They hunger to reach the world with the gospel, often pioneering new ways and approaches to evangelism. Philip in the NT is an outstanding example. It was he who wanted to depart from Jerusalem and take the gospel to the Samaritans, and then later to the first African. And, of course, his wish was fulfilled. We can read about it in the book of Acts, that marvelous account of his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, the official from the court of the queen of the Ethiopians. One of our own missionaries, Dudley Weiner, is a gifted evangelist. In his ministry in Paris, Dudley is always pioneering new things. Another of our missionaries, Jim Foster, who lives in Romania, evangelizes in a quieter way. He prefers to share the gospel on a one-on-one basis. Liz Hanneman, the wife of our pastor John Hanneman, belies her tiny frame in her boldness to witness to Christ to anyone who comes across her path. She is a wonder to watch!

Body Life likened this gift of evangelism to the work of the digestive system of the body: it takes food and turns it into new cells.

The gift of pastor-teacher comes next in Paul's list. The grammar of the Greek text indicates that the apostle used both words to refer to the same individual. "Pastor" refers to a shepherd who cares for his flock; "teacher" refers to his primary task of feeding the flock. This does not necessarily mean that everyone who has a teaching gift is a pastor. But it does mean that every pastor must be a teacher. How else is the flock to be fed?

Ray Stedman said this gift of pastor-teacher works like the cardiovascular system of the body: it cleanses, builds up and strengthens the body of Christ.

What do these foundational gifts have in common? They have what Christians need as a foundation upon which to grow, and that is the Scriptures. Each of these gifts expounds the truth in unique ways. The foundations for church growth, in other words, come not from programs, but from the Scriptures. This is why God has gifted men and women with special skills to unfold the Word to his church.

This text must have been especially meaningful to the Christians in Ephesus who were eking out an existence on limited financial resources. They had no political support, either. The licentious world in which they were called to live was dead set against everything they believed. So it was good news to them to learn that God was generous and he had everything in place for them to grow. Paul's question to them would be, "How is your diet? Are you eating regularly?" If they were not growing, it was because they were not eating.

We would do well to ask ourselves the same question this morning: How is our diet? Are we growing in Christ? Are we taking advantage of the opportunities to grow? Are we reading the Word and allowing it to cleanse us daily?

Paul's next point is that these office holders must have a clear understanding of their job description.

(b) Understanding the Proper Job Description

For the equipping of the saints unto the work of service, unto the building up of the body of Christ; (4:12)

Some take this to mean that the task of church leaders is to do three things: they must equip the saints, do the work of the ministry, and build up the body. This is the school of thought that says pastors should do all the work of the ministry, that they are responsible to meet everyone's needs, in other words. They must be available night and day for counseling, visitation of the sick, organizing committees, fund-raising, weddings, funerals, coaching, even maintenance of the church facilities. When a church functions this way, however, disaster is close at hand.

Moses is a good illustration in this regard. Because of his exalted po-

sition as leader of the nation during the Exodus, everyone who needed counseling came to him. But Jethro, his father-in-law, took him to task for responding to everyone who had a dispute. Here is what Jethro said, in Exodus 18:18, "What you are doing is not good, you will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone..." The solution was for Moses to quit being a full-time counselor and become instead a full-time teacher and discipler and allow the people whom he had trained to become the counselors (Moses would remain a part-time counselor for the most difficult cases). The apostle would agree. This was how God designed the church to function.

The pastor's job description is but *one* thing: he is to "equip the saints unto the work of service." "To equip" means "to restore something to its former conditions"; "to add what is lacking to something to make it complete, fit for use"; "to prepare something creatively." The verb is used of mending a torn fishing net, setting a broken bone, or restoring a broken brother. (The word is used almost exclusively in the Psalms (8:2; 11:4; 17:5; 18:33; 29:9; 40:6; 68:9,28; 74:16; 80:15; 89:37) to praise God for the beauty and order that he has established in his own creation.) "Equipping" here means being fitted out for a task, in relationship with others, so that, working together with the whole, nothing is lacking. Equipping, in other words, is a synonym for discipleship. If the pastor-teacher's job description is *equipping* the saints unto the work of the ministry therefore, the saint's job description is *doing* the work of the ministry. (Some of the saints, of course, go on to become pastors, elders and deacons, while others function in the service ministries.)

I will always be indebted to one man who faithfully carried out this ministry in my life. David Roper took me under his wing when I was 19 and a sophomore in college, and he set about the process of equipping me. I asked him to teach a Bible study in my fraternity, but he refused my request and offered instead to teach me so that I in turn could teach my fraternity. Dave never took me out of my setting as a student or an athlete to do something that had religious connotations. He helped me become God's man in those very settings so that I could function as a minister of the gospel. Meeting him changed my life.

So there we have the foundations for growth in the church: Gifted leaders who know their job description, who faithfully teach God's word, discipling others to do the work of the ministry.

What, then, is the goal of growth? Paul addresses this question in verses 13 and 14.

II. The Goal of Growth: Maturity (4:13-14)

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That no longer may we be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

(a) No Longer Children

Would you be surprised to learn that God has set goals for you? If you know and understand his goals, then you won't be taken by surprise when he designs your circumstances to accomplish them in your life. God wants us to grow up. He desires that we no longer be children, that we no longer be unstable, vulnerable, gullible, and indiscriminating.

The image that Paul uses here is of helpless children adrift in a tempest-tossed boat. Paul knew what it meant to be "driven to and fro" by the waves. William Hendricksen comments, "While he was writing this, the trip which had brought him to his present Roman imprisonment must have been before him in all its vivid terror." Children in the faith are easily misled by new, so-called doctrines. They are prone to be tossed about in the wind. They can't discern the evil motives that lie behind false doctrines. In the NT, the apostles invariably confronted the motives of the false teachers, not their doctrinal positions. It is because wrong doctrine always arises from impure motives. Paul described such teachers in Galatians in these words, "They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them" (Gal. 4:17).

When David Roper began his work of equipping me, one of my room-mates, who was an avid student of the Scriptures, had a visit from his uncle. This man told us that our Christianity lacked something that he called a "second blessing." If we would seek this, he said, we would receive another endowment of the Holy Spirit and we would speak in tongues and prophesy. My room-mate agreed to seek this blessing and pretty soon he began to speak in tongues. A few days later he spoke in tongues in my presence and prophesied concerning me. I couldn't sleep that night. I felt a sense of evil oppression in my room. Extremely agitated, next morning, I stormed over to David Roper's house. Dave was sitting in an old lawn chair in his back yard. He had just finished mowing his lawn and was sipping a glass of iced tea. As I poured out all my confusion, his face had a look of serenity and tranquillity. Then he picked up a Bible and clearly taught me from the Scriptures until my soul was composed. The mature man in Christ was teaching the child.

This is what God wants from his own — to "no longer be children, tossed here and there by waves..."

What, then, does maturity look like?

(b) Maturity

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the [experiential] knowledge of the Son of God...

Here Paul is referring to the deep faith that results from years of walking intimately with God.

Notice in the text that we will one day "attain to the unity of the faith." This is where we end up, not where we begin. I do not like to impose detailed doctrinal statements upon Christians in an effort to foster unity. This should be our goal, not our starting point. We attain the unity of the faith through years of faithfully walking with Jesus. Then, when someone asks you, for example, for your views on God's sovereignty and goodness, you will be able to answer from your years of study of the Scriptures.

Charlie Luce was an elder at PBC for many years. His outstanding love for Christ and his fellow men modeled for me the love of the apostle John. When Charlie's wife Roberta died a few years ago, he shared from Psalm 34, her favorite psalm, at her memorial service. He read these words,

**They looked to Him and were radiant,
And their faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor man cried and the Lord heard him;
And saved him out of all his troubles. (Psalm 34:5-6)**

Imagine the weight of these words coming from a man who had lost his wife after some 50 years of marriage. Roberta's face was radiant, he said, because God is sovereign and God is good. This is the kind of response that God wants from those who love him, a response borne out of years of experience and maturity.

And what is the measure of maturity? The text tells us: "to a mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Maturity is measured by nothing less than the character of Christ. And how do we get there? God designs life so that we might experience the things that Christ experienced, and in them experience his life. So you might ask yourself, "Are the experiences of Christ becoming part of my experience?"

Jesus was rejected by his family, yet he did not become bitter. He used his own rejection as a platform to gather up the outcasts of Israel.

Jesus was misunderstood by the leaders of Israel, yet he did not lobby for his own case. He went on being misunderstood, trusting that God would work out his purposes through this misunderstanding.

Jesus did what was right. He helped others and was scorned for his good deeds. Yet he did not compromise.

Jesus was wounded and betrayed by a close friend, yet he did not harden his heart but continued to remain vulnerable.

Jesus was physically and verbally abused until his body was a bloody, unrecognizable mass. Yet he knew that his stripes were not in vain; they would bring healing to the nations. (What an encouraging

word this is to victims of sexual abuse. Your stripes are not in vain.)

Finally, Jesus experienced the gripping grief of death, dying that others might live. This, too, will be our lot one day.

Ray Stedman went home to be with the Lord last year. His wife Elaine is one of my favorite people. She has a sweet, angelic-like spirit that I find most appealing. With Ray's home-going, she has now entered into a new phase of life: she is learning how to live without her husband. She told me that one of the most encouraging words shared with her came from a pastor who telephoned her and said he had three things to tell her. "First," said this man, "it will hurt. Don't pretend that it won't. Second, God will help. And third, read Psalm 71 every day." But surely, I thought to myself, she knows these things already. She already has suffered much in life. But then I remembered: she has not experienced suffering in this new dimension. God has created a new experience for her so that she will taste the life of Christ in a new way.

Isn't it encouraging to know that church growth has little to do with numbers or with feats of power? Rather, church growth is filling out the life of Christ in all our experiences. This may lead to numerical growth, of course, but numbers are not the true measure of church growth. Don't settle for anything less in your life than the full measure of Christ!

So in these verses we have the foundations and the goal of growth.

We come now to the means of growth.

III. The Means of Growth: Divine Speech (4:15-16)

But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted together and held together through every supporting ligament, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Don't you find it intriguing that though the NT talks a lot about spiritual gifts, we are never told how to discover what our own gifts are or, when we find them, how to use them? So how do we discover our spiritual gifts? Here is a clue. Have you noticed that every passage that makes mention of spiritual gifts is immediately followed by a passage on love? We discover our gifts by loving people! So get involved. Start loving people. And the deepest expression of love is speech. Start talking to people and you will be using your gift, out of love. This is how the body grows — through the use of divine speech.

The vast majority of spiritual gifts are gifts of speech. This was the great gift that Jesus possessed. Isaiah wrote concerning him,

**The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples [the learned],
That I might know how to answer the weary one with a word.
He awakens me morning by morning,
He opens my ear to listen as a disciple. (Isaiah 50:4)**

Jesus had the gift of so crafting a word that individuals came alive and felt cleansed and encouraged. At times, as was the case with the Samaritan woman, individuals to whom he spoke went on to change whole cities as a consequence.

In these verses, Paul lists five characteristics of this divine speech.

(a) Truth Bathed In Love

"Truthing in love..."

Love is the origin of good speech. As it fills you it liberates you to tell the truth. We are learning that victims of abuse hide the truth. They do not feel free to talk so they bury everything deep inside themselves, mistaking submission for silence. But then they make the startling realization that their refusal to speak results in their constructing their own tomb: they are the ones who die. Concealing the truth is not a loving thing. Love liberates the truth.

Over the past few months my wife and I have come to know a couple in our congregation, and we have been delighted to observe how well they communicate with each other. But the wife told me that it hasn't always been so. We learned that both she and her husband come from abused backgrounds. He, as a result, sought to control their home so

that she did not feel free to share her feelings. At last she sought counseling from a woman in our congregation, and love liberated her. She felt free to talk, so she confronted her husband and told him he needed help. He listened, and he too sought counseling. The result is that they began to communicate in the way that my wife and I found so appealing.

Husbands, can it be that you are not growing because you have created an atmosphere in your home in which your wives no longer feel free to speak to you? If your wife can't tell you the truth, who will? She is the one who loves you, the one who knows you best.

Divine speech, therefore, begins with truth that is bathed in love.

Secondly, Paul goes on to say that this speech does not promote self, it promotes Christ.

(b) Speech Which Promotes Christ

"...we may grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, Christ..."

When we speak, we promote Christ, with the result that people are encouraged to respond to him as their Head, not to us. The Galatian church rejected Paul and embraced another gospel, but he wrote these words to them, "You have done me no wrong. Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the *truth*?... My children, with whom I am again in labor until *Christ is formed in you*..." (Gal. 4:12,16,19). Paul told the Galatians the hard truth not to get them to respond to him, but to respond to Christ.

Third, when one is brought to lay hold of Christ as Head, the life that results serves to enhance commitments.

(c) Speech Which Enhances Commitments

"...from whom the whole body, being fitted together and held together ..."

Our purpose in directing people toward Christ is to bind them closer together, not to cause them to run away or create divisions. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he uttered one of the most beautiful statements of Scripture. As he gazed upon his mother and his disciple John, he said, "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother." The text continues, "From that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (John 19:27). The speech of Jesus binds together commitments like marriages, parent-children relationships, and relationships in the workplace.

There is a fourth thing.

(d) Speech Which Fosters Specialization

"...held together through every supporting ligament, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body..."

Notice that divine speech does not impose agendas upon people, but rather enhances commitments by allowing them to specialize. When every member is functioning properly (according to the proper working of each individual part), the body of Christ grows. In the human body, no organ is a superstar, as it were. It is the same in the body of Christ: each member has a unique and a limited function. The body grows in a healthy way when leaders allow the saints to develop according to gift-ness. This will happen naturally as people respond to the life of Christ as their Head. In the book of Acts, saints like Stephen and Philip use their gifts vigorously, without asking anyone's permission or having an organization instruct them on what to do.

Finally as the life of Christ is imparted from the head allowing everyone to function according to divine gift then says Paul the whole body builds itself up in love.

(e) The End of Divine Speech: Love

"...for the building of itself up in love."

Love is both the origin and the end of divine speech. What began as a private word, crafted in secret, now spreads out onto the public stage, strengthening the entire body, and the whole body is built up in love as a result.

The life of Jesus illustrates this so well. His custom-designed words, exchanged in secret, not only strengthened the hearers but went on to change whole cities through them (John 4); and later, the lives of millions throughout history who cherished the written record of the event. Well chosen, timely words spoken in secret will reverberate back onto the stage of history and strengthen many as a consequence. Love sown secretly in truth bears a rich harvest of love.

A number of years ago, a brother came to me privately to ask me how he could grow in Christ. He shared some struggles in his personal life that were impeding his spiritual growth. He asked me what I thought he should do with his struggles. When he said he had not shared these things with his wife, I advised him to go home and do so. She responded by loving him, not condemning him, and this acceptance liberated him to love others. He began to quietly minister behind the scenes with the love and grace of Christ. He even began to write beautiful poetry. Then tragically, he was diagnosed with leukemia. He had a bone marrow transplant, and he suffered through that painful radiation treatment that kills the bone marrow. Then infections set in, causing him to suffer more. Through 145 days and nights he suffered. When we visited him, we could not recognize him. But we heard him say, like Job, "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him." In a moment of great beauty and tenderness we watched as his wife washed his feet. On August 23rd, 1991, Michael Buchanan died at the age of 41. His wife Hazel and her two boys moved to Sacramento just recently, and she wrote to me last week and enclosed a poem, a prayer to his Savior, which Michael had written several years before he died.

MAN OF PAIN

*In simple power
How deep the death
Deep in the earth
My Lord drew breath*

*The bloom of love
I stand in awe
He looks at me
And though ice caps thaw*

*Oh man of pain
What can I do
I long to show
That I love you*

*Around my neck
Embrace me now
In everlasting
Union bow.*

Michael's prayer was answered. Like Jesus, he grew up to become a mature man, a man of pain whose sufferings brought many to a knowledge of the simple but transcendent power of the love which blooms at the cross. This is what growing up is all about. Amen.

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HIS MAJESTY'S NEW CLOTHES

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 906
Ephesians 4:17-24
Thirteenth Message
Brian Morgan
March 21, 1993

The apostle Paul began the fourth chapter of his letter to the church at Ephesus by entreating the Ephesians to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” This morning, as we come to the second half of this chapter, the title I have chosen for this message is, “His Majesty’s New Clothes.”

My wife is always eager to dress me up with some new look. On my birthday recently, she handed me a wrapped box and said, “These are for a new look.” Inside I found a new shirt, a tie, and a pair of socks. I must have given one of those looks that didn’t need interpretation, because she immediately added, “I won’t feel bad if you want to take them back.” (How well she knows me!) So I took them back to the store and exchanged them. I like the old me (especially when I saw the bill!). While I was in the store, I saw all the new fashions for spring. Isn’t it amazing how the fashion industry gets away with changing everything people wear, as if by decree? I found myself browsing through all the new styles and colors, and it wasn’t long before I had chosen a new shirt and tie. (When I got home, I discovered I had spent more than my wife had, without the socks!)

New fashions, of course, tug at our hearts, because deep down most of us are dissatisfied with the old “me.” The Bible says that this sense of dissatisfaction and our need to cover ourselves finds its roots in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve had sinned, their shame led them to clothe themselves with fig leaves and hide from God. But God had a better plan for them. He exchanged their fig leaves for fur coats. God beautifully clothed them with the sacrificial skins of innocent animals so that they could walk with him once more in purity and acceptance.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament God is depicted as a fashion designer who gives new clothes to his people. Exodus 39 has a description of the beautiful clothes which he designed for the High Priest. The priest dressed in costly linens of blue, purple and scarlet; his breastplate was made of 12 precious stones; and his robe was detailed woven work all in blue. “Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness,” wrote the psalmist (Psalm 132:9). These garments were given to inculcate in the Hebrew mind the notion of godly character for God’s new humanity which he would establish through Israel, recovering what Adam and Eve had lost.

Isaiah described in these words the clothes that the LORD would wear when he brought about salvation for his people,

“And He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.” (Isaiah 59:17)

We learn later in Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messiah had the same wardrobe:

“I will rejoice greatly in the LORD
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,

He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.” (61:10)

In our passage this morning, Paul tells Christians that through the work of Christ, we have the supreme honor of wearing his majesty’s clothes. His costly new royal garments are ours to wear too. In the first century converts were clothed in new white garments when they were baptized, symbolizing this new purity. This symbolism was as important to the convert as a white wedding dress, symbolizing virginity, is to a bride today. Since Christians have these new royal garments, says Paul, we should take care to wear them on every occasion.

The apostle gives three motivations to the Ephesians to put on their new clothes and walk in newness of life. First, in verses 17-19, he reminds them of the old walk that came naturally to them.

I. The Old Walk That Came Naturally 4:17-19

Therefore this I say, and testify in the Lord, that you walk no longer as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; who, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

The apostle was grieved that some who had taken a vow of allegiance to Christ at baptism still continued to walk like unbelievers. The word “testify” illustrates the seriousness of what Paul is saying. He summoned the Ephesians into a holy courtroom, indicating that what he wrote would be used as evidence for or against Christians on the day of judgment. There are no other options open to Christians. We have to wear our new garments. Paul “testifies” to this in the Lord.

Paul then reminds the Christians of Ephesus about the nature of their old walk so as to motivate them to walk in a new way of life.

(a) A Futile Road: Darkened Minds

The first characteristic of their old way of life was that it was a dark road. “...that you no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding...” The dark road which they followed in the past always ended up in futility. No matter how much they gave their minds to logic and reason, ethical futility was the end result.

Isn’t this the mark of the world today? Paul traveled to Athens, the center of Greek philosophy, but he had little impact for Christ in that place. Luke commented on the pastime of the Athenians, “All the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new (lit., newer)” (Acts 17:21). Their speculative reasoning could not free them from idolatry. Their great learning ended in futility because it lacked the light of reality. I am reminded of our own Bay Area. Despite our fine universities and the great minds that surround us, people continually fall for the futility of the darkened mind which lacks the light of reality.

The road which the Ephesians walked was a dark road. And secondly, it was a hard road.

(b) A Hard Road: Calloused Hearts

They were "...excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart..." The tragedy of the old life was that although they lived in God's own world they were strangers on earth, isolated, their hearts unresponsive to the Creator. And the farther they walked down that road, the less capable they were of feelings and emotions; their hearts had become calloused

The road they were on was a futile, hard road. And it was a dead-end road.

(c) A Dead End Road: Enslaved Wills

"...have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." The Ephesians had presented themselves to the idol of pleasure. They were early followers of our modern-day pleasure seekers whose philosophy is, "if it feels good, do it." Tragically, that road always ends up in addiction. One seemingly insignificant choice had led to a habit ("practice" is the word Paul uses). People no longer made choices because they wanted to, but because they had to. Then their practices escalated ("every kind of impurity"), until they found themselves doing things they never thought possible. They began to practice, in John Stott's term, "unblushing obscenity."

Last Sunday's newspaper had an example of unblushing obscenity. Apparently, a newly released pornographic film is geared especially for women. Women find pornography too sleazy, the article said. It continued, "Isn't it too bad there's no visual erotica for women...Strong women, tender guys need lust too...it's a kinder, gentler pornography." The actress who played in the film is a 47-year-old graduate from Berkeley, the mother of two teenagers. Over 600 copies of the video were sold in San Jose alone. Today, it seems no one, not even housewives, is safe from sensuality, from the "practice of every kind of impurity with greediness."

But that old road, which seemed so promising at the beginning, always ends "with greediness." It never satisfies. It is a dead-end road, one that leads only to frustration. If we continue to walk on it, we will lose our royal garments and end up like naked beasts.

Paul wrote these warnings so that we will never forget the road on which we once walked — a futile, hard, dead-end road. We walked with darkened minds, hard hearts, and a sense recklessness with regard to our own lives.

The apostle gives a second motivation: the love of Christ which has made available a new road to walk on.

II. The New Walk That Is Learned 4:20,21

But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, just as the truth is in Jesus...

The Ephesians had learned a new walk through the work of Christ. The old way came naturally to them, but this new walk had to be learned. It required an instructor to teach it, and discipline and work on their part to learn it.

(a) The Voice of Instruction

Paul says that as the Ephesians walked down that dead-end road they heard the voice of Christ. Like Adam, they were walking on the old road when they heard the voice of God. Adam hid amidst the trees in the garden because he was ashamed. Into that

setting, however, the voice of God came, saying, "Adam, where are you?" Despite his sin, God did not leave him to continue walking on that dead-end road. He sought him and found him. Paul himself was living recklessly before he heard the voice of God on the Damascus Road. His hardened heart and darkened mind were leading him down the road of destruction, but then he heard Jesus say to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). The Ephesians were living in subjection to the sensuous spell of the goddess Artemas, but then through the preaching of the apostle they heard the voice of the living Christ.

Throughout the centuries, every time Christ is preached his voice is heard again. The great preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, heard the gospel preached when he was a boy, and this was how Christ reached him. Laboring under great conviction of sin, the young Spurgeon was making his way to church one Sunday morning when a blizzard hit. He could go no further, so he turned into a little Primitive Methodist Chapel where there were but 12 or 15 people attending. Describing the scene, Spurgeon wrote in his autobiography,

The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now it is well that preachers should be instructed, but this man was utterly ignorant. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, "*Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.*" He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.'" "Ay!" said he, in broad Essex, "many of ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there...Look unto Me, to Christ. Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "And you always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved...you have nothing to do but look and live." I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun... (C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1, The Early Years* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth] 87-88).

The great Spurgeon came to Christ through the unsophisticat-

ed preaching of a man who simply said, “Look unto Christ.”

We, too, if we have come to faith, if we have looked unto Christ, have heard his voice.

And Christ has graciously shown us the way of instruction.

(b) The Way of Instruction

“...heard Him and been taught in [or “by”] Him...” After Adam and Eve had come out from hiding in response to the voice of God, they discovered that their clothes were inadequate. God made new garments for them, however, and he began to teach them to walk in a new way. From now on they would walk blamelessly before him.

In Genesis we read that “God walked with Adam” in the Garden of Eden. God walked alongside him in order to teach him, in effect. What this text in Ephesians is saying is that the Garden of Eden has been recreated in the church. In the church, Christ descends to walk with us and teach us. This is what he did for Paul. He took him into the wilderness and there for 10 years privately instructed him how he should walk. So too, Christ invites us to come out of hiding to teach us through his word and through the gifts of the church to walk in newness of life.

And Christ, says the apostle, is the only instructor.

(c) The Only Instructor

“...just as the truth is in Jesus...” When Jesus instructs us to “walk no longer as the Gentiles walk,” his teaching has a ring of reality about it. When he says, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to Father but by me,” you can entrust your life to his words. No other teacher or no other teaching can compare with the truth as it is in Jesus.

If the pain you suffered while you were walking on the old road was not enough to motivate you, then the love of Christ who intervened, who tenderly spoke to you to save you from destruction, will do it.

We come now to Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians on how to put off their old clothes and put on their new wardrobe. He gives these in principle in verses 22-24; and then, in verses 25-32 (which we will take in our next study), he lists them in practice.

III. The New Walk In Principle: A New Wardrobe 4:22-24

...taught by Him...to put off, in reference to your former manner of life, the old man, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and to put on the new man, created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

The apostle gives three specific instructions in these verses.

(a) Take Off the Old Man (like clothing)

Though the power of sin had been broken through the cross of Christ, the Ephesians still carried sin around with them in their bodies. And this sin would remain with them until the day they died.

Paul lists the characteristics of this “old man.” First of all, he is “old,” as his description clearly states. He has been around a long time. And he carries with him all the old sinful habits and their associations, memories and moods that lead believers into sinful habits. When we put him on, it feels natural, just as our old clothes feel comfortable when we put them on. Paul is clear-

ly implying that passivity in the Christian life is always a formula for disaster. Our natural drift is negative, so we have to “put off the old man.”

Secondly, this old man is “being corrupted with the lusts of deceit.” He never gets any better. He never learns from the past. He will forever remain misguided, naive, and vulnerable to evil.

A glance at the life of Abraham proves how true are the words of the apostle. Twice, the patriarch lied about his wife, jeopardizing his family and, of course, God’s plan for his people. On the first occasion, God intervened to deliver him, sparing him by grace. But 20 years later, Abraham repeated his sin in exactly the same circumstances, yet God delivered him once again. Had he not grown spiritually in the intervening 20 years? Of course he had. But the “old man” had not grown. He remained as corrupt as ever.

But now, in Christ, believers are free to “put off” the old man. He is, in fact, no longer our true identity for we have been joined with Christ. As we walk in Christ we have a choice to “put off” the old man and “put on” Christ. True repentance involves decisive action. So don’t just cry over your sin. Get rid of it. Put it off, through the grace of Christ.

This was what Josiah, the righteous Old Testament king, determined to do. Whenever there was an effort at reform in Israel, the kings would often tear down altars but not the high places, the sources of temptation. But in his day, Josiah broke down the pillars and ground them into dust, and he removed all the houses of the high places. In Arad today, the wall still stands which he built right through the high place so that the people would not be able to worship at the place of temptation. It is a testimony to his faithfulness.

Secondly, we must renew our way of thinking.

(b) Be Renewed In Your Thinking

“...be renewed in the spirit of your mind...” We can’t change our behavior without changing the way we think. We can’t make any significant moral changes without spiritual renewal — and renewal needs to go on all the time.

Our local Crisis Pregnancy Center is a good example of this truth. The women who minister there know that it is not enough to tell a woman with an unwanted pregnancy that abortion is murder. They know they must begin by changing her way of thinking at the deepest level. In a loving atmosphere, without coercion, they share with young mothers as much of the facts as they wish to know. Then, if they are interested, they are offered spiritual counsel, as a basis for ethical behavior. This is the basis of their appeal for ethical change. Erasmus said, “The mark of greatness is not to coerce a man but to convince a man.” Christians change through spiritual renewal. Shouted slogans won’t do it. We convince people through acts of love and kindness.

Thirdly, says Paul, we must put on the new man.

(c) Put On the New Man (like clothing)

“...to put on the new man, created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” Often Christians have little moral impact on their culture because to the world we look like the fabled emperor who had no clothes. We think we have a new wardrobe, and we like to show it off. But we just look silly, because the world sees us as naked. We boldly renounce the old man, putting off immorality, homosexuality, adultery, etc., but we fail to put on an ounce of kindness, forgiveness, or forbearance. This is why we appear naked to the world. It is because we are naked! We have stripped off the old man, but we have failed

to put on the new man.

This “new man” has two characteristics. First, of course, he is new. He is “new” because he is clothed in the robes of Christ. I participated in an Orthodox wedding ceremony yesterday with two priests, one Romanian Orthodox and one Roman Catholic. When I saw the beautiful vestments of the priests, the incense, candles, crowns and crosses, etc., I felt a bit out of place. Why don’t we wear vestments? you ask. It is because we have new vestments that have been “made without hands.” We have the reality of which those beautiful vestments are but a shadow. We have Christ himself, and it is him we must put on.

Secondly, this new man has already been “created.” We are responsible to put on righteousness and holiness, but not to create it. Jesus told the lame man to walk, something the man had never been able to do before. When he looked into the face of Christ, however, and placed his faith in him, he began to walk in newness of life. This is what we do when we put on Christ. We actually enter into his life. This is not hypocrisy. We actually become united with Christ.

My daughter has been fighting an illness during the past few weeks. On successive weeks the school telephoned and asked us to take her home because she was feeling faint. On the second occasion, we kept her home the next day to rest, but that afternoon she said she had a school softball game and she wanted to play in it. A few days later she came home wearing a new softball uniform. She had been called up from JV to play in a varsity tournament. When I pointed out to her that she had not been able to get out of bed to go to school, let alone play softball, she assured me I shouldn’t worry. She not only played, she got a hit the first time she was called off the bench to bat! After the game our doctor informed us that she has mononucleosis. I thought to myself, “Mononucleosis or not, give her the uniform and she will play varsity softball!” No matter how you feel about yourself, if you put on the garments of Christ you will play varsity Christianity!

So wear these new clothes, “righteousness and holiness of the truth,” and these very things will become realities in your life.

What further motivation do we need? We have a new wardrobe, created for us and gifted to us. Let us wear it.

I will conclude by drawing three implications for this new walk in Christ.

IV. Implications of the New Walk

(a) Humility of Heart

The prophet Micah asked, “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love loyal-love and to *walk humbly* with our God” (Micah 6:8). Though we have new clothes to wear, we must never forget that the old man remains with us until the day we die. So let us be circumspect, not presumptuous, living humbly before God, knowing that we are but one step removed from all of the old patterns for living.

(b) Renewal of Mind

Micah had a vision of a great day that was coming: “On that day many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will *teach* us his ways, so that we may *walk* in his paths” (Micah 4:2). That day has dawned. Christ is in our midst, teaching us from the New City to walk in his ways. Yet the tragedy is that of all generations of Christians, we have remained babes in our thinking. We are satisfied with a diet of Christian junk food. We don’t take time to meditate, to read the Scriptures, to study the great doctrines of the faith. We need to be diligent in our walk. Never has our world been more needy. So let us avail ourselves of opportunities to learn of Christ and in the process renew our minds continually.

(c) Freedom in Walk

Let us never again be subject to the yoke of slavery which Christ broke through his death and resurrection. The Lord said to Moses at Mt. Sinai, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high” (Lev. 26:13). This same God has delivered us, just as he delivered the Israelites. We should wear our new-found freedom proudly.

Yesterday at the Orthodox wedding which I spoke of I was struck by the beauty of the young Romanian bride as she walked down the aisle. Her white gown was a statement of her purity and devotion to her husband to be. Making the day even more special was the fact that she herself had led him to Christ. She walked with head erect, her eyes radiant. Can there be anything more beautiful than the sight of a bride in all her purity and innocence? If she is not hesitant to display the beauty of her purity on the public stage, why should we hesitate to hold our heads high, proudly displaying our wedding garments, our new clothes which Jesus purchased with his own blood?

O Bride of Christ, wear your new clothes!

Amen.

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NEW CLOTHES OF INTEGRITY

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 907
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
Fourteenth Message
Brian Morgan
March 28, 1993

My father has always been an immaculate dresser. To me, his clothes seemed to mirror the high degree of skill and the meticulous attention to detail that he brought to his profession as a surgeon. I have a deep respect for him. I have always regarded him as “one of the best.”

As a child, I longed for an opportunity to watch him work during surgery. One day, when I was about eleven years old, he invited me to join him in the operating room. Together we walked down a long corridor and entered the changing room. There he laid aside his immaculate street clothes and put on a simple bluish-green smock and pants. As he began to scrub his hands and arms, he glanced at me and told me that I too had to don surgical clothes and scrub up. My new clothes gave me instant access to his world. It was a thrill to walk past the “No Admittance” signs and enter the operating theater. For the next 90 minutes I was an awestruck observer, beholding the wonder of surgery as my father worked with extraordinary skill and speed. He was indeed the master I always dreamed he was.

In the same way that the surgical clothes I wore that day gave me access to my father’s world, Christians are privileged to wear the wardrobe of the Savior Jesus Christ and behold the wonder of his work in the salvation of souls.

As we have been learning in our studies during the past few weeks, this is the astounding declaration of the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. In this matter of my putting on surgical garb there was one striking difference, however. Putting on the clothes of my father that day when I was 11 certainly did not make me a surgeon. In Christ, however, Christians become entirely new creations. Our new clothes declare our new identity — who we really are.

Last week, we saw that Paul described our walk as Christians in terms of taking off our old clothes and putting on the new man in Christ. In 4:17-24, we looked at this process in general. We found that three steps were involved: putting off the old man; being renewed in the spirit of our minds; and putting on the new man. Today, in 4:25-5:2, Paul applies this principle in four different areas of life. To help us grasp what the apostle is saying, I would like us to think of this text in terms of four different sets of clothing which we are privileged to wear, clothes that depict the work of Christ.

The first outfit is described in verses 25-27.

I. Developing Honesty: The Clothes of the Prophet (4:25-27)

Therefore, putting off falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH, EACH ONE WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, nor give the devil an opportunity.

(a) Honesty In Speech

First, says the apostle, Christians should put off all forms of

lying. Lying, whether it be blatant, such as bearing false witness or slandering one another, or subtle, such as saying nothing at all, or appearing to agree when we really don’t, is unacceptable behavior for Christians. We must not make the mistake of valuing peace in relationships over purity. “...the wisdom from above is *first pure*, then peaceful...” said James (3:17a). We shrink from telling the truth at times, however, because we would rather be man-pleasers than truth-tellers. But this is a form of lying.

Our clothing should be like that of a prophet who speaks the truth in all circumstances. Samuel, the first prophet, had an unenviable first assignment. As a mere boy he had to confront his tutor and professor Eli. The aged priest had allowed his sons to compromise the truth of God in the temple, thereby slandering the sacrifice. Samuel was terrified at the prospect of confronting Eli, but he did so and became a prophet of God. It is not an easy thing to confront members of the body, especially those who are older or perhaps more powerful than ourselves. But this is what we must do. Ray Stedman used to say that honesty is not the best policy, it’s the only policy.

A young married woman who was once a member of our congregation before she and her husband moved to another city, telephoned me last week to ask for advice. Her father, a Christian who divorced her mother years ago, is planning to marry again and he asked his daughter to attend his wedding. She knows that he does not have biblical warrant for this marriage, so she was perturbed as to whether to attend or not. I asked her if she had spoken to him about his divorce, and she said that she had discussed it with him in the course of a long conversation a few months ago. She had asked him if he had ever repented of his sin and his hardness of heart toward her mother. When I heard this, I told her that whether she attended the wedding or not was a minor issue compared with the fact that she had lovingly confronting her father with the truth. She had put on the clothes of a prophetess, thus fulfilling the first requirement of Paul’s injunction to Christians, to put off falsehood and speak the truth.

What is Paul’s rationale for this? It is that we are “members of one another.” In the body of Christ we are not isolated from one another. If one member suffers from a crack in his or her foundation of faith, then all suffer. John Stott commented, “Fellowship is built on trust, and trust is built on truth.” There must be integrity between what Christians say and what is true.

So believers should be honest in their speech. And secondly, they should be honest in regard to expressing their emotions.

(b) Honesty In Emotions

Paul writes, “BE ANGRY AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, nor give the devil an opportunity” (4:26-27). Christians have had difficulty determining what Paul meant here. Was he commanding believers to be angry but to control it lest it get out of hand? Some commentators hold that righteous anger in the cause of God is proper, but it is improper in our own cause because it can easily become self-righteous. I

find this interpretation troubling, however, because everywhere in the NT we are told to put off anger. "...the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God," said James (1:20).

This text is not dealing with righteous anger, I think, but with the anger we feel at times in relating to one another. These words, "*be angry but do not sin*," come from Psalm 4:4. But the Hebrew does not convey this as a command to anger. What it is inferring is, tremble, and stop sinning. The Jews were angry at God, and the king was saying, "You are angry at God, so trouble yourself. Tremble, and stop sinning."

What then did Paul have in mind here? I am indebted to a brother from my fellowship group who linked this text with Leviticus 19:17-18. I think this is the context for Paul's words here. Leviticus says, "You shall not hate your fellow country-man in your heart; you may *surely reprove* your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD." This text assumes that it is easy to become angry at people, but we should not allow our anger to become hatred. What we should do, as the text says, is "reprove [our] neighbor." Tell him how you feel. Vent your emotions. And be careful to do this on the same day. If you do not, if you bury your anger, you are opening the door to the devil. The fire of anger will burn all night and keep burning until it consumes you. Then you will end up taking vengeance as the instrument of the devil.

Once you have told him, however, then leave everything in God's hands. Don't bear a grudge. Don't try to manipulate the situation. Trust God. This is what Sarah did with her husband Abraham. Sarah is portrayed by the church as an example for wives to submit to their husbands, but submission does not equal silence. When Sarah was wronged by Abraham, she spoke her mind clearly: "May the wrong done me be upon you...May the LORD judge between you and me!" (Gen. 16:5). She was angry at what Abraham had done, so she confronted him with the truth. Then she backed off and allowed the Lord to work on him.

Then, once you have done this, love your neighbor. Follow your honesty with love, then the fires of anger will be quenched. Even elders in the church have to do this on occasion. Most of our elders' meetings are models of love and harmony, but there are occasions when anger becomes stirred up. Our last meeting, held two weeks ago in my home, was such an occasion. Things took a strange turn, and I became very defensive. The meeting did not end until 12:30 a.m., and I didn't get to bed until 1:30. Even then I couldn't get to sleep all night. Next day I called a few of my brothers to express how I felt. They in turn shared with me how they felt and expressed their point of view. It wasn't long before my anger and resentment subsided. This past weekend at our annual pastors and elders retreat, we followed this up with little acts of kindness and love toward one another, further dampening any residual anger. This is what we should do in the body of Christ.

To summarize, there must be integrity between what Christians feel and what they say. We should be open with our emotions and not be afraid to tell people how we feel, so that anger and resentment are not allowed to fester among us. In the OT, at times a prophet had to tell Israel that God was angry with them, that he was emotionally damaged by their behavior. This was the work of a prophet, and it is our work at times, too.

The Christian's second set of clothing is described in verses 28-30.

II. Contributing To Needs: The Clothes of the Builder (4:28-30)

The one stealing no longer let him steal; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has a need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Spirit, the Holy One of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Our second outfit is the work clothes of a builder. Notice the repeated use of the words "good" and "need." We are to contribute to the needs of others by our hands, and we are to do good to them through our speech.

(a) Contributing With the Hands

"The one stealing no longer let him steal; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has a need" (4:28-30). Paul was concerned that Christians in the churches he founded not be lazy. We know that in Thessalonica, for instance, some Christians were lazy and were refusing to work. They were taking advantage of the generosity of members of the body, as if they had a right to be subsidized. To Paul, this was tantamount to stealing. Christians, says the apostle, should work hard, making more than they need so they can contribute to the needs of others. Paul himself modeled this attitude and practice wherever he went. He gave up his right to be paid by the church and worked as a tentmaker to set a good example for all.

Christians should not ask what they can get out of the government (especially at tax time), the insurance company, their family or friends. Our concern should be for what we can contribute. As citizens, we should be thankful for the fine amenities that we have. We should not be reluctant to contribute our share to maintaining them. In Corinth, according to F.F. Bruce, a marble paving block has been unearthed with the inscription: "ERASTVS. PRO. AED. S. P. STRAVIT" ("Erastus, in return for his aedileship [commissioner for public works] laid this pavement at his own expense.") This man Erastus did such an excellent job as city clerk that he was promoted, and in appreciation he laid a slab of marble pavement at own expense. What an excellent example he was for Christians in his congregation!

A number of years ago, I planned a major addition to my house. When I was ready to pour the cement foundations, a man whom I had never met came and offered to help. He was dressed in dark blue work clothes, and he told me he was a building contractor. He went to work, and began to direct a number of college students who were helping me. At the end of the day he entrusted to us his expensive tools which we needed to continue the work. Then he became part of our High School ministry to Mexicali each year, roofing churches and adding Sunday School rooms as the need arose. In my mind I always picture him as a gentle, humble brother, wearing dark blue work clothes. Even today he is still ready to contribute with his hands to Christians who have need. This is exactly what Paul has in mind here.

(b) Contribution In Speech

The apostle continues, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Spirit, the Holy One of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (4:29-30). "Unwholesome" means rotten. The word was used of spoiled fish or

rotten fruit. If we are not careful, it is easy for rotten speech to proceed out of our mouths, perverting what is good and defiling someone in the process.

The book of Proverbs says, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19). I am painfully aware of this tendency when I am preaching. Every week I spend 20 hours thinking through the text I will be preaching on, carefully crafting my words so that I might build you up. Yet I know that I cannot speak for 40 minutes and not have some words miss the mark. (Last week, for instance, a number of people telephoned me to say I had missed the mark!) I pray that when I am preaching, God will feed you with what is good and protect you from what is chaff. My social speech, which I do not prepare, of course, gives me even more reason for pause. I often say things that are not edifying, things that fail to build up.

Paul’s rationale for saying this is, not only do we hurt the person on the receiving end of the unwholesome word, but the Spirit, the Holy One of God who has given us our new wardrobe, is grieved. This should be ample motivation for us. We damage the Holy Spirit emotionally when our speech does not edify.

So the new man in Christ assesses the need, thinks it through and then carefully crafts his words so as to impart grace to the one who hears. Proverbs has a word for this type of person: “A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word!” (15:23). “Like apple of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances” (25:11). Words have great value! We are not dealing in common metals like copper or brass. Words are like gold. We should take care to present them in the right setting. Let us use graceful, loving words to build up, not unwholesome words which tear down. I was on the receiving end of “timely words” this past week. On three different occasions, a timely word from individuals, unbeknownst to them, ministered greatly to me and lifted my spirit in my time of need. This is what we should be doing for each other.

So our work as prophets is to tell the truth, to clothe with integrity our speech and our emotions. And our work as builders is to build up others, materially, with our hands, and spiritually, through our speech. Let the work of both our hands and our tongues therefore be edifying in all that we do and say.

We find the third part of our wardrobe in verses 31-32.

III. Nurturing Good Attitudes: The Clothes of the Surgeon (4:31-32)

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

We should put off destructive perspectives and in their place nurture good attitudes toward all.

(a) Putting Off Destructive Attitudes: The Clothes of a Patient

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (4:31). “Bitterness” is the critical word here, because this is what gives rise to everything that follows. Bitterness springs from a hard heart that refuses to let go of grievances and be reconciled. If this is our state of mind, we will find ourselves slipping into all of these other things which the apostle lists: *anger* (an emotional outburst of rage); *wrath* (a controlled form of anger which methodically plots someone’s downfall); *outrage* (shouting matches); *slander*

(speaking evil of someone behind his back); *malice* (harboring ill will toward others which leads to plotting harm).

Notice what Paul says about these evils: “Let [these things] be put away from you.” We cannot do this ourselves. We are to passively allow God to expose our sin to us and then permit him to weed the garden of our souls. This was David’s prayer in Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any way of pain in me, (139:23-24a).

In this instance we become the patient and allow God to be the surgeon. Here is where we take off our surgeon’s garb and don the humble, barely adequate gown of a patient ready for surgery, thus allowing ourselves to be completely vulnerable. This is what we must do so that God can have his way with us. We must remain passive as he probes the deep recesses of our hearts, excising the weeds of bitterness, anger, wrath, outrage, slander and malice.

If we do this, then God will give us his clothing.

(b) Put On Gracious Attitudes: The Clothes of an Obstetrician

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (4:31). Now we become active again: we put on “kindness.” The Greek word for this is “*chrestos*,” from the word “Christos,” from which we get “Christian.” “Kindness” means imparting good to others in a gentle and generous way. This was the mark of Christians in the first century. They went around Christ-like, sowing seeds of kindness wherever they traveled.

And be “tender-hearted.” This word literally means, “well kidneys.” It means we allow our emotions to be moved by the plight of others. I try to foster tender-heartedness in our men’s Bible studies by asking newcomers to share their life stories with us. This helps the men empathize with them and become involved with them.

“Forgiving” involves more than merely relinquishing a debt. It ought to be translated “imparting grace” to others, just as God has graced us. Do not treat people as they deserve to be treated, in other words. If you insist on treating your own family members as they deserve, showing little tolerance for their frailties, then your home life will be hell. When we are wronged, we have opportunity to show more and more grace in order to lead people to Christ.

When I put on my father’s surgical gown years ago, I was allowed to watch the surgeon in action, but I was no surgeon. When we put on the clothes of Christ, however, we become surgeons — obstetricians, in fact, who help give birth to others. What a holy job description this is! Through kindness, tender-heartedness and acceptance, we are privileged to deliver people from darkness into the realm of light as it is seen in the face of Christ. As a pastor, I have the joy of observing you as you learn to wear your new clothes — some as prophets, some as builders, some as holy surgeons — and I can tell you there is no greater reward for a pastor than watching this occur among the body.

Now we come to the last set of clothes that Christians put on. These are the ultimate “God clothes,” in a manner of speaking.

IV. Imitating Holy Love: The Clothes of a Priest (5:1-2)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Him-

self up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

(a) The Example of Love

“Be imitators of God,” says Paul. Our final outfit, the clothes of the Father himself, surpass all the others. These are the clothes that Christ wore in his supreme act of love — giving up his life so that we might have life. These are the clothes of a priest, the holiest of all clothes. In Gethsemane, as he sweat great drops of blood, Jesus knew that the betrayal, the spitting, the mocking, the beating, the crucifixion that he was about to endure was the most holy worship he could offer the Father whom he loved from the beginning. His flesh would be the offering, his death that fragrant aroma.

(b) The Motivation of Love

As we become aware of this we are motivated to holiness. The key to motivation lies not in mere ethical commands, but in telling a story. God tells us his story to demonstrate his love for us, and when we see it, it becomes our story. Notice here that as we wear these clothes of a priest our motivation is so exalted that Paul does not have to tell us to put off the old man. This is no longer an issue when we see what God has done in Christ. Love transcends everything, so we begin to imitate what we see has been done for us. We will want to be priests, to live and die for others so that our Father whom we love can smell that sweet fragrance.

Richard Wurmbbrand is a Romanian pastor who spent many years imprisoned for his faith. He beautifully captures this idea in his book, *One Hundred Prison Meditations*. He wrote,

Suppose you were living 2,000 years ago in Palestine, that you were sinful, heavy with guilt, and Jesus told you, “Your sin is grave and deserves punishment. ‘The wages of sin are death.’ But tomorrow I will be flogged and crowned with a crown of thorns for you. I invite you to assist them when they drive nails into my hands and feet and fix me to a cross. I will cry in anguish, and I will share the sorrow of my holy mother whose heart will be pierced by compassion for me as if by a sword. You should be there to hear my cries. And when I have died, you shall know that your sins are forgiven forever, that I was your substitute, your scapegoat. This is how a man gets saved. Will you accept my suffering for your offenses, or do you prefer to bear the punishment yourself?” What would you have answered?

Would you accept? More than once in Communist prisons I have seen a pastor receive a beating to the blood in place of another prisoner. A name would be called and the pastor would simply say, “It is I.” In Auschwitz, Maximilian Kolbe, a priest, offered to take the place of a Pole sentenced to death by the Nazis. The Pole was the father of many children. The commandant of the camp accepted the substitution and the Pole was spared. Kolbe died by asphyxiation. Had you been that Pole, what would you have decided? I believed that to accept would be a greater wickedness than all I might ever have

done in my life and I flatly refused this proposal. Jesus was glad of my “No.”

Then came the real question, the thing He had in mind from the beginning. “What if I incorporate your being into mine, if you become part of my body, if you deny yourself as an independent self, and I will live in you henceforth and you will be ‘crucified with me’ (Gal. 2:20), ‘buried with me’ (Romans 6:4), and share the fellowship of my suffering? People in churches will sing ‘safe in the arms of Jesus,’ while you will be safe as an arm of Jesus, nailed like His to a cross, but also imparting goodness like His. Do you wish to become my co-worker for the salvation of mankind, alleviating sufferings, filling up ‘that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ’ (Co. 1:24), and imparting eternal life to others? By virtue of my presence in you, the real fruits of my wounds will appear in your soul.”

I accepted this proposal. It is this consciousness of a high calling and of partnership with Jesus which brings gladness in tribulation, which makes Christians enter prisons for their faith with the joy of a bridegroom entering the bridal room.

When George Vins, the general secretary of the Baptist Union of USSR, was sentenced for his faith, ...his little daughter, hoisted on a stool, recited in front of the Communist judges, “Father, with Christ you are free in prison, and freedom without Him is prison.”

Because sacrifice is implicit in a conversion, the call of the Evangelist has the name “altar-call.” Every being placed upon the altar in Jerusalem, lambs, rams and pigeons, died. Someone dies for you. This time it is not an animal, but the Son of God. He has decreed it and nothing you can do will change His mind. You can only ask for the privilege of being able to sacrifice yourself as well henceforth for the glory of God and for the good of your fellow men. In return, you receive the right to die to sin and to the world and its laws.

Once when I was eleven years old, I donned a surgeon’s gown and entered a mysterious place, way beyond my skill and years. But the awe and wonder I felt that day will never compare with what I have experienced among you in recent days. This year I have watched a chosen number of you put on the gown of a priest and go to the altar in holy worship to offer sacrifice to the Father as a fragrant aroma. One couple came bearing their son in their arms. Another couple came bearing their daughter. Three women came, each bearing her spouse. One young man brought us as a congregation and a nation to Romania and laid his life on the altar to live in that land. All of these brothers and sisters came to bear the wounds of Christ so that others might be healed. As their sacrifice was offered, and their wounds inflicted, I beheld the most holy love of God in the beautiful garments of Christ. At those moments I said in my soul, “This is holy ground. I am not worthy to be here.”

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CONQUERING THE WILD BEAST OF IMMORALITY

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 908
Ephesians 5:3-14
Fifteenth Message
Brian Morgan
August 22, 1993

My family and I have just returned from a week's vacation in Lake Tahoe, which we shared with our friends the Hanneman's. On our last evening there we decided to visit a casino together. Driving to Stateline we could see in the distance the bright lights of the casinos that allure the unwary with dreams of glamour and riches. Soon we found ourselves in bumper to bumper traffic. When we got to the casino at Harrah's, there was hardly a parking space available. At last we made our way inside the palace-like hotel. The basement, where children get to play video games while their parents gamble upstairs, was no palace, however; it looked rather dilapidated.

As we made our way upstairs we could hear the din of the slot machines and the occasional cheer when the dice came up or someone cashed in on a jackpot. We made our way past people packed shoulder to shoulder, some of them glassy-eyed, drinks in hand, staring blankly. We felt like cattle being herded into a pen. By one of the roulette tables I overheard a young man, probably in his early twenties, making a ritual vow as he walked to the ATM machine: "Just one more withdrawal and I'm done," he promised himself. The Baccarat tables, reserved for the very rich, couldn't even be approached without a month's wages in hand.

For those who didn't feel like gambling, a suggestive billboard advertised a cabaret ("Beyond Bare Essence") complete with showgirls. In another area, fanciers of the sporting life gathered to gamble underneath multiple TV screens showing sporting events. The odds-makers sat nearby, calling out odds on football games and horse racing. In a corner I spied a young girl in tears as she recounted her disgust with her boyfriend to what appeared to be a male sympathetic ear, but on a second look, the man seemed more like another male beast stalking his evening prey. After about 45 minutes we had had our fill. My eyes were blurred, my mind jaded, my clothes grimy. The parking lot outside was more crowded than ever. As we left, I heard a man say, "What am I offered for this parking spot?"

Outside I thought about a pastor friend who had lived in Lake Tahoe for several years. How could anyone make an impact in a city whose economy was based on immorality and greed? I wondered. Then I remembered that in A.D. 52, a rather unimpressive-looking Jew, a tent-maker by trade, made his way into just such a city in Asia Minor. Ephesus lay at the mouth of the Cayster River valley, and was thus the gateway to the interior of eastern Asia Minor. The Greeks called such a colony an *emporion*, or "way in," since through it all the trade and resources of the world outside could be tapped. The city, which had excellent harbor facilities, grew rapidly as a commercial port. Later the Romans developed it, making it the seat of the provincial government. They called it "The Landing Place."

In the century before Christ, the area was hit with a severe economic depression. To survive, the city turned from trade to tourism. On the San Francisco waterfront area, the old canneries have today been transformed into restaurants and tourist shops, and a visit to the wharfs is a must for tourists. In the same way, a visit to the temple of Artemis was a must for tourists in the ancient city of Ephesus. Alexander the Great had contributed liberally to the new temple in the city, making it a shrine of unrivaled splendor. It was run by a fertility cult, complete with temple prostitutes. Here is what one commentator, E. M. Blaiklock, has written concerning the cult:

Artemis of Ephesus was a strangely ornamented female figure, shrine and basket on head, a veil decorated with beasts, long necklaces, embroidered sleeves, legs sheathed with impaneled animals, and with multiple breasts, or as some suggest, an apron covered with clusters of grapes or dates, sign and symbol of Artemis; role as the nourishing spirit of nature...Around the great shrine, to which worshipers and tourists poured from far and near, tradesmen and hucksters found a living, supplying visitors with food and lodging, dedicatory offerings, and the silver souvenir models of the shrine that the guild of Demetrius was most interested in making and selling. The temple was also a treasury and a bank, in which private individuals, kings, and cities made deposits. Coins of Ephesus sometimes show a date palm, sacred to Artemis, and the symbol of the goddess' beneficent activity.

Into this city then, midway through the first century A.D., came the apostle Paul. He set up shop in the Hall of Tyrannus, and for a period of two and a half years there preached the gospel of the risen Christ. His message met with astounding success. Even repentant magicians were converted. They actually had a book burning, and about one-half million dollars worth of magic books went up in smoke. Demetrius, the silversmith, fearing that the entire guild was in jeopardy, organized a riot to throw Paul out of the city (Acts 19). The apostle left at last, but not before a band of Christians, loosely organized in house churches, had been formed in the very shadow of the temple and tables of the idol merchants.

Ten years later, the apostle wrote to these Ephesian Christians asking them to make four commitments that would enable them to conquer what I call the wild beast of immorality. We find these commitments set out in chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, starting at verse 3, where he begins by asking the Christians to be pure in both conduct and speech.

I. Commitment to Sexual Purity (5:3-4)

But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

(a) Purity In Conduct

There are two elements to this first commitment. First, the act. The word immorality (*porneia*) comes from the verb "to sell." We get our term pornography from this word. Literally, it meant "harlot for hire, prostitution or fornication"; metaphorically, it was associated with idolatry. This word refers to all sex that is engaged in outside the bonds of marriage; in other words, the act of selling out cheaply something that has infinite value.

Second, the effect of immorality is "impurity" (uncleanness). This word is used in Classical Greek for the foulness that emanates from a wound or sore. Sexual sins create a weight of guilt, uncleanness and defilement that makes one feel ashamed.

And third, the drive. "Greed" (covetousness) literally means "a desire to have more because one is arrogant." In Classical Greek, the word was used of material greed. Due to their arrogant presumption, some wanted to have more than their share, to go beyond the bounds. Here, the word is applied to sex. Man, in

his arrogance and presumption, wants to have more than his due. Lust is a wild beast with an insatiable appetite that plagues mankind.

I would like to offer four practical suggestions here for how Christians should live today in light of the immorality of our own times. First, a word to single men. How far do you think you are permitted to go in your relationships with women and still remain pure? We find the answer to this question in Paul's letter to Timothy: Treat "the younger women as sisters in all purity," says Paul (1 Tim. 5:2). Women are holy, and men should treat them as they would their own sisters.

In like manner, the bride in the Song of Songs asks the young virgins to take a similar oath:

**"I cause you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,
That you not arouse or awaken (this kind of) love
Until it pleases" (2:7).**

The metaphor of the gazelles and the hinds seems to be hinting that sexual love, once it is aroused, takes off, speedily runs out of control, and frequently results in sexual intercourse. This is why the bride urges the daughters of Jerusalem to "swear" — a serious charge.

So the biblical admonition to young men and women is not to arouse or awaken this kind of sexual desire before marriage.

Second, I would say that young women need to be aware that men are easily aroused by what they see, therefore caution is necessary in choice of dress, deportment, etc. Women, on the other hand, are aroused by touch and closeness. Again, quoting from the Song of Songs, the bride says:

**"I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers;
Then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace" (8:10).**

Young women need to be taught to cover themselves in order to protect their purity. Here, the bride says she made her breasts like towers (a point of defense on the city wall), then they would be considered beautiful in the eyes of men.

The third exhortation is that men need to be vulnerable and honest with each other. Sexual enticement has been escalating at an alarming rate during the last decade. But we need not be afraid to admit that we struggle with temptation toward sexual fantasy or impurity. We should admit one other thing: we can't survive this kind of temptation alone. We need help. Let us therefore be vulnerable with each other and stop concealing our struggles. That is the devil's strategy to make us feel we're the only ones who struggle in this respect. But no one is exempt. If men share their struggles with their brothers, even with their wives, they won't be condemned, but loved. When we're open and honest with each other, the devil has no foothold. On a personal level, one brother actually telephones me weekly to help me check out my thought life, because he knows I can't make it alone. No one can.

Finally, a word to all: pre-determine your ethics. Lust is persistent, therefore assume you're going to be tempted. Chuck Swindoll had this to say about the perversity of lust:

Its alluring voice can infiltrate the most intelligent mind and cause its victim to believe its lies and respond to its appeal. And beware, it never gives up...it never runs out of ideas. Bolt your front door and it'll rattle the bedroom window, crawl into the living room through the TV screen, or wink at you out of a magazine in the den.

You must assume you're going to be tempted — when you travel, at work, during leisure time — so predetermine your ethics. Travel in twos, for instance. Turn off the cable TV before you enter your hotel room. Be especially watchful when you're tired, lonely, or depressed. These are times when you may be vulnerable to fantasizing.

So Paul's first word to Christians is, commit yourselves to purity in your actions.

A second thing is necessary.

(b) Purity in Speech

and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

We must put off three things: Filthiness, which is shameful, base, lewd conduct, and brash sexual gestures. Likewise, we must put away foolish or silly talk. Do not treat sex lightly. Do not make jokes about it or become involved in sexual innuendo at work. And do not partake in coarse jesting. Being witty and facetious, skilled at giving quick, witty answers, rapidly turning phrases and circumstances into double meanings, was an honored attribute in Greek society. Comedians make millions of dollars doing this today, but these things are not fitting for Christians. Jokes and witty retorts are merely defense mechanisms to keep people at arm's length. In summary, Christians must put off any speech that defiles, devalues or is a defense mechanism, under the guise of humor, to keep people at a distance.

What should we do in matters pertaining to sexuality? Paul says we should respond by "giving of thanks." Prayer and praise are the answers to lust. Give thanks for the beauty you see around you and pray for the other person. This will help defeat lust.

Purity in actions and speech, therefore, is the first commitment that Paul sought from the Ephesians. In the Old Testament, Noah's sons, Shem and Japheth, discovered their father drunk and naked once. Their other brother, Ham, was making light of the situation, but the two brothers took a cloak and, walking backwards into their father's presence, covered him in his nakedness lest they be defiled. In a day when some people are seeking every opportunity to unclothe each other, Christians should be guarding, protecting and sanctifying others, making them feel holy and dignified.

Here is the second commitment that Paul sought.

II. Commitment to the Truth (5:5-7)

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

(a) Know That This Area Determines Everything Else

"You certainly know," Paul is saying here, that a fornicator or unclean or covetous one who is an idolater, has no share in the kingdom of God. This doesn't mean that those who fall into sexual sin and then repent lose their salvation. What it does mean is that sexuality and idolatry are closely linked. Whatever we worship affects our body, and what we do with the body affects the soul. You can't sleep with an idol at night and expect to be pure during the day. If you try to, eventually the idol will take possession of your whole person.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's story, 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,' the kindly, benevolent doctor began tampering with a magical brew that transformed his person and released all the diabolical evil in him so that he became the tyrannical, hideous Mr. Hyde who terrorized the streets of London at night. As he drank the potion, in time he became more and more addicted to it. At last, one night as he sat debating with himself whether or not he would drink his magical brew, to his horror he turned into Mr. Hyde, without even drinking the potion. Evil had triumphed over him and destroyed him.

Alexander Pope caught this syndrome beautifully in these lines,

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien

*As to be hated needs but to be seen,
But seen too oft too familiar that face
We must first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

Television, unfortunately, has brought us to this place today. Daily we are subjected to all kinds of vices and evils on our TV screens. Adultery used to be a hateful thing, but because we have grown accustomed to adulterous situations on television, we have learned to endure it. It is the same with homosexuality. We have learned to first endure it, then pity it, and finally embrace it as a legitimate lifestyle.

(b) Know That It Will Come Under Attack

For this reason, because the stakes are high, Paul knew that his teaching would come under attack by false teachers. But Christians should not be deceived by empty words. The apostle comments, "...because of these things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience." And God's wrath is not something that will happen sometime in the future, it is an ongoing phenomenon. Our schools today educate children about sexually transmitted diseases, yet at the same time some authorities are inviting teens to be open about their sexuality and to experiment with it. "Safe sex" (through the use of condoms) is what they call the bridge between these two notions. But "safe sex" is a myth. Physically, so-called "safe sex" has a 16% failure rate, but emotionally, pre-marital sex has a 100% failure rate. But we never hear this statistic quoted, do we? No one talks about the shame and the emotional heartache, brought on by experimenting with sex, that is destroying so many of our young people.

But, says Paul, God will judge. No civilization can last in immorality. Ephesus, which had the full patronage of five Roman emperors subsidizing its glory, had to learn this bitter lesson. E.M. Blaiklock comments: "Under Claudius in the middle of the 1st century and under Trajan at the beginning of the 2nd, the great theatre was remodeled. Under Claudius the monumental Marble street was built. Nero gave Ephesus a stadium. Domitian widened and beautified the great central boulevard." Because it was built in immorality, however, Ephesus became a heap of rubble following a Gothic raid in AD 263. No family, no city, no nation will stand in immorality, because God will judge.

Christians, says the apostle, need to be committed to sexual purity and to truth.

There is a third thing.

III. Commitment To Love (5:8-10)

Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), proving what is pleasing to the Lord.

(a) Enjoying the Fruits of Proper Sexuality

Promoting abstinence ("Just say no!") is not enough to defeat the wild beast of lust and immorality. Living healthy, attractive, robust lives is the answer. As Christians, we need to cultivate goodness, righteousness and truth. "Goodness" here refers to making a proper use of these things instead of perverting them. As far as sex is concerned, Tom Cruise has nothing to teach the Christian! Have you ever thought about this? I have. Christians need not be ashamed of the biblical view of sex. Actually, they are the ones who truly know how to handle sex.

"Righteousness" refers to doing right by another person; and truth (its Hebrew synonym is "faithfulness") speaks of not breaking covenants of fidelity, but promoting faithfulness among couples.

(b) With a Renewed Mind and Holy Affections

Paul encourages this commitment to goodness, "proving what is pleasing to the Lord." God's intent is not to have us learn by

the pain of experience, but that we might learn by the light of his Word. As we do so we will have renewed minds and thus will be able to test life at its deepest levels, "...proving what is pleasing to the Lord," says Paul. This requires the hard work of observation, thinking and meditating. Christians can't afford to have lazy minds, passively drifting along with the tide. What we need is to have renewed minds and holy affections.

So the apostle calls Christians to commit themselves to purity, truth, and to love.

But there is one final thing necessary to defeat the beast of immorality.

IV. Commitment To Evangelism (5:11-14)

And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says,

**'Awake sleeper,
And rise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.'**

(a) Don't Hide In The Dark, Expose With The Light

Some Christians feel so threatened by the immorality prevalent all around them that they are tempted to take off and look for a wholesome environment where they can build a secure family life. But Paul has a different perspective. First, there is no place to hide. You will find immorality wherever you go. A glance at history proves that. And secondly, instead of being threatened by the fact of sexual immorality, Paul sees this phenomenon as an open door for evangelism.

Why is this? It is because sexual immorality destroys its victims. Think of the terrible plague of AIDS. Think on the fact that one out of seven teenagers already has a sexually transmitted disease. The toll resulting from sexual abuse creates such an intense level of emotional and physical pain that people are ready to quit playing games and respond to the truth of the gospel. Christians are the light of the world. Who is going to tell people how to be truly human and why God created them if we don't? And let us not witness like self-righteous prigs, holding up signs and rudely confronting people. Let us instead be like Jesus — personal, intimate, understanding, and compassionate. We shouldn't leave non-believers with the impression that their ethics offend us, but rather that we grieve for them because they aren't experiencing life as God designed it to be lived.

So expose everything with the light — and preach Christ. If you do these things, there is a side benefit for you: it will foster your own purity. At Stanford University, I joined a fraternity that did not have one Christian member, but I found it rather easy to overcome sexual temptation in our pagan frat house, because I led a Bible study there. This fact was so well known that they even took my initials and renamed me "Bible Monster"! With that label pinned on me, there was no way I could browse through the sex magazines that were lying around. As a marked man in that pagan environment I felt protected. A passive, secretive Christian, on the other hand, is much more prone to indulge in what is going on around him.

When things are thus exposed to the light, there is a great promise awaiting.

(b) Knowing The Promise Of The Light

But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says,

**'Awake sleeper,
And rise from the dead,**

And Christ will shine on you.’ (5:13-14)

Light at first exposes. Then after time it gives off heat. Heat turns to flame, and flame consumes and purifies all that is impure, transforming it into light. You can't remain in the light and not have it transform you.

George MacDonald's words bear eloquent testimony to this:

[God] is a consuming fire, that only that which cannot be consumed may stand forth eternal. It is the nature of God, so terribly pure that it destroys all that is not pure as fire...He will have purity. It is not that the fire will burn us if we do not worship thus; but that the fire will burn us until we worship thus; yea, will go on burning within us after all that is foreign to it has yielded to its force. No longer with pain consuming, but as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God.

Concluding this passage on conquering immorality, the apostle quotes from Isaiah 60. There was a time when I thought that these words formed the Christian's appeal to the non-Christian world, but then I discovered these verses were originally addressed to Israel, the people of God:

**“Arise, shine; for you light has come,
And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness will cover the earth,
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the LORD will rise upon you,
And His glory will appear upon you.
And nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.”**

**“Lift up your eyes round about, and see;
They all gather together, they come to you.
Your sons will come from afar,
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.
Then you will see and be radiant,
And your heart will thrill and rejoice.” (60:1-5a)**

Here in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul addresses this word from Isaiah to the church. Let us have done with lesser things. Let us rise up, climb out of our graves, and gaze upon our magnificent Christ, “whose eyes are like a flame of fire.” As we allow his gaze to penetrate and purify us, his holiness will penetrate deep inside our very beings; then the world will come to us like a flood, seeking to learn about the Savior.

Our sexual drive is actually a token of our deeper, spiritual longings: we long to be possessed and owned and loved by God himself. Sexual desires, therefore, are truly satisfied only in Christ. When he shines on us, casting his burning, flaming brightness about us, out of the watching world will spring an international family of Christians. There is no thrill, no joy greater than that. I witnessed the birth of my first-born son David, and as I saw him cradled in my wife's arms, a sense of holiness overcame me. I remember thinking that romantic love was never as thrilling as being present at the birth of a newborn. In the same way, the greater purpose of sexuality is to witness to the miracle of new life in Christ. As we involve ourselves in this magnificent work, we will understand why God said to the prophet Isaiah,

**“Your sons will come from afar,
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.
Then you will see and be radiant,
And your heart will thrill and rejoice!”**

The wild beast of lust can never tamed by man, but it can be transcended by the love of the Lion of Judah.

In appreciation to God who alone conquers the wild beast of immorality, I want to close by reading wrote a poem that I wrote last evening:

Beauty and the Beast

What beast is this,
Garbed in light
Whose appetite
Craves the soul of man?

He stalks his victims with untold pleasures,
First bite excites and delights,
Then wounds and bleeds and festers
With perverted appetites.

His seducing fangs sink into the naive
Reducing their innocence, truth and purity
To figments of distant childhood dreams
Now shattered.

Then he retreats into the darkness,
His work is done, for every wounded prey
Repeats his craft, enhancing it more
On those yet born.

What can man do
Strangled by the beast
But weep, shackled in his shame,
His sterile vows shown vain?

What beast is this who roars
Upon the horizon seen
Whose appetite craves the souls of men
And walks in light unseen?

He stalks his prey with focused eye
His first bite wounds and bleeds,
Til a premature death foretold,
Takes us to thy grave.

Yet stunned and fallen,
He bids us awake, arise to our delight,
And with enlightened eyes
We behold Judah's Lion ablaze in light.

He cries, “Live my child and gaze on Me,
Before you victory stands, with shining train.
Look to the horizon, and see fertility,
Countless faces of your children purged of pain.”

O what can man do but weep with joy
For one vow made and kept
To restore childhood longings,
For a greater goodness than man had ever dreamt.

Blessed be the Lamb of God.

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BRINGING HEAVEN TO EARTH

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 5:15-21
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Brian Morgan
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*"Our Father who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven."*

All Christians are familiar with this prayer uttered by Jesus in response to his disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus prayed to his Father, who is holy, and lives in heaven, asking that his holy will be done on earth as it was in heaven. But the question arises, "How do we bring God's holy will from heaven to earth?" especially when we live in increasingly evil days? Do we accomplish God's will on earth through politics or protest, by the sword of coercion or through economic means?

The Christians of Ephesus during the first century A.D. longed to bring God's holiness to earth. But they had none of the usual trappings of power to effect change. They had no political clout, financial resources or legal status. And they certainly did not own any buildings like the magnificent temple of Artemis, located on the outskirts of the city, which drew people from all over the world to sample its sensuous pleasures. How could they bring heaven to earth? Given their circumstances, they probably wrestled with the deeper question: Was it even possible to bring heaven to earth, or were the words "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," merely a divine joke?

Any well taught Jew in Ephesus, of course, would say that heaven was real; it was no joke. Heaven had a history of coming to earth, he would say. Hadn't God walked with Adam in the cool of the day, communicating with him when the evening breezes wafted through the Garden of Eden? Following the loss of paradise, the great redeemer God had even recreated heaven on earth on a grander scale in the land of Israel, a land "flowing with milk and honey."

In Deuteronomy, Moses declared that Israel was a land quite different from Egypt. For one thing, Egypt garnered water by pumping it from the earth, but Israel depended on rain from heaven to make the land fertile. Here is how Moses described the land: "The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the *rain from heaven*, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deut. 11:10-12).

Furthermore, our well-taught Jew would say that the rain that watered the land was controlled by the wind. Thus Israel was absolutely dependent on the wind patterns to provide rain. This dependence on the winds of heaven was most keenly felt during the Jewish feast of Shevuot, the Day of Pentecost. The Jews were to count 50 days from Passover to First Fruits (which the rabbis called seven weeks of trepidation and prayer), and watch and pray for the winds to do their work. Nogah Hareuveni, in his book, *Nature In Our Biblical Heritage* (Neot Kedumim, Israel, 1980), describes their prayers: "Let the northern wind come during the first weeks after Passover, thus giving wheat and barley a chance to fill with starch, leaving the olive buds closed. Let the dry southern wind come only after the grain kernels have filled and the stalks hardened, but let it prevail until the flowers of the olive, grape and date and pomegranate have been pollinated" (p. 37).

It is the wind that brings heaven to earth! And it is no coinci-

dence that in both Hebrew and Greek, the word "wind" is the same word used for God's Spirit. Some 30 years before Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians, on the Feast of Shevuot, the very occasion when Jews were bringing to the temple the first fruits of the grain, oil and wine (produce that depended on the interplay of the southern and northern winds), a mighty wind had blown through the place and Jesus' disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. This event, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit without measure, marked the inauguration of the last days. Heaven had pulled off the grandest invasion of earth. From that time forward, heaven would not be confined to a garden or to one nation; heaven had come to invade the entire earth. So the Ephesian Christians were to respond to their decadent culture, not by trying to compete with Artemis worship on worldly terms but, according to the apostle Paul's letter to the church in that city, they were to cultivate spirituality through the power of God's Holy Spirit which had been poured out on them. As the prophet Zechariah wrote, "Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord" (Zech. 4:6). The Spirit would bring the forces of heaven to earth and create a new community that would outlast not just the temple of Artemis, but history itself.

In a mere seven verses from chapter 5 of his letter now, the apostle holds forth perhaps the most beautiful cameo of Christian spirituality ever composed. We could well entitle these verses, "How To Bring Heaven To Earth." Ephesians 5:15-21:

Therefore watch carefully how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

The first thing we will consider from our text is the goal of spirituality.

I. The Goal of Spirituality: Redemption (5:15-16)

Therefore watch carefully how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

(a) The Necessity for Redemption: The Days Are Evil

Surrounded as they were by the cult of Artemis, the Ephesian Christians were living in chaotic, evil times. Eugene Peterson described the conditions which they labored under in these words: "In the ancient world each day of the week was assigned to the care of a god or goddess. Each divinity made its own capricious demands and dispensed good or ill arbitrarily. The pagan deities were at odds with each other, bickering and quarreling. The week was a hodgepodge of scheming and intrigue. The Christian, in contrast, discovered all time to be under the lordship of Christ. Time is redeemed."

Despite the evil of the times, true spirituality turns Christians into involved citizens, not reclusive monks. In Christ, God has empowered Christians to "buy back" the time normally used to accomplish evil and use it instead for good.

(b) The Nature of Redemption: Seasonal

Secondly, wise persons know that all time is not alike. The word Paul uses for time is *kairos*, meaning “season.” Time has a seasonal quality about it. For example, there are different times for sowing, watering, growing, and reaping. Spiritual people don’t act like high-powered managers who impose their agendas from the top down. Christians act like wise farmers. They are sensitive to existing conditions and they take careful advantage of seasonal windows of opportunity lest those moments be lost.

Jesus was a wonderful example of this very thing. One day in Samaria, for instance, he met a woman who was drawing water from a well. To the casual observer, everything in the scene would seem to be out of kilter. Here was a Samaritan, a woman, by herself, drawing water, at the wrong time of day. The disciples reckoned it was lunch time, so they went off to buy food, but not Jesus. Ever spiritually perceptive, he recognized that someone had sown spiritual seeds with this woman before he came along. The first fruits were present, the buds of heaven were beginning to blossom, and his task was merely to water; then the harvest would be ready. Following their encounter and certain things he said to her, the woman returned to her village with news of what Jesus had said and soon the whole place came out to see and hear this man who had told her everything she had ever done. Later, when the returning disciples questioned his timing, Jesus told them: “Do not say, ‘There are yet four months and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes, and look on the field, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages, and is gathering fruit for life eternal; that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (John 4:35-36). Jesus had recognized a spiritual opportunity. It was the right season to act, and he acted.

The goal of spirituality is not to make Christians into reclusive monks or high powered managers, but observant farmers who are sensitive to the conditions that will bring forth a harvest of redemption.

So in these verses we have the goal of spirituality.

The obvious question now is, how do we cultivate spirituality? And where do we begin?

II. Cultivating Spirituality (5:17)

So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.

(a) Stop Playing the Fool

“Don’t be foolish,” says Paul, “start using your mind.” By “foolish” here he means careless. The word speaks of making choices on impulse alone without regard for the consequences. Some people think it is the very height of spirituality to allow their natural impulses to take over without first utilizing their minds. If this is how we act, however, we will end up playing the part of the fool rather than the part of the Spirit-led Christian.

(b) Start Using Your Mind

On the contrary, says Paul, Christians should “understand what the will of the Lord is.” “Understand” means we use our abilities to get to the bottom of something, bringing all of our observations together so we can see the whole. If we do this, our actions will be based not a momentary urge, but after careful perception, having considered the full weight of evidence.

So the first priority of spiritual people is not to act, but to be quiet and reflective. Truly spiritual people have a certain humility about them. They recognize they don’t have the full picture, so they carve out time to retreat with God to think, listen, read, pray, meditate, memorize, and reflect. This was what Jesus did, wasn’t it? In Capernaum, despite the great ministry of healing which he had accomplished, and the numbers who were still awaiting a touch from his healing hand, Mark reports: “And in the early morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there.” Then he said to Peter, who had sought him out, “Let us go somewhere

else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for” (Mark 1:35, 38). Even the Messiah himself knew that he had to spend time alone with the Father so that he could reorder his priorities.

Heaven seldom comes to earth, not because Christians lack zeal, but because we lack perception. Our thinking is carnal, shallow, and often premature. Only you know when you’re at your best, so make the best use of that time and give it to God in prayer, meditation and reading. I have learned that I am at my sharpest at the beginning of my day, thus I like to read a psalm and then selected spiritual writings early in the morning, before I begin my work day.

So spiritual people have sanctified minds. They discipline themselves to read and meditate before they act.

Having addressed the mind, the apostle now goes on to address the will.

III. The Imperative of Spirituality (5:18)

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,

(a) Do Not Get Drunk

In Ephesus, drunkenness and loss of control was considered the height of religious activity in the cult of Artemis. Yet, as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once pointed out, alcohol and drugs do not stimulate the mind, they depress it: “Alcohol...depresses first and foremost the highest centers of all in the brain...that control everything that gives a man self-control, wisdom, understanding, discrimination, judgment, balance, the power to assess everything; in other words everything that makes a man behave at his very best and highest.”

The truly spiritual person is the one who is in full control of his behavior, perhaps for the first time in his life.

(b) Be Filled with the Spirit

The words “be filled” are a present imperative. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on believers and they were commanded to be continually filled by the Spirit. This is not an option, but something that is to be continually practiced by and expected from every Christian.

I want to point out that “being filled” is not referring to filling up (as if we need more of the Holy Spirit), but being filled out, in the way that a choir fills out an auditorium when it sings. This command to be filled with the Spirit is not referring to our getting more of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit getting more of us! In the book of Acts there is a good illustration of what the word means. There it was used by the high priest in Jerusalem to accuse the apostles of filling the city with the teachings of Christ: “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have *filled* Jerusalem with your teaching” (Acts 5:28).

So it is the task of Christians to go into all the world as God’s instruments to bring the whole world under his dominion, that he might fill all in all.

Thus we see that spirituality is available to us, and that it is not an option, but an imperative.

How then do Christians express spirituality in their everyday lives? In the closing verses of this section, Paul gives four participles to instruct us.

IV. Expressions of Spirituality (5:19-21)

...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Notice first that three of the participles are active and expressive: speaking, singing, and thanking. Spiritual people are ex-

pressive people. The Holy Spirit animates, enlivens, and stimulates his people. Truly spiritual people, therefore, can't be dull and inverted.

Neither can they be loners or recluses (note the twice-expressed phrase, *one another*). Spiritual life is expressed in community, and spiritual people must be committed to community. This may take the form of a Bible study, a home fellowship, gathering together over breakfast, whatever. Spiritually-minded people will seek out an arena where they can express themselves.

We come now to the four particples.

(a) Speaking

Be filled with the spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

The spiritual person speaks in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, says Paul. The Book of Psalms, of course, is the school of prayer. If we lack freedom in our prayers, perhaps it is because we have not studied the psalms.

Written by the kings of Israel (fully half of them by King David), the psalms are an expression of the rule of God upon earth. Following his anointing as king of Israel, David had to flee to the wilderness to escape Saul who had all the power of the state, the military, the official priesthood, etc., at his beck and call. Prayer was all that was left to David. Hiding from his adversary in remote and primitive locations like Engedi, or the cave of Adullam, David wrote the psalms and through them introduced the kingdom of heaven to earth, resulting in the defeat of Saul.

The spiritual value of the psalms was evident in the Jewish tradition where almost every older Jew had memorized the Hebrew Psalter. We note also that the psalms became the most quoted Old Testament book in New Testament. Then in the history of the church, the Sixth Council of Chalcedon decreed that all candidates for ordination had to memorize the psalms of David. So filled are the psalms with inspiration and spiritual depth that Jesus himself used them as his prayer book. He is the ultimate King for whom the book was designed. When you pray the psalms, therefore, you are praying the very prayers of Jesus. You enter into his laments, his thanksgivings and his praise, and you will feel caught up into heaven. But Christians go one step further. The psalms were the prayers of David and Christ, as we have seen; and now, according to the NT, Christians are "in Christ," so the prayers of the Messiah actually become our prayers and our experience.

In the magnificent OT story of Jonathan and David, Jonathan placed himself between his friend David and the wicked Saul, taking the spear for David, in effect. (Psalm 27 describes how David was saved and protected and how he sang songs of praise in his tent.) David's escapes from the pursuing Saul took on new meaning for me personally when I was ministering in Romania a few years ago. The secret police, the Securitate, discovered that I was visiting a certain house and they surrounded it. I escaped and, safely outside the village, I read Psalm 27. I was struck by the fact that David's experience became Christ's, and it had now become my own. And incredibly, the Romanian brother who stood between me and the police was named Jonathan! Later that week, while I was camping in the hills, the police came three more times, but three more men, each of them named Jonathan, put their own security on the line in order to save me. I was moved to tears when I realized that I was part of holy history and I had personally entered into the psalms.

My exhortation is obvious: School yourselves in the psalms! Read a psalm at the dinner table. Read one before bed. If you do, you will learn to pray and you will learn to speak. And when your speech is informed by the psalms, through it you will be participating in bringing heaven to earth everywhere you go.

(b) Singing

...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;

It is not enough that we should speak and pray, however, we must also sing. The psalms erupt into melodious songs that resonate into the soul, for all true spirituality affects the emotions. Eugene Peterson has an excellent word for us in this respect: "There are songs everywhere in Scripture. The people of God sing...Songs proliferate. Hymns gather the voices of men, women, and children into century-tiered choirs. Moses sings. Miriam sings. Deborah sings. David sings. Mary sings. Angels sing. Jesus and his disciples sing. Paul and Silas sing. When persons of faith become aware of who God is and what he does, they sing. The songs are irrepressible."

And what should we sing? Here is where congregations divide. Some people like the old hymns, but some like to sing only the new. But notice what Paul says. We should always start with the old. All of our singing is to be schooled by the psalms; then we can move on to the great hymns of the church, and then the new songs. Every service should have a blend of these three. Deep emotions are born out of rich theology, so let us write new songs, but only after we have been schooled in the psalms. When I listen to and participate in these three categories, I find that the worship experience transports me, as if I were in Elijah's chariot, to heaven itself. There, under the throne of God, Christians can find themselves in company with all the saints of all time — our loved ones, the prophets, the angels. This is what the book of Hebrews is describing in these words: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Hebrews 12:22-23).

I have shared with you how affected I have been by the deep spirituality of our brothers and sisters of the Lord's Army in Romania. They sing the hymns of Traian Dorz, a man who composed 10,000 hymns while serving 16 years in prison for his faith. I will never forget singing with them on the hillsides of Romania. It was as if they had left behind the earth and all their suffering and ascended to the throne of God. There they wept for the joy of the intimacy they were sharing with Christ. Afterwards they became quiet and reflective. How shallow is our own Christianity, I thought. We are used to having our emotions titillated, but we seldom enter a theology of suffering and true worship. In Romania, because Christians had been schooled first in the psalms of David, they were able to write their own hymns of worship, hymns that had been crafted in the cell of suffering.

Music is critically important to assist you in worship. If your children have any musical ability, therefore, cultivate it. Spend money on music lessons for them, for instance. When my daughter Becki plays the piano at home, I feel transported out of the routine and the mundane and I enter into heaven. What do you do when you are caught in traffic? I have a suggestion for you: sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs! Your car can become your heavenly chariot as you worship the Lord.

(c) Thanking

giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

The psalms of thanksgiving were composed to publicly acknowledge that God had saved his king. In song we express our appreciation to God, and we give freedom to our highest emotions. We are acknowledging that he is in control of circumstances, and that it is well with our souls. I even make it a practice with the men and women I work with to have them write their own psalms of appreciation based on their experiences. I do this because heaven comes to earth when we appreciate the work of God.

Spiritually-minded people who show their appreciation for God in all circumstances are imbued with the fear of Christ. My wife and I spent time last week with Brenda and Marty Mathiesen, a couple who are going through a severe crisis of suffering, yet their entire demeanor is one of appreciation to God. We felt the love of Christ as we talked together of how much they appre-

ciated the Lord, their marriage and their family. This is the very height of spirituality.

Now the fourth participle.

(d) Submitting

and being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Singing

Speaking

Thanking

Thinking

Submitting

If we put these participles in order we can observe a certain rhythm in the expression of our spirituality. It should begin with thinking, with having our minds renewed; thus we should be quiet and receptive. Next there is speaking, and all of our speech is informed by the Scriptures. Then we reach highest emotional expression, which is singing. We follow this by a quiet time of thanksgiving and appreciation. All of these activities then are climaxed by submitting. Thus we end where we began, in a receptive mode, humbly receiving the life of Christ from others in community.

This spirit of submitting is the highest expression of Christian spirituality. Notice the good news that bringing heaven to earth does not depend on getting our way or controlling others. In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wrote, "The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society...In submission we are at last free to value other people. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We have entered into a new, wonderful, glorious freedom—the freedom to give up our own rights for the good of others...Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want."

So important is this matter of submitting that Paul devotes the next chapter of this letter to work this out in every arena: first, the home; then in relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and children, and work-place slaves and masters. Heaven is designed to invade every sphere you enter.

I have a helpful suggestion here for you. When you want to feed your souls with the great spiritual works, turn to the writers who did not get their own way. Paul's epistles were written while he was in prison. John's Apocalypse was written while he was in exile. David's psalms were forged in the wilderness. Solzhenitsyn's writings were birthed in a cruel Communist gulag. Spirituality is birthed when man does not get his own way. Writing about this in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn said:

Leo Tolstoi was right when he dreamed of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought needs a shower of rain! All the writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I...have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "Bless you prison, for having been my life."

Following Pentecost, heaven can't be confined to any geographical location, nor can its rule be opposed. Try and shut it out by force or decree and it will invade the darkest cell, enlighten the simplest mind, and strengthen the weakest body.

There are many people in this congregation who have taught me much about spirituality through their beautiful spirit of submission in difficult circumstances. I would like to dedicate this service to Art David, a man who brought heaven to earth for me as he lay dying of cancer. I will close by reading a poem I wrote in appreciation of him.

HE LEADETH ME

It is written in Thy book
That You lead your sheep
To still waters of rest,
And we ought fear no evil,
For You are with us.

I heard these words,
But as I walked
In the valley of deep darkness
I mused upon them.

What are these thoughts of the ancient king?
Well driven nails
Given by one Shepherd,
Or mere dreams that vanish like smoke?

Then I came across a precious lamb
Who I found long ago lost in the wilderness.
I rejoiced then, laid him on my shoulders
And brought him home to the fold of God.

Now the lamb lay limp, bleeding,
Its limbs broken by wolves.
The shepherd wept.

"Weep not for me,
For the Lord is my shepherd
And He leads me through the valley.
I fear no evil for He is with me."

"Though He crush me
Yet I will trust in Him,
For He crushes me
That I may love Him."

O Art, I watched you
As He carried you on His pinions
And made you ride
On the heights of the earth.

He made your soul
Like a well watered garden,
And like a spring of water
Whose waters do not fail.

His love brightened your eyes,
His Word loosed your tongue,
His light made your face radiant,
The fragrance filled the whole garden.

What faith this is,
Pure unalloyed faith,
That reigns in heaven,
For all the humble of earth.

Now we know the words of king David
Are true: there is a heaven!
We have seen it
In the radiant face of Art David.

On this day,
The sheep became the shepherd
To show us The Way
Through the valley of death...
To the garden of God.

"Lead me in the everlasting way."

In Appreciation to God for the life of Arthur Lloyd David,
April 29, 1932 - July 31, 1993

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MARRIAGE: LOVE'S HOLY STAGE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 910
Ephesians 5:21-33
Seventeenth Message
Brian Morgan
September 5, 1993

Nothing grieves us more as pastors and elders than the high level of pain being felt in many marriages at PBC. Some of these problems can be put down to family backgrounds. One partner, oftentimes unbeknownst to the other, brings into the marriage a lot of pain resulting from past physical or emotional abuse. Other couples did not have biblical premarital counseling so they are ignorant as to how to cultivate their relationship and communicate effectively. Some marriages are surviving merely through the mechanism of escape. Lacking intimacy, husbands and wives escape to the private realm of their minds to an idol that offers pleasure on demand. There they indulge in secret, while they act out a facade of commitment in public. Even couples who are committed to their wedding vows often become discouraged, because they find little evidence of or support for fidelity in our culture. Divorce statistics bear stark evidence of the toll on marriage in our day. In this country in 1910, one out of 10 marriages ended in divorce. By 1980, the figure had grown to one out of two. Today in Silicon Valley, for every marriage registered there are two divorces. It would be an understatement to say that marriage is not faring well today.

Lest we get too discouraged, however, we should remember that marriage did not fare well in the apostle Paul's day either. William Barclay had this to say about marriage in the Greek society of Paul's day:

The whole Greek way of life made companionship between man and wife next to impossible. The Greek expected his wife to run his home, to care for his legitimate children, but he found his pleasure and companionship elsewhere. In the fourth century B.C., Demosthenes said,

"We have harlots for our pleasure,
concubines for daily physical use,
wives to bring up legitimate children
and to be faithful stewards in household matters."

...In Greece, home and family life were near to being extinct, and fidelity was completely non-existent...The degeneracy of Rome was tragic...It is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world was adulterous...The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown.

In the Ephesus of Paul's time, only two professions, that of prostitute or priestess, lay open to women who sought to rise to equal status or surpass men in influence. The cult of Artemis, where the goddess was worshipped as the supreme mother of nature and fertility, provided ample opportunity for these pursuits. Needing no assistance from the male species, Artemis was the ultimate symbol of female liberation in first century Asia Minor. Her priestesses were highly respected in society, but although they felt emancipated, they were stigmatized by the fact that selling sex was their profession. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul had to face the challenge of how to motivate husbands and wives who came out of such hurtful backgrounds to love and fidelity in their marriages. He does so by raising the stakes. The answer, as we will see, lay in play production.

When I was in junior high school, Mrs. Blustin, our drama teacher, told candidates for her productions that we would have the privilege of playing a part in a famous play. But first we had to try out for parts, so each of us was given a script to memorize. I was fortunate to be chosen, and on opening night I played my part with clarity, conviction and charisma. I still remember the spine-chilling applause at the final curtain call. Why is it that when a junior higher is presented with a script, he will respond by working hard to play his part? It is because he has become part of something far bigger than himself.

Privilege motivates! Marriage, says Paul, is a privilege, a holy stage. When the lights go up, two people, each playing different parts, begin acting out a drama that is much bigger than themselves, for in marriage, God is reenacting the most famous script of all: the drama of redemption, God's holy love redeeming his church. This is why Paul says, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."

In our last study we saw that the apostle shared with the Ephesian Christians certain principles which he set down in four verb participles—speaking, singing, thanking, and submitting—actions that would help them express their spirituality in the decadent environment in which they lived. We will begin today by looking again at the fourth participle—submitting—what we could well call character screening for the drama of marriage that Paul will unfold.

I. Character Screening (2:21)

...being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Here we have the first thing necessary. The curtain cannot rise, the play cannot even begin until the characters have adopted the right frame of mind. Mutual submission to one another in the fear of Christ, is a must. Here is how Mike Mason put it in his book, *The Mystery of Marriage, As Iron Sharpens Iron*: "Who wins the battle of wills and whims is not the point; the point is that each tries to surrender as much as possible for the sake of the other so that the love between may be honored and built up in every way."

How many couples have stepped off this very platform, having taken their spouses "for better or for worse," naively imagining that submission one to another would be easy! Their marriage, unlike others, would be a refuge from the storms of life. Their home would be their castle, complete with walls and moat, and no wind of conflict would be strong enough to breach their haven. It was only a matter of time, however, before they discovered that marriage was the very eye of a hurricane.

Again, quoting Mike Mason:

[Marriage] is not a little bastion of tenderness designed to soften the blows of fate. It is not a clever system of protection in which another person is interposed between ourselves and the pain of living. On the contrary, the person interposed may actually become the source or focus of

more suffering than we ever bargained for, the very vessel from which our own humiliation is poured. Is it not a bitter and ironic truth that the very person we love most in the world may appear to us, from time to time, to be the only thing standing between ourselves and our happiness? The fact of the matter is that holy matrimony, like other holy orders, was never intended as a comfort station for lazy people. On the contrary, it is a systematic program of deliberate and thoroughgoing self-sacrifice...For marriage is intended to be an environment in which they will be lovingly yet persistently confronted with the plainest and ugliest evidence of their sinfulness and thus encouraged on a daily basis to repent and to change...

Marriage is not a comfort station, it is a crucible! Our text holds that mutual submission is the key to married bliss, the key to bringing heaven to earth. Without it, the play will not begin. Submission, therefore, is the screen test for this drama of redemption.

We come now to the different roles.

II. The Wife's Role: The Believer (5:22-24)

Being subject to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

Here in his instructions to wives, Paul gives the basis, the motive, and the extent of submission.

(a) The Basis of Submission: Creation

"For the husband is the *head* of the wife," says the apostle. We must point out immediately that submission here in no sense implies inferiority. Submission is merely a reflection of the created order. Man was created first, and out of him came woman, and he named her (Gen. 2). But man's first words eloquently expressed his appreciation that at last he had met one who was his equal, and he celebrated this fact. Spiritually, the woman stood toe to toe with him as an equal heir of the grace of life. Headship has nothing to do with equality! The woman's title of Helper is evidence of the fact that she brought special something that the man was desperately lacking in himself.

Next, we have the motive of submission.

(b) The Motive of Submission: Redemption

...Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being Savior of the body

Submission is grounded in creation, but it is explained in terms of redemption. Notice that Paul says, "being Savior of the body." In the Bible, commitment is always preceded by an act of salvation. God liberated the Jews following 400 years of slavery in Egypt, but only after he had freed them did he ask them to commit themselves entirely to him. Likewise, Jesus died to redeem his church, and our response now as his people should be to commit our entire hearts to him in appreciation for his sacrificial act.

Appreciation is key! Here is how Charles Wesley expressed his appreciation to Jesus in these memorable words from his hymn, "And Can It Be?":

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray:
I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!*

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!*

Submission is not unthinking obedience on the part of the wife, but grateful acceptance of her husband's care. He vows to give up his life for her! Submission, therefore, is never to be coerced from the wife. It is to be freely given by her out of appreciation for her new-found freedom. David Roper put it this way, "No woman will have a problem submitting to a man who will be crucified for her."

And how far must submission go?

(c) The Extent of Submission

But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.

Wives must respect their husbands in everything in their role as head. In the OT, not even religious vows could be used as an excuse to violate this principle of headship.

A woman might object here that her role as we have described it is dangerous and limiting. But wives are really entrusting themselves not so much to their husbands, but to the living God who rules over their husbands. An excellent illustration of this is found in the occasion when Abraham went down to Egypt and in the process put the holy seed in jeopardy. But God intervened on Sarah's behalf and used a pagan king to rebuke Abraham for his lack of faith. Wives can trust the living God who rules over their husbands.

A second objection could be as follows: Does submission imply that wives cannot speak their minds, offer a different point of view, challenge faulty thinking or confront and even resist evil in their husbands? It is wrong to think that a woman must keep her opinions to herself, as some hold the apostle Peter is saying in his word in 1 Peter 3, "If a husband is disobedient to the word, let a wife win him *without a word*." The context of this verse is referring to unbelieving husbands and how they are won over to Christ. Non-believing husbands are won, says the apostle, not by speech, not by putting tracts under their noses, but by loving deeds. This doesn't imply wives aren't free to confront their husbands with speech. This is illustrated by Sarah, who said to her husband, Abraham, who had wronged her, "You wronged me, but the LORD judge."

Make no mistake about it, sparks will fly on occasion in marriage. If this does not happen, it may well be because the partners have stopped communicating. Perhaps I can illustrate here. Emily and I sometimes disagree over finances. I come from a wealthy background and I have no trouble giving money away. Emily, on the other hand, is frugal. She is from a middle class background, but her parents divorced and she was raised on very little. This has given rise to conflict between us in the past, so we agreed to communicate better with each other regarding our giving. But, I must confess, I fall back into my old patterns of spontaneous giving now and then. Just a few days ago, she came to me with the checkbook, saying, "What was this check for?" She read me the riot act, because I had broken our agreement. We all need this kind of airing out of issues in our marriages.

So the wife's role in the drama of marriage, her holy orders, are to show how fulfilling it is to be a believer, by submitting to her husband in everything.

Now we come to the husband's role.

III. The Role of the Husband: Christ (5:25-32)

Husbands, *love your wives, just as Christ also loved the*

church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man shall leave His father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.

Notice the seriousness of the husband's role. If the wife's part is to play the role of the believer, the husband's is to play the part of Jesus! The importance of the husband's role may be seen in Paul's intensification of the comparative: "Wives submit as unto the Lord," but, "Husbands love your wives just as (or exactly as)." The comparative is used twice, in verses 25 and 29, to bracket the text. Notice, too, that headship is not defined in terms of husbands making decisions, not by words like "control" or "lead," but by how they love.

In these verses, Paul gives four characteristics of Christ-like love.

(a) Love Is Sacrificial

He gave Himself on her behalf.

If wives give *in*, husbands must give *up*. Notice that love is defined by a verb. That is because love is an act of the will which seeks the best for the other person regardless of cost or feeling. Headship is defined not in terms of a husband's authority to control or dominate his wife, but by his responsibility to care for, nourish, and cultivate her life. Feelings should be present, of course—they are the spark in a marriage—but they are the byproduct, not the driving force behind commitment.

This doctrine of headship is very well illustrated in the first parable in the Bible, found in the book of Judges (9:7-15). The men of Shechem had appointed Abimelek, an ancient-day Rambo whose leadership style was, "do it my way or I'll impale you upside down on a stalagmite!" as king over them. When Jotham, who was a judge of Israel, heard of Abimelek's appointment as king, he stood on Mt. Gerazim and related to the Shechemites a parable about the nature of true leadership. The trees went forth to anoint a king over them, he said, and they came to the olive tree, but the tree said, "Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored to wave over you?" The fig also refused, saying, "Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit to wave over the trees?" Likewise the vine: "Shall I leave my new wine which cheers God and men to wave over you?" Then the trees came to the bramble and asked, "Come, wave over us." The bramble responded by demanding that they take refuge in his shade. If they refused, he said, "fire will come out and consume cedars of Lebanon."

The bramble is a large tree whose height and shade surpass all others. (Scholars identify the tree, *Ziziphus spinachristi*, branches of which were used to make Jesus' crown of thorns.) Nogah Hareuveni, in his book, *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* (Neot Kedumim, Israel, 1984), describes the bramble:

When the *atad* [the bramble] is left to grow unimpeded, it develops a wide and "wild" look, its foliage made up of clumps that seem to hang in the air. The *atad* is larger than all the other fruit trees native to Israel and casts a wide and heavy shade beneath its boughs... The thorny branches, make convenient hangers for hammocks, packs and overclothes... This tree is known to be harmful to fruit trees. It

is a strong tree, whose roots spread in a wide circle and compete with the roots of other trees with a vigor the fruit trees cannot rival. A farmer who wants his orchard to succeed must first uproot every *atad* in the vicinity, small saplings as well as full-grown trees...After [the branches] dry out, they are chopped up for excellent kindling. Both the thin and the thicker branches quickly catch fire and burn brightly, generating much heat with very little smoke (pp. 63-64).

The lesson of the parable is obvious: The bramble demanded that everyone live in his shade. If Israel came under the rule of Abimelek, he would strangle them until they were no longer able to give forth fruit to others. And if they refused, if he could not have things his own way, then, as the bramble threatened, fire would come out of him to consume the cedars of Lebanon. It is ironic that it was a woman who killed Abimelek; she threw an upper millstone on his head, crushing his skull (Judges 9:53). Tragically, a similar thing is happening in our nation today, as children are murdering their tyrannical fathers.

Contrast the bramble with the olive tree, which gives oil of fatness to honor others, or the fig tree, which gives fruit that makes life sweet for others, or the vine, which gives good wine and bring gladness to others. Husbands should give, give, and give even more. They should give honor, sweetness, and gladness. This is true headship, one that loves with a sacrificial love.

So the first characteristic of love is that it is sacrificial. The second is that it is purposeful.

(b) Love Is Purposeful

Christ gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her...that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

The old view of the wife's role was that she was man's helper; she should take care of the domestic duties so that the husband need not be bothered with the menial tasks of life but go on to fulfill his greater role in the world. But we note that in the book of Acts, Christ did not relegate the church to menial tasks while he stood in the spotlight. No, he retreated backstage and put the spotlight on the church, helping believers to develop their spiritual gifts. In fact, everything Christ did in the gospels, and even greater works, did the apostles do in Acts.

What should godly husbands learn from this? It is that they should move backstage in an attitude of serving and allow the spotlight to shine on their wives so that they can develop their spiritual gifts and ministries. Love does not smother; it encourages and allows others to develop their freedom. And Christ did this for the ultimate glory of the church.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put this beautifully in these words:

Dare I put it like this? The beauty-Specialist will have put his final touch to the church; the massaging will have been so perfect that there will not be a single wrinkle left. She will look young, and in the bloom of youth, with colour in her cheeks, with her skin perfect, without any spots or wrinkles. And she will remain like that for ever and ever.

So love is sacrificial and purposeful.

Third, love is expressive.

(c) Love Is Expressive

...that He might sanctify her, having washed her with the

washing of water with the word...So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as also Christ does the church, because we are members of His body. (5:26a, 28-30)

Here we discover that love expresses itself in speech and in touch. When I was courting Emily, I wrote her one or two letters a day for four years. But after years of marriage, the excitement wears off and couples tend to take one another for granted. Husbands have to work at communicating through speech, because to a wife, conversation is the greatest expression of her husband's love. It will be hard for your marriage to survive unless you carve out time each week to talk to one another. Do simple things together. Walk together. Do the dishes together. Read together. Emily and I eat breakfast once a week in a restaurant far from here where no one knows us, and there we engage in small talk together. Choose things that stimulate you as a couple. Go to a movie or a play together. When husbands speak to their wives in this way, they illustrate how Christ speaks to his church, his bride, in his Word.

Love expresses itself not only in speech but in touch. A husband "nourishes and cherishes" his own flesh, says Paul. "Cherish" means "soften by heat." A husband keeps his wife warm and tender by creating a protective atmosphere of warmth and love. Women love asexual touch. They want to be held and hugged. It is a delightful thing to see older couples holding hands in church. This displays how Christ nourishes his church. He wants to hold us, to hug us and talk to us.

So love is sacrificial, purposeful, and expressive.

Finally, love prioritizes.

(d) Love Prioritizes

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. (5:31)

In marriage, a man must abandon his most precious relationship—that which he has with his parents—and cleave to his wife. Love must prioritize and focus, and thus it will involve pain. Love is single-minded. A husband's love risks all past relationships for the sake of his bride. But commitment does have its rewards. The result is one flesh, where every part of life is gathered into one union.

This abandonment of all other relationships is the holiest moment in God's dramatization of redemption, for it portrays

the determination, the single-mindedness of Christ's love for us. In order to save us and marry us he had to leave his heavenly Father. On the cross he was abandoned by God as he sought and secured his bride. When a man abandons all of his relationships and cleaves only to his wife, therefore, he is acting out the holiest moment in the drama of redemption. Just as the church was worth the pain to Christ, so to a man, leaving his past relationships to cleave to his wife is worth the pain to him.

So the role of headship for the husband is not one of stifling control or tyrannical rule, but one of the responsible initiative and sacrificial care. It is a holy role, nurtured by holy love.

And who is watching this drama?

IV. A Holy Audience (5:32-33)

This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each and every individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

On the opening night of my junior high play, I couldn't resist peeking at the audience through the curtain before the play began. The sight of the whole assembled school turned my opening night butterflies into squadrons of eagles! Then I noticed my mother and father entering, with all my relatives, Aunt Hazel, Uncle Glenn and Grandma, in tow. The audience gave my performance weight and importance.

So it is in a marriage. Look out from behind the curtain and observe who makes up the holy audience. Your children are there. Perhaps your parents are there. They might never have read the book, but they will come to the play because you're in it! And your neighbors and your friends from work will be there. This is the first time they've ever seen this play—and you're in it. There are visitors from every nation present, some of whom have never heard of the play before.

Then, to your amazement, you discover that there are holy angels present; they, too, have come to see the drama of redemption. The house lights are dimmed, the stage lights come on, the curtain rises, and you walk onstage to play your part. The tragedy is, oftentimes we don't know what to say because we have not read the script. Worse yet, we don't even know that a holy drama is in progress. The Playwright weeps.

It is my prayer for those of you who have lost hope that the Living God will transform your marriage from a combat zone that is barely surviving under an armed truce, to a holy drama where you feel privileged to play your part.

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NURTURING FATHERS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 911
Ephesians 6:1-4
Eighteenth Message
Brian Morgan
September 12, 1993

In May of 1979, I was ministering in the town of Egbe, in Nigeria, Africa. Christianity, I discovered, had made one of its first inroads in this very village in 1898. At the center of the town stood a high school, which was staffed by Christian missionaries, and I taught the Scriptures there during my visit. Whenever I entered the room where the students were assembled, all of them in uniforms of bright blue cotton, I was struck by the beauty of their faces and their warm smiles of greeting. Their sense of joy and anticipation was heartwarming as I prepared to open up the Scriptures to them. One afternoon, I attended a school soccer game. It was only then I noticed the almost complete absence of men in the town. When I inquired from one of the missionaries where the men were, he replied that they had all gone to Lagos. Apparently, the men married wives at a young age, had multiple children (up to 10 in most families), then, after a number of years, the men left to work in the capital city, never to return. The children of the town were left with their mothers to fend for themselves.

Sadly, as the weekly news magazines have been reporting recently, families are suffering the same fate here in America today as fathers are abandoning their children. I will read from a recent account in *Time* magazine one little girl's story:

"I don't have a dad," says Megan, 8, a tiny blond child with a pixie nose who gazes up at a visitor and talks of her hunger. "Well, I do have a dad, but I don't know his name. I only know his first name, Bill."

Just what is it that fathers do? asked the visitor...

"Love you. They kiss you and hug you when you need them. I had my mom's boyfriend for a while, but they broke up." Now Megan lives with just her mother and older brother in Culver City, CA.

What would you like to do with your dad?

"I'd want him to talk to me." She's hurting now. "I wish I had somebody to talk to. It's not fair. If two people made you, then you should still be with those two people." And she's sad, "I'm not so special," she says, looking down at the floor. "I don't have two people."

"I wish it would be just like that commercial where the kids play doctor with their daddy and say, 'Daddy, are you all right?'" She smiles, dreaming. "The kids show the daddy that they care for him. They put a thermometer in his mouth. They think he's sick because he came home early. They are sitting on the couch watching TV, and it's like, wow, we can play with Dad!"

Megan thinks her father is in the Navy now. "One day when I get older, I'm gonna go back to Alabama and try to find him."

Isn't it astonishing that despite the pain inflicted upon them by their fathers, children still carry a deep longing to reconnect with them? Describing what a home should be like, this little girl said: "two people made you, and two people are supposed to stay with you and love you..."

Now the good news of our text this morning from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians is that in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit reconnects fathers to daughters, and mothers to sons, creating in the process homes of love and acceptance. Our text begins with a word about reconnecting children to their parents, and

then moves to reconnecting fathers to children. Paul writes:

I. Reconnecting Children To Parents (6:1-3)

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.

It is apparent from these verses that in the family of God in Ephesus, adults treated children with dignity, as equals. How very different from the Roman and Greek worlds of the apostle's time, as we learn from this insight in John Stott's commentary on the book of Ephesians: "It was a radical change from the callous cruelty which prevailed in the Roman Empire, in which unwanted babies were abandoned, weak and deformed ones killed, and even healthy children were regarded by many as partial nuisance because they inhibited sexual promiscuity and complicated easy divorce." We remember that Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:14).

In these opening verses of chapter 6 now, Paul addresses the children of these house churches in Ephesus, offering in the process four extremely helpful points.

(a) The Command to Obey

Obey your parents in the Lord, for this right.

The phrase "in the Lord" should not be interpreted as a qualifying statement, as if children should obey their parents only if they are Christians, but as the spirit in which obedience is rendered. These words could well be translated, "because of the Lord." Such obedient behavior by children pleases the Lord and helps develop the spirit whereby they can obey him.

And there is a two-fold basis for this kind of behavior.

(b) The Basis of Obedience

First, obedience to parents is proper because it reflects the created order. Parents are the source of their children's life, therefore obedience is to be granted to them, not grudgingly, but from the heart. Children are in their parents' debt, therefore they should never be callous or indifferent towards them.

Second, children's obedience to parents fulfills the fifth commandment that they should "honor" them. This word means, "to make heavy, to give someone social weight"—quite the opposite of treating parents in a light or casual manner.

In the OT, parents had two roles, thus they were to be honored in two ways. First, they gave physical life to their children, therefore the children were to provide for them in their old age by feeding them, clothing them, nursing them, etc. This is what is meant by "honoring" parents. And second, parents taught their children spiritually, instructing them from the Torah. As children obeyed their parents, therefore, they demonstrated obedience to God, and thus brought their parents high social esteem in the community of faith.

Children might well ask here how long were they required to obey their parents, and how far should that obedience extend?

(c) The Extent of Obedience

The Greek word for child refers to children in relation to their parents who bore them. This relationship ends when the child leaves home. Thus, obedience ends at this point, although we should honor our parents throughout our lives.

And how far should the child's obedience extend? We must balance this teaching with the word of Christ, who said, "You cannot be my disciple unless you hate your mother and father." In this statement, Christ was conveying the notion that obedience to him might appear as though believers were neglecting their parents, but what Jesus was inferring was that children should obey him and refuse to do anything their parents asked of them if it was in conflict with Scripture.

Personally, I have always delighted in obeying my parents. Their dream for me was that I attend business school, and when I decided to enter the ministry full-time, my decision grieved them. I did not like disappointing them, but I was leaving home, and I wanted to follow Christ. There is a proverb, however, that says, "A wise son makes his father glad." Although my obedience to Christ created problems with my parents in the short term, in the long run I believed it would bring them honor and esteem. This has been borne out over the last twenty years. Today, my parents look to me for financial advice, and my father, who was a surgeon, even comes up here from Southern California for his medical treatments. Our relationship is founded on solid ground and affection.

Next, we come to the promise inherent in the command for children to obey their parents.

(d) The Promise of Obedience

...the first commandment with a promise, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.

The home is the first realm where obedience is practiced. Far from inhibiting a child's life, his choice to honor his parents enhances his life and leads to greater opportunity: "...it will be well with you, and that you may live long..." says Paul. "Length of days" in the OT referred not to life on this earth, but to eternal life. In contrast, an undisciplined life brings death and disaster.

An obedient life is the ultimate expression of honor to a parent, and such obedience fulfills the law of love. If children are not willing to obey their parents and honor them by giving them the social weight they deserve, this is a sign that they are not really interested in the discipleship of Jesus Christ. Even if they profess to be, they will have a hard time submitting to his rule in their lives.

Thus we have the apostle's instructions to children.

His word to fathers follows immediately.

II. Reconnecting Fathers to Children (6:4)

And fathers, stop provoking your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

(a) Do Not Provoke Your Children to Wrath

You may be wondering why Paul addresses his remarks only to fathers. It is because fathers in the Roman world of the apostle's day were very abusive, and they were protected by law despite their behavior. William Barclay, in his commentary, explained: "At the head of the Roman family...was the *pater familias*, who exercised a sovereign authority over all members of the family...A Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his fields even in chains, he could take the law into his own hands, for the law was in his own hands, and punish as he liked; he could even inflict the death penalty on his child."

Given these facts, it is hardly necessary to say that Christian fathers who came from a background like this needed to change

their attitudes towards their children. Every child bears the holy image of God, therefore he or she deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

Furthermore, a child's personality is delicate and fragile and needs to be nurtured with care and protection. Fathers, says Paul, should not breed resentment in these little ones by "provoking [them] to anger."

I believe fathers can be guilty of this in a least four different ways. The first and most obvious way that fathers provoke their children to anger, I feel, is when they mistreat them by disciplining them in anger, by ridiculing, teasing, or publicly humiliating them. Scripture teaches that parents do not have the right to use anger to change their children's behavior. If parents cannot control themselves, how can they expect their children to be in control? In the Garden of Eden, God had dealt with the disaster caused by his children's disobedience. In a mere moment in time, Adam and Eve turned all of creation over to Satan, destroying the whole human race in the process. We can only imagine what we would say if it were our universe! But not God the Father. He did not get angry. He responded by asking questions. He was more grieved than angered by his lost relationship with Adam and Eve and the cost to him to redeem the damage.

Second, fathers provoke their children by being controlling. Rather than developing them for their own sake, fathers use their children to try and live out their own unfulfilled dreams. The story of the former University of Southern California quarterback, Todd Marinovich, has been widely publicized. From childhood, this young man was driven by his obsessive father to be a star football player. The father's obsession resulted in divorce from his wife, but he still pursued his dream of living vicariously through his son. To this day, failure looms as the most threatening monster on the horizon of Todd's life.

Third, fathers provoke their children by being too restrictive. They won't allow them freedom of expression or exploration, lest their spontaneity or sense of adventure infringe on their own sense of order. Unlike Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, where there were so many yesses and only one no, there are homes today where the word no is the only word that is heard. Some children ought to ask their parents, "Are we living in a home or a museum?"

Fourth, and probably most painful, some fathers provoke their children by neglecting them. They never take time to enter their little world to interact with them in their daily activities. On the contrary, their only response to their children is anger when they are interrupted by them. Sitting at dinner one night last week I asked my daughters to tell me how I provoke them. One of them said that whenever she asks for help, I always have the "right" way to do something, and she has to do things my way. My analytical mind takes over and I stifle their creativity when I respond in this way.

"Fathers," says Paul, "stop provoking your children to anger."

What should they do instead?

(b) Love Them

...but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The words, "bring them up," would be better rendered "nurture them." John Calvin put it this way: "let them be fondly cherished."

This word is so rich in meaning it is used to translate many Hebrew words in the OT, covering a wide range of images. Take the case of Joseph, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. When at last, because of famine, Joseph came face to face with his brothers, he used this very word in his remarks to them: "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance...there I will provide for you..." (Genesis 45:7, 11). Joseph

saw himself as a privileged provider who cared for his own family in famine times despite their mistreatment of him. His privilege of being a provider overcame the pain of his rejection. "You meant it for evil, God for good," was his word to his brothers. There is a famine of love abroad in our world today, yet men and women who have suffered rejection by their own families have been led to Christ through that very suffering and rejection. God sent fathers ahead to create storehouses of love and tenderness in order to preserve a remnant of life.

A second image in the OT for how this word was used is that of a shepherd. Psalm 23 describes God as a shepherd who, in the words of David, "...leads me beside still waters." We are helpless, so God tenderly takes us by the hand and guides us through dangerous territory, finding for us cool waters of refreshment.

A third image is that of a bridegroom who *nourishes* and cherishes his bride. (We saw this in our last study in Ephesians, where Paul gave instructions to husbands and wives.) The verb there was linked with "cherish," which means, "to soften by heat, to keep warm." It refers to nurture, born out deep affections.

These images give a picture of closeness, tenderness, and warmth, coupled with expressions of touch, even in the midst of threatening times (like famine), or while traversing dangerous territory. Fathers are to be nurturers, and the key thing about nurturers is that they are *there*, plain and simple, with a ready, tender touch, to nurture and cherish. Being nurturers benefits fathers, too, as the *Time* magazine article which I quoted from went on to say: "As much as families need fathers, men need their children...to learn from them all the secrets that children, with their untidy minds and unflagging hearts, have mastered and that grownups, having grown up, long to retrieve."

There is a second thing fathers should do for their children.

(c) Train Them

...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The words, "discipline of the Lord," usually bring to mind verses like that from the Book of Proverbs, "He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him seeks Him diligently (at the dawn) with discipline" (Prov. 13:24). You may have seen the recent television program where parents who spanked their children for their misbehavior were interviewed. It was as if "spanking" was all that was meant by "the rod and discipline." But this word "discipline" has a much broader meaning than that conveyed by spanking. It speaks of nurturing a moral and spiritual life that doesn't come naturally, but requires diligent training, like the disciplines of music or athletics.

I learned the secret to this kind of training from a non-Christian man. Bob Munson was a carpenter who "sought me diligently" and came into my world. Bob was a tall man, a former football player, and a craftsman. He was everything young boys want to be when they grow up. I met him when he worked on a project in our home. Every day I waited by my window for his yellow pickup, eagerly anticipating his arrival, because I knew that Bob was coming into my world and I would learn from him. After two weeks the project was finished, and I was depressed. But he promised that the following year he would take me deer hunting, and I would enter his world! Now, when the yellow pickup up arrived at my home, it was to take me into his world. We built things together in his garage. We fashioned a gun box, and we shortened the stock on my rifle. He taught me how to fish, how to camp, and how to shoot. In four years hunting together, we never took a shot at a deer, but I didn't care; I was with Bob. I listened attentively to his many maxims for life. (He told me once, "If you ever leave my tools out, you're flirting with death!")

I believe Bob Munson set me up to receive Christ later in life, because he taught me how God trains people. In high school, I yearned for God, because I sensed that God was like Bob: He cared about me, about my school, my grades, girlfriends, sports,

etc. I felt that God would get in his yellow pickup truck and show up in my world if I asked him. He came, not in a pickup, but in a chariot, and every place I asked him to come with me, God walked with me in high school. But that was not all, he would then take me to his world, one much bigger than my own, to places I had never been before, to see his works. I came up to the Bay Area to attend university and I met people at PBC. I got to travel overseas and I saw God building his kingdom—and he let me have a part in it alongside him.

So training means that fathers are to enter into the world of their children and walk their turf, then they can take them into their world.

There is something else fathers must do with their children.

(d) Instruct Them

There was a time when I thought about how I might instruct my children, and I imagined that my family would sit around the dinner table, like Jesus' disciples, and ask me to teach them. As a pastor with about five thousand sermons in my files, I imagined they would ask me to teach them about prayer, how to avoid sexual pressures, and other critical issues, but in my 17 years as a father, they have never once asked me to teach them! And if I attempt to, they complain, "Dad, that's your teaching voice!"

The lesson is obvious: Fathers should not be lecturers. Nor should they act like Moses, the lawgiver, coming before their children with a holy writ that no one among their peers is paying attention to, and smash it on their desks. Teaching ethics will not change anything. No, fathers should not act like lawgivers; they should be storytellers. Telling stories graces children with dignity, but lectures on ethics and edicts are always condescending. How much of Scripture is imperative? How much is storytelling? Look at Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Esther, Job, 1 & 2 Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts—all of these books are stories. They don't illustrate the gospel, they *are* the gospel! So tell your children the stories of the Bible. Be a storyteller!

In his book, *Reality and the Vision*, Philip Yancey has an excellent word in this regard. He interviewed 17 writers who shared with him the author that changed their lives. Walter Wangerin, Jr., a former pastor who is himself now an author, said:

When my father bought a thick, pictureless book containing all the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and began to read them to his children, he did me a kindness more profound than mere entertainment. He began to weave a world which genuinely acknowledged all the monsters in mine, as well as all the ridiculous situations and silly asides which I as a child found significant.

So, then, this is the way it is: Dad sits in a chair beside my bed, one lamp low at his shoulder, his pipe clamped between his teeth. Mostly the room, an attic with slanted ceilings is in darkness.

"Ready?" Dad asks.

I nod. I curl tight beneath the covers.

"Once upon a time," Dad read, "there lived in a village two men who had the same name; they were both called Claus..."

Night after night my father's baritone voice reads to me, gently the voice invited me. Slowly I accepted the invitation and delivered myself to a wonderful world, and I looked around, and lo, it was confident with solutions, and I was a citizen with some authority and reputation. I was no longer alone, no longer helpless.

Night after night I live the adventures that order my turbulent days and shape my waking self, my instincts, my faith, my adulthood to come. Optimism grows in me, and hope in the midst of suffering, and this third thing too, perhaps the most difficult thing of all: forgiveness for my own most self-

centered and wretched sins. Not the doctrine of forgiveness. Not the concept. Forgiveness in fact, as a mold to my experience ever hereafter. Andersen's world is a dramatic enactment of theologies which the child simply cannot grasp in the abstract.

My father reads in a murmuring voice, so softly that the words resolve themselves into spaces and things around me...when my father reads the final sentences of a story (about forgiveness) I am crying. I am tingling. For I am not learning, but rather I am experiencing the highest truth of our faith. Not in doctrine, but in fact it is releasing me from my own sins (of my childhood)...In the depth of my bones I know and believe in forgiveness, for I have lived it. By Andersen's stories I was shaped in it—and the shape remains, forever.

Fathers: Read stories to your children! Tell them Abraham's story, Joseph's story, Israel's story, David's story, Jesus' story, *your* story. Then make it their story. Tell them their story! A couple of years ago, my wife suggested I fly to Paris to meet my daughter, Becki, who was an exchange student, and join her for a father-daughter time. I met her in Paris and we traveled to Lucerne, Switzerland. I asked her to choose any restaurant she liked and I would take her to dinner. Afterwards, I told her a story. Twenty years earlier, her mother and I were in Lucerne, and I proposed marriage to her beneath a covered bridge. We went into a jewelry store and found a beautiful ring (it was even affordable!) Our hearts were pounding with excitement, and we decided we should think about it over dinner. We agreed our parents might be a bit upset at our getting engaged at 19, so we decided to wait a year, and I bought her a gold locket instead. Then in the restaurant I took from my pocket a heart-shaped gold locket and gave it to Becki. I told her I loved her, and that she should keep the locket and give it to her husband one day as a symbol of her purity. Then she could tell him her story.

There is one other point here. Fathers should keep themselves in the story, not above it. Adults, too, are always in need of instruction and guidance, so we should maintain that sense of humility over what God is teaching us. So remain a child, and refuse to play the role of professor!

God has ways of humbling professors, doesn't he? I taught my daughter to drive recently, and I made full use of all the imperatives—what to do, what not to do, etc. One evening, when I was out of town, I called home, and my eleven-year-old got on the phone and said, "Dad, Becki backed your car out of the garage and pulled the bumper off!" Upon my return, I took the bumper and assembly and put them in my wife's car, and took my daughter with me to the auto repair shop so that she could learn how much these things cost. As we drove there, I lectured her on driving and safety. Then I came to a right hand turn. I stopped at the sign, and my wife, who was following me in my car, rear-ended me, demolishing another bumper! There went the lecture! Becki laughed, and I said something I cannot repeat! Fathers, the moral is, keep yourselves in the story as learners.

The home should be the showcase of God's school of discipleship, but our country has become like Egbe, hasn't it? There is a famine of love. A hungry world longs for fathers who will nurture children.

In case some of you older men are feeling that it's too late for you to learn how to nurture like this, I will close by reading a letter someone wrote to me in July of this year:

Dear Brian,

Just a few years ago I was in a card shop selecting a birthday card for my father. You were there buying one for your sister. You spoke to me and asked what I was looking for. I said I was getting a card for my dad, then added "It's real hard to find a card for your dad when you don't have much of a relationship." Then you fixed your eyes on me with that gaze of yours and said, "Never underestimate a father's love for his daughter."

That phrase was like water for my dry heart. My parents divorced when I was two, and my father and I spoke only once, when I was 18. For the next 22 years he and I had no contact at all. Then when my own marriage failed, I called my father for emotional support and shared with him a precious childhood memory of him at a soda fountain, but he was silent, unable to respond. Since then we have exchanged cards and a phone call or two.

Last week, I flew back East for a family funeral. I called my father and we met face to face for the first time in 28 years. He told me of his regret that he, "didn't grow up," with me. He spoke of coming to my high school graduation and of his pride at my awards.

Then to my amazement he recounted my childhood memory of him which I had shared with him seven years previous. I was in a drug store with a friend, as my friend turned around he saw my dad with one of his daughters from his second marriage sitting at the soda fountain, eating an ice cream. My friend said, "Look, Carol, that's your daddy." My dad's eyes filled with tears as he looked me in the eyes and said, "Honey, that's the saddest thing I've ever heard." Brian, in that moment through those tears I saw the truth of your words. For all of my life my father has kept a secret, tender place for me in his heart though he could never express it. He ached for the gulf between us.

We hugged often in that two hour talk. He kissed me on the cheek and told me he loved me. I believed him. I am praising God for that time with my dad. I am grateful that we could have those two precious hours to see the love that flows between us. I want to shout it from the rooftops and sing it to the skies—"My Daddy loves me!" My father is a believer. In heaven, he and I and our precious Savior will dance in jubilation, unhindered by earthly restraints, and will fully experience the love of a father and a daughter.

So men, if you think it's too late, it's never too late.

Amen.

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WORK: ARE YOU SLAVE OR FREE?

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 912
Ephesians 6:5-9
Nineteenth Message
Brian Morgan
September 19, 1993

Our text today deals with the very important subject of work. Work occupies half of our waking hours. Pastors, some feel, are the exception here. Someone once said of pastors that they are “six days invisible and one day incomprehensible!” So as we look at the topic of work together I promise not to share with you my 20-year-old illustrations of when I used to get up at 5:45 a.m., don a hard hat, take the 6:40 commuter train to San Francisco and labor all day on a 37-story high-rise building at the corner of Fourth and Market.

What I am going to do instead is give you the point of view of a man who worked with his hands all his life, yet his intellect equalled that of the great philosophers of his day. This man’s background was such that he felt at home in all arenas of first century life: the Hebrew synagogue, the Greek marketplace, the Roman court. He knew how to work alongside the prominent and powerful, the poor and insignificant. He plied his trade in magnificent palaces and oppressive prisons. He knew how it felt to be affluent and honored, as well as poor and despised. He never tired of work, because he regarded work as holy activity, indeed the very means to worship God. He never retired, but labored to the end, even looking forward to death as his final act of worship.

I am referring, of course, to the apostle Paul, whose letter to the Ephesians, written during a time when he was held as a slave in prison, is the subject of this series of messages.

In our text today, from chapter 6 of this letter, we come to the apostle’s word to slaves and masters. Slavery was widely practiced in Paul’s day. William Barclay wrote that “it has been computed that in the Roman Empire there were 60,000,000 slaves.” John Stott had this to say about slavery in the empire: Slaves “constituted the work force, and included not only domestic servants and manual laborers but educated people as well, like doctors, teachers and administrators...” Referring to how they were cruelly treated, he said, “Slaves were sometimes whipped, mutilated, and imprisoned in chains, their teeth were knocked out, their eyes gouged out, they were even thrown to the wild beasts or crucified, and all this sometimes for the most trivial offense.” There were exceptions to the rule, but more often than not, the life of a slave was extremely demanding, as evidenced by the fact that “some slaves ran away (risking, if caught, branding, flogging and even summary execution), while others committed suicide.” (*The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 250-251).

But in the gospel, Christ had redeemed slaves from a life of oppression, and in the process set their spirits free. And in the house churches of the first century, we know that slaves were treated as equals with free men and women. Here in this text now, Paul addresses both slaves and their masters. He encourages slaves to relish the liberation

that was theirs in the gospel through the Spirit of God, and masters to find their true freedom as slaves of Christ, ready to serve those who labored under them.

We could well say that our text, therefore, poses the following question of all who work: Are you slave or free?

First, a word about the context of the apostle’s word concerning work.

I. Work: The Natural Soil for Cultivating Spirituality

This text is found in the broader context of spirituality, of Paul’s command to believers in chapter 5 to “be filled with the Spirit.” He is referring to all aspects of life—to marriage, the home, and now, as we will see in this text, the work place.

Following the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early Christians recognized that this event had two implications for their lives. Here is the first:

(a) No Distinction Between Sacred and Secular

There certainly were distinctions between the sacred and the secular in the Old Testament. There was a holy land, a holy temple, a holy priesthood, a holy sacrifice, etc., and Israel’s task was to guard the holiness of these things from anything that would defile them. This was what lay behind the building of walls and gates, the establishment of rituals, etc. But the prophets foresaw a day when all this would change. This was Zechariah’s prediction when he wrote: “In that day there will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘HOLY TO THE LORD.’ And the cooking pot in the LORD’s house will be like the bowls before the altar. And every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the LORD of hosts...” (14:20-21).

This picture captures the idea that in the day of Christ, everything would be regarded as holy, and this holiness would be intensified by the coming of the Spirit. This was why Jesus could do things that were strictly forbidden in the OT. He touched a leper, healed a hemorrhaging woman, touched a dead person, and communed with sinners. The Spirit had been given him in such measure that, rather than these actions defiling him, his holiness cleansed those whom he touched.

The work place was no different. It, too, had become holy. And it would be a takeover, not a merger. It had been taken over, and henceforth believers would be the representatives of the new regime, with new systems and new management. So think of your workplace this week as the future home of the New Jerusalem, and yourself as its secret representative.

Here is the second implication.

(b) Spirituality Gives Coherence to One’s Life

The early Christians did not feel they needed to engage

in grandiose schemes in order to minister. On the contrary, they filled out the life of the Spirit in the natural arenas in which God had placed them—in their marriages, homes, and in the work place. In America today, however, we often run across a very different philosophy of ministry. Christians at times structure ministries in a way that uproots them from their natural spheres and places them in unfamiliar, artificial settings. The result is that some believers who are being pulled in these new directions, under the guise of “ministry,” become less committed to their marriages, homes, and work. Frequently, their lives become fragmented and unfocused because of this, and they crash and go down in flames. What believers need to do is recover authentic spirituality, the kind of spirituality that will enable them to be integrated and whole, not disintegrated and scattered.

Work, then, is the natural soil where spirituality is cultivated.

We come now to our text. First, the apostle’s word to slaves.

II. The Motivations for Work(6:5-8)

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will rendering service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

In Paul’s time, the Greeks thought of work as servile activity, while the Romans felt it was beneath their dignity as citizens. Many Christians today seem to have similarly bad attitudes regarding work. Some feel work is a necessary evil resulting from the fall, a curse they have to put up with it. Others regard the work place strictly as the source of their twice-monthly paychecks. They might have to slave five days a week at work, but the weekends are for freedom, and their paycheck provides the resources for their leisure hours. The only connection either of these viewpoints has with Christian ministry is the tithe, which is given to support what they regard as “full time” Christian ministries.

Paul has a very different viewpoint, as we will see. He gives slaves two strong motivations for work.

(a) Knowing the Purpose of Work

The apostle uses language that links work, which at first glance may seem ordinary and mundane, with worship, which is extraordinary and divine! His understanding of work can be traced clear back to Genesis where, in the opening account of creation, the omnipotent God worked like an architect and an engineer, designing all the grand divisions of the universe and filling them out with created life. Then, like a potter, from the dust of the earth he made man in his own image. Next, God went to work as a gardener. He planted a garden, and placed man in the garden to do his first work, given in the two-fold command, “to cultivate it and keep it.” Like God, man was made to work.

These verbs, “cultivate (or serve) and keep,” are used in Deuteronomy 7 with respect to worshipping God. There the priest was instructed to “*serve* God and *keep* command-

ments.” Work and worship, therefore, are clearly linked in Scripture. Work is the link between humble humanity, working in cooperation with omnipotent Divinity, to bring about a harvest of life through the accomplishment of mundane things. All work is geared toward this. Gardening, you will agree, is humble work. It involves plunging the hands into the dirt, turning over the soil, mixing in manure, and burying seemingly insignificant seeds in the mixture. The only thing left to the gardener is to go to bed and sleep. While he is sleeping, the seed also sleeps. Then it dies, and a divine miracle is worked.

One of the great Hebrew poets Judah Halevi (ca. 1080), expressed this miracle beautifully in these words:

Here is the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace from him who looks down upon it. It is however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced.

The gardener wakes up to awe, wonder, and amazement. The seed which he planted came to life while he was asleep, but it took both God’s and man’s work to bring it about. In the same way that the Jews worshiped God by bringing the first fruits of the harvest and offering them to him, we work all week long and then offer our tithes to God in an act of worship, as an expression of how he has prospered us at work. Is that how you felt earlier this morning when you put money in the plate at the offering, or did you think of your giving in terms of a tip?

So there is the first motivation to work: knowing that the purpose of work is to worship God.

The second motivation is knowing who is our master.

(b) Knowing God Is At Work

Obey your masters...in sincerity of heart, as to Christ... as slaves of Christ...doing the will of God from the heart...serving the Lord...from the Lord.

Five times in these verses our boss is identified as Christ. When we go to *work*, it is God who is at *work* in us to make our work *holy* activity. So give your heart wholly to your work. God is present, watching all the while. The company is his holy temple, and you are his representative there. The early Christians delighted in this perspective on work, but we have lost much of this today. Although many of these believers were slaves, and thus powerless to change their circumstances, they had superior job satisfaction because they knew the identity of their true boss.

A glance at the lives of the New Testament couple, Priscilla and Aquila, proves the point. Aquila, a native of Pontus, on the south-east coast of the Black Sea, in all probability was a slave. In Rome, he married Priscilla, a woman of some financial means and social rank, and they set up business as tent-makers. When in 49 A.D. the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from the city, Aquila and Priscilla went to Corinth and set up shop. There they met another tent-maker, the apostle Paul, and they spent 18 months studying the Scriptures with him. Everywhere

they traveled for the rest of their lives—and they traveled a lot, as you will discover if you trace their footsteps in the NT—their home was the site of a house church. So the imperial edict of expulsion, far from being a tragedy in their lives, was actually the avenue which led to their being disciplined by the apostle Paul.

Is your company forcing you to relocate in another state or you will lose your job? Then be glad. God, your master, your boss, not your company, is pulling the strings. You are working for him.

Now we come to the question that Paul is really asking in these verses.

III. Working: Are You Slave or Free? (6:5-9)

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will rendering service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. And, masters, do the same thing for them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

What determines whether you are slave or free? Slavery is not determined by role (whether you are slave or free), but by your attitude. It is not where you work, but whom you are seeking to please. In the gospel, Christ has liberated believers from the most enslaving practice of all, that of pleasing men, to pleasing God. So, if we serve as slaves of Christ, then we are free indeed. As Martin Luther said: “Man is free from all and servant to none by virtue of grace, but slave of all and servant to all by virtue of love.”

Here the apostle lists four changes in attitude that will affect both slaves and masters as they learn to grasp that God is really their employer, their master. We could call these “the attitudes that liberate.”

(a) Giving Respect Liberates

Be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling,...

“Fear” and “trembling” are the exact Greek words that are translated in the Septuagint version of Psalm 2 with reference to how we respect the Messiah:

**Serve the Lord with reverence,
And rejoice with trembling. (LXX Psalm 2:11)**

The words Paul uses are not speaking of cowering or of cringing servility, but of respect for the fact that God is the power behind employers, and when we respect them we are actually worshipping God. In the same way, if employers want to be respected, they must demonstrate respect for their employees; and if they want service, they must serve. They must never use threats to motivate. This is true liberation in the work place.

It's interesting to think that it is the servants, not their supervisors, who have the advantage in the work of spreading God's kingdom. The bosses, if they are going to be successful in this, must put down their titles and take on the role of servants. This is how the company of Christ operates.

In the wonderful little letter of Paul to Philemon, the

apostle instructs Philemon on how to handle his runaway slave, Onesimus, upon his return to service. The runaway had visited the imprisoned apostle in Rome, and in the process the prisoner in chains liberated the slave, made him a slave of Christ, and set him free from his oppressive master. But then Paul sent Onesimus back to serve his master freely, accompanied by a letter reminding Philemon that the runaway was no longer a slave but a brother forever in Christ. Furthermore, Paul, the prisoner in chains, undertook to pay any debts the slave had incurred, although he gently reminded the master that he, too, was indebted to Paul for his own soul—a gentle rebuke to a master who already should have been serving and respecting his servant.

Here is the second attitude that liberates.

(b) Working Wholeheartedly Liberates

...in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ...doing the will of God from the heart [lit. soul]

In these words we have an allusion to the great Shema of Israel:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery” ... “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deut. 6:4-5)

God is one—there is no division in his heart—thus as believers in Christ we must love him with our whole hearts, souls and minds. When this happens, it is beautiful to behold. Paul labels it sincerity, but it would be better translated as *integrity*. As David observed Israel's wholehearted offerings for the Lord's temple, he used this same word, integrity.

“Since I know, O my God, that You try the heart and delight in uprightness, I, in the integrity of my heart, have willingly offered all these things; so now with joy I have seen Your people, who are present here, make their offerings willingly to You. O Lord the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, preserve this forever in the intentions of the heart of Your people, and direct their heart to You.” (1 Chron. 29:17-18).

May God preserve that attitude in us forever.

The opposite, of course, is true also: God hates halfhearted worship. Likewise, God detests halfhearted work done to impress men.

Reflecting on this text we discover that spirituality, by definition, makes believers into enthusiastic, robust, vital workers! We must not go to work with our heads hanging, our eyes glazed, our feet dragging, doing just enough to get by. This kind of attitude is a contradiction. Spirituality makes us vibrant and alive. It enables us to do everything before and for God. This is how we will act as Christians if we are walking in the Spirit.

Here is the third thing.

(c) Making Friends Liberates

With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men,...

“Good will” means “to be well disposed to someone to make them your friend.” The noun has two ideas: first, that of “favor, affection or benevolence towards someone,” and second, pursuing others with “zeal and enthusiasm.” The Greek OT used this word to translate the Hebrew

word which describes how a husband and wife are to cleave to one another (Genesis 2:24). What an exalted view of work! People are behind every task you do at work, so you should work to their good will and to make them your friends. How can you work with people for 40 hours a week and not cultivate affection for them?

You may reply by saying, "You don't know who I'm chained to all week!" My response is: Paul was chained to a member of the Praetorian Guard, a Rambo-like figure, a Jew-hater who could not care less about Hebrew theology or Greek philosophy. But Paul didn't see it that way. He recognized that these guards were chained to him, and he led many of them to Christ. Who is chained to you all week at work? This is how you should view your co-workers.

Work is the natural channel to make friends, so look beyond the task at hand to the people you are yoked to. Wish them well, and cultivate your affections for them. Reach out and invite them to lunch, or into the sanctuary of your home.

In an effort to keep abreast of the world, I often desire to cultivate a ministry in the community. So last year I asked God to give me one that would bring coherence to my life, family and work. In March, when I went to pick up my daughter at the high school, I volunteered to help coach her softball team. At first the coach didn't take me up on my offer, saying that I hadn't met the coaching requirements. A couple of days later, however, he told me I could help if I kept things low-key. The following week, he came to me and said, "I'm leaving town for 10 days. You're the coach!" Thrilled with the new opportunity, I asked my daughter what I could do to make her team mates feel special, and she suggested I invite them over for a barbeque. We had a wonderful time together, and afterwards we watched the baseball movie "A League Of Their Own." When we played against the best team in the league, I told the girls that if they won, they could dump the contents of the ice chest on my head. (We scored in the final inning and won!) To finish the season, I called a friend and his wife and asked him if he would like to be father to 14 daughters for a day. They hosted us one afternoon and we had a marvelous pool party. Later, while we were driving home, one of the girls expressed amazement that people they didn't even know went to such trouble to host them and give them such a great time.

When I set out to coach softball, I didn't regard it merely as work. I wanted to make 14 friends, and I ended up with 14 daughters. This is what work is supposed to be: moving beyond the task at hand, to wholeheartedness, to divine friendships.

The fourth "attitude that liberates" has a reward.

(d) Waiting for the Ultimate Wage Liberates

Many great athletes today are noted for holding out for more money, lest their pride is damaged, before signing their contracts. What a way to live, holding up the whole company to get what they feel is their due! But, Paul says, we must not look to men for our ultimate worth on the job. The gold watch just isn't worth it. Let us look only to God.

The apostle concludes: "...knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free." God is our employer. He will pay back all the good that has been done.

Last week, I got a letter from Jim Foster, our missionary in Romania, which I found to be very helpful with respect to what the apostle is saying here. Jim wrote:

One night a Danish couple was packing to go to Denmark for one and half months. They are here living on faith and working to help the street people in Arad, mainly children. I heard that they needed some money so I asked the Lord if I should help them because I had a little and it was more than they had. As I was going home I decided to give them all that I had in our house. I thought that it was \$350, but I had forgotten that I used \$150 on a trip to Hungary. So I took the \$200 put it in my pocket and took some Romanian money to buy some gas and I put it in the other pocket and went to their apartment in the city. They were still packing when I arrived at 11:30 p.m. but they stopped so we could pray together. They had one daughter with them who is a Christian, and a son and [his] fiancée who are both non-believers. After prayer, I just reached into my pocket and put the money into my fist and put it in his hand and said good-bye. When I went to the car I decided I had better check to see if I gave him the right money. Oh! Oh! I had made a mistake. So I ran back and knocked on the door and quickly explained my error. Filled with joy, I went home, and my Danish friends left early the next morning.

Later, I received a letter from the couple saying: "Remember, Jim, when you were in our apartment and gave us some Lei, the evening before we left for Denmark? We told Lisbeth and Kim about it, and he said, 'It was good, but if he had given you \$200, then I think it would have been God.' Then you came back with \$200 and I showed him what you gave me...God's perfect timing. Kim had to think about this, and later that week both gave their lives to Christ at a youth camp. Hallelujah. God is so good.

Jim concluded by saying that the very next day, he got a special delivery letter from a brother at church, and when he opened it he found \$200 enclosed. God pays wages, and he keeps very short accounts!

Work, then, is the natural soil where spirituality is cultivated. It begins with respect, moves to wholeheartedness in work, presses on to friendships, until we meet God himself face to face.

My friends: God has constructed a holy stage for you to play your part for 40 hours a week to teach the world what it means to worship him and be truly human. Please don't walk off that stage, saying your ministry lies elsewhere. Can the farmer abandon the soil and expect a crop?

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THE CALL TO ARMS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 913
 Ephesians 6:10-13
 Twentieth Message
 Brian Morgan
 September 26, 1993

In his book, *Everything We Had*, an oral history of the Vietnam War, Al Santoli tells the story of a medic welcoming new recruits at the hospital:

A couple of us were just kind of hanging loose out in front of the main hospital building, which was a big, corrugated-tin pre-fab. About forty new guys were lined up there to have their shot records checked before being sent to their units.

The guys were all new, their first couple of days in-country, and they were all wondering what it was going to be like. Joking, smoking cigarettes, grabbing each other in the line—it was pretty loose. I mean, nobody was saying, “Straighten up. Stand in formation,” none of that. People were just kind of leaning up against the building.

All of a sudden, four choppers came in and they didn’t even touch down. They just dumped bags. One of the bags broke open and what came out was hardly recognizable as a human being. For those of us that were just sort of standing there looking in the direction of the new guys...it’s not the kind of thing you laugh at. Irony or satire...things get beyond words. All the guys stopped laughing. Nobody was saying anything. And some people were shaking and some people were throwing up, and one guy got down and started to pray.

I said to myself, “Welcome to the war, boys.”

What a shocking introduction to the war for these young recruits!

Many new Christians have been similarly shocked to discover that when they signed up as new recruits for Christ, naively expecting life to become like a vacation in Eden, they ended up getting shot at like tourists in Miami. They fell victims to violence, sickness, slander, and betrayal. I imagine the devil must say to himself, “Welcome to the war, people!”

It is in this vein of spiritual warfare that the apostle Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians. Paul has been demonstrating how God in the cross of Christ created a new humanity through the pouring out of his Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The key element in this new spirituality, we learned, is submission under Christ, one to another: submission in our marriages, homes, and work places. But in our text today, we come to an abrupt and dramatic change of scene. Tranquility gives way to war, peace gives way to battle. This scene, in the words of John Stott, records “shocking reality harsher than dreams.”

But, there is good news, too. Things are not out of control. The apostle declares that God is bringing about redemption in the midst of a great global conflict. As we look at these closing texts today and next Sunday, therefore, the following four questions come to mind:

1. Do we know there is a war going on?

2. Do we know who the enemy is and what he intends to do to us?
3. Do we have an overall strategy for battle?
4. Do we have practical steps for implementing our strategy?

First, I would like to recommend three books which deal with this subject of spiritual warfare in much great detail than I can accomplish in two messages. Ray Stedman’s book, *Spiritual Warfare*, gave me as a young Christian a very balanced framework for dealing with temptation, sin and the strategies of the devil. I recommend it highly. The second book is the classic by C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. Someone once said to Lewis, after reading this book, “You’re a theological genius. How did you learn all the subtleties of Satan’s strategies?” “I merely examined my own life!” was the great writer’s honest response. The third book, *Reversed Thunder*, by Eugene Peterson (some consider him the country’s foremost theological poet), sets out how to worship God in the here and now through the imagery of the book of Revelation.

Now we come to the apostle’s text, Ephesians 6:10-13:

Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

This brings us to our first question.

I. Do We Know There Is A War Going On?

(a) The Nature of Life Is a Struggle

Paul says there is an invisible war, one of constant struggle and wrestling, going on throughout every moment in time. He introduces this theme of spiritual warfare with the word, “finally.” This does not mean “in conclusion.” This word is an adverb meaning, “for the remaining time.” In other words, the whole period between the first and second comings of Christ will be characterized by spiritual conflict. Many Christians say that wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famine portend the last days, but my response is to quote my daughter’s favorite expression, “Wake up and smell the coffee!” It has been the last days for the past two thousand years. Such signs have been manifest ever since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

For example, first century Jews would have been famil-

iar with the siege of Massada, the bar-Kochba rebellion, and the terrible conquest of Jerusalem by Titus when 2.5 million Jews were killed. Recording his own experience, Paul says he “fought the wild beasts of Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32). I think he was vividly recounting the scene when 40,000 Ephesian idol-worshippers, reacting against the gospel of Jesus Christ, chanted for two hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” almost causing a riot. The apostle barely escaped with his life on this occasion.

Let us not be naive. This text puts the final nail in the coffin of the prosperity gospel’s deceptive claims of health, wealth, and ease. Our text also unmasks the wishful thinking of Eastern religion’s Nirvana, which holds that we can escape the conflict through meditation. And it unmasks the lie of Christian Science that holds there is no sin, no battle, and no victims, only wrong thinking. There is a war going on! Commenting on this text, Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: “It is a stirring call to battle...Do you not hear the bugle, and the trumpet?...we are being roused, we are being stimulated, we are being set upon our feet; we are told to be men. The whole tone is martial, it is manly, it is strong.”

And what is the source of this war?

(b) The Origin of the Conflict

“I will put enmity between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

These are the words which God uttered to Satan following the fall of mankind and the devil’s usurping the administration of earth. Here, God placed enmity, an active hatred, between Satan and the seed of the woman. The rest of the Bible is the story of that hostility: the seed of the devil warring against the seed of God. Ever since God uttered that prophecy of the devil’s final end, Satan has lived in a state of paranoia. Fearing that every male child born would be the one who would, according to God’s promise, bruise him on the head, the devil immediately set out to try and destroy the seed of God. The Old Testament records these stories: Cain murdered his brother Abel; David’s royal line was constantly under attack, etc. These then are the origins of this war that is under discussion here in Paul’s letter.

But, following the advent of Jesus Christ, we are now in a quite different stage of the battle. Christ has come, and he intends to completely take over of the earth from Satan’s rule. In the words of Revelation, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Christianity is not some minor, privately-held religion. It is a faith that is lived out in the open, in the heat of battle and conflict—a conquering faith.

(c) What Stage Is the Campaign In?

In the gospels, Jesus predicted that he would attack the strong man (Satan), overpower him, remove from him all his armor on which he relied, and then distribute the plunder (Luke 11:21-22). The cross was the decisive battle in this campaign. It was the cross that broke the back of the devil. This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote in Colossians, “When He [God] had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Col. 2:15). What this is saying is that the deciding battle has already been fought.

All that is left is a mop-up operation. Christians can announce freedom to the captives because Christ has overthrown the tyrant.

Hear again the words of Revelation: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). And this peace is not merely an armed truce, like what passes for peace today. Let us remind ourselves of Paul’s wonderful pronouncement in Romans 16:20, “And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” The enemy has been conquered on his own turf; and the job of Christians is to liberate his captives.

(d) Implications of the Battle

Christians are the sole answer to the terrible evils of the world. Government can’t solve these intractable problems; neither can educators. Christians are the only ones who are privileged to liberate the captives of Satan. So, what kind of lives should we be living? Are we living in light of this reality, that we are part of God’s liberating army? Do we truly sense the high privilege and calling that we have the solution to the problems of sin and evil? It is recorded of that noted Puritan, Colonel Hutchinson, that as he foresaw the approach of the Civil War, he “deliberately gave up most of the sports and diversions in which he had previously indulged, as mistimed and no longer in place.” While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with taking legitimate time for rest and leisure, we would do well to remember that Satan does not take breaks from the war. The battle is real and constant.

Next, Paul gives the identity of the enemy, saying that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood.”

II. Do You Know Who the Enemy Is?

...the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies...

(a) Not Against Flesh and Blood

Tragically, throughout history the church has fallen into the mistake of doing battle with the wrong enemy. When we treat victims of the enemy as the enemy, however, in God’s eyes we look as ridiculous as Don Quixote tilting against the windmills.

It is not difficult to illustrate. The Vietnam War was in full swing when I arrived at Stanford University, a young Christian and a freshman, in 1968. Back in those days, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were organizing demonstrations against the war, taking over classrooms on campus, etc. I was incensed at the disruption in my education, and determined to do something about it. So I joined a counter-group, Young Americans For Freedom, to fight against the SDS plan to shut down classrooms. When we heard that the SDS planned on taking over Encina Hall on campus, I tried to recruit a group of football players to stand in front of the hall, but none of them would agree to come. I finally recruited about 15 freshmen to come with me instead. As we stood in front of the hall, accompanied by two policemen, the SDS group headed toward us. There were 500 of them! I was terrified. Although I had organized our counter-demonstration, I fled. Then I watched as the demonstrators broke down the doors and trashed

the building. I learned something that night: I was fighting the wrong enemy, with the wrong weapons, and I was fighting on their terms. If we insist on doing this, we will always go down to defeat.

The lesson is obvious: our battle is *not* against flesh and blood. Therefore, Christians should never take sides according to the flesh. If they do, their actions will polarize people and impede God's rule. We must remember that no side is immune to sin. The enemy is neither Republican nor Democrat, liberal or conservative. Malcom Muggeridge said of the two Berlins (before the Wall came down), that evil permeated both sides of that infamous wall. He referred to the divided city as "two rival towers of Babylon confronting each other, one of power, the other of affluence."

Our enemy is not flesh and blood, so let us not be tempted to take sides and seek, according to the flesh, to align the kingdom of God against men and women.

(b) But Against Spiritual Forces of Darkness

...but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies...

Notice how each phrase in this section builds in intensity. What an awesome power confronts us! There are forces behind the evil that we see on every hand. Paul refers to them as "rulers." They have been around a long time, and they are highly organized, functioning in networks covering the whole earth. What is even worse, we can't see them because they are located in the "heavenlies." We're not in their league. If we take them on in our own strength, it's like taking on the Mafia. We can't just take on the local drug dealer and expect to deal with him alone. Behind him stands a vast network of dealers on the local, state, national and international levels. The destruction of mankind is the aim and object of these "spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies."

The OT book of Job is an excellent illustration of these forces at work. In the opening scene of the book, the Sabeans kill Job's herds of oxen and donkeys, and his servants. Next, fire from heaven (probably lightning) kills his sheep and his servants. Then an attack by the Chaldeans kills his camels and his servants. Finally, a fierce wind levels his house and all his children are killed. But, according to the book, the power behind all of these natural and human phenomena was Satan himself. The devil is a murderer. But murder for him is not a pointless exercise; it is designed to prove a point. Satan had taunted God, "Does Job love you for nothing! You've put a hedge around him..." In other words, Satan was charging that Job loved God merely because of the many blessings which God had bestowed upon him. Satan was saying that there was nothing higher worth living for than what man could get out of God and life—a hedonistic view of life. So every time the murderer strikes, a holy battle is being staged: Does man love God for what he can get out of him, or because God is worth loving?

The story of Job is not the exception, it's the norm. I will illustrate by reading a letter from Todd Poulter, our missionary in Nairobi, Kenya, who wrote in his letter in May of this year:

Monday afternoon, I left the meetings to attend a memo-

rial service for Stephanie Martin, the 3-year-old daughter of colleagues, who died of malaria. Tuesday afternoon, Karla greeted me with the news that a Kenyan neighbor had been murdered. Wednesday, we learned that a missionary who arrived here only a month ago had run into and killed a young girl. Thursday, a colleague shared with us the news that his elderly father had just passed away. And then Saturday morning, we learned of the death of a dear friend by his own hand. Death from illness, murder, old age, involuntary manslaughter, and suicide, all in one week. What is God doing?

In these tragic and seemingly untimely incidents, however, God was making a holy stage upon which he will prove that his loyal presence and his love are better even than life itself. Martin Luther's words, from his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," seem appropriate here:

*Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also,
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still:
His kingdom is forever.*

So there is our enemy. It is Satan himself, not, as we are often tempted to believe, someone made of "flesh and blood." We would do well to remember that his kingdom is highly organized and invisible; that he is bent on our destruction; and that we are not in his league.

This brings us to our second question.

III. Do We Have An Overall Strategy For Battle?

(a) Don't Hide in the Church

Many are tempted to withdraw from the fight when they learn the identity of their powerful enemy. They want to run for cover and hide in a cozy den of Christian fellowship. But this text says that it is impossible to hide from the devil. He is invisible, and his power penetrates everywhere. Religion, as a matter of fact, often becomes a welcome home for him. We remember that Jesus received more blows from his own countrymen than he ever did from the cruel Romans. Following Satan's direct attacks on Job's family and on his body, the devil worked indirectly through Job's three friends who hurled at him false accusations, shrouded in orthodox theological terms. Their words did more damage and caused more pain to Job than Satan's direct attacks. The pain of accusation always cuts deeper than the stripes of the rod.

Christians can't hide in the church.

I had a letter recently from Jim Foster, our missionary in Romania, which will help illustrate this point. Jonathan, Jim's brother-in-law, publishes a newspaper of the writings of Traian Dorz, the great Romanian poet. (This newspaper also prints the Sunday morning messages given here at PBC/Cupertino. They are translated by a Romanian brother who worships with us.) In his letter, Jim says that the opposition to their work now comes, not from the Romanian authorities, but from the church of the land:

A young girl about 23 years old has been trying to organize a young people's group for prayer, singing and Bible study. The priest said that they can only do this in the

church building regardless of the temperature (usually between 20-32 degrees in the winter, as none of the Orthodox churches are heated at all). He will not let them pray out loud because, of course, only the priest can talk to God for the people. He says that Bible study is not necessary or even correct because only the priest can interpret or understand the Word of God. He will not even sit down with them to teach a study.

In her frustration, after two years of this, she was at a train station near her village and she saw a stack of our newspapers. She saw Jonathan's name as the editor and invited us to start a Lord's Army meeting in their village. We met with her and some of her young group and decided to start with an evangelistic meeting in the town hall. When we came, the priest had already told his congregation that it was wrong for any of them to go, for it was sin to meet outside the church building. The church was the only place Jesus came and that people would not be saved outside of the building. So we attempted to hold the meeting in the church, and David spoke on Ephesians 2:1-10. The priest was outraged. Later Jonathan was slandered by others in the Orthodox church because he has relationships with foreigners and publishes their writings; he is called the Trojan Horse in the Orthodox Church. Later he was called to a meeting where they held a tribunal and verbally attacked him for two hours. The result of the meeting led to an official excommunication. It would be good if the brothers at PBC would pray for us on a regular basis as we are expecting the fire to get hotter.

It is clear that Christians cannot hide from the fight. How then should we respond?

(b) Join the Army of Liberation!

Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God...Therefore, take up the full armor of God.

Christians should join the army of liberation! Our armor is given to us, not for hiding in foxholes, but to defend us from counter-attacks while we are on the offensive. In light of the danger involved, we need the full armor of Christ in order to stand. So the battlefield is the safest place for us! Spirituality is better learned in battle than anywhere else. This is where we truly learn to put on Christ—all of him!

A reading of the book of Psalms is very helpful here. Many of the psalms were penned in the very heat of battle. Martial songs, they testify that the greater the danger, the greater the intimacy with God. David, you will remember, made a critically wrong decision once. In the spring, when kings go out to battle, he decided to stay home. What followed, of course, was his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her warrior husband. "We are safest in the fight!" says Eugene Peterson.

As Paul was writing this very letter in Rome, the capital of Satan's stronghold, chained to a Roman guard, the apostle was winning the battle as he witnessed to his captors of the Savior whom he served. Pray that God will send you to places you never dreamed of going, that you, too, might be involved in liberating captives. Perhaps you will liberate the captive who sits behind the door marked "Boss." You may be involved in freeing captives in your local

school. Perhaps you will journey to places overseas where you have never traveled before. Don't settle for defensive Christianity. You are much safer taking your place in the front lines.

(c) When Attacked: Stand, Stand, Stand, Stand!

Expect to be attacked yourself. There is a cost involved. And when the attack comes, adopt what Ray Stedman used to call the "infallible posture," given in Paul's word: *Stand*. Don't run. Don't lash out. Don't fight fire with fire. Stand! For emphasis, Paul uses the word four times. If you stand, the devil will flee from you.

I seldom get sick, but last week, as I prepared for this message on spiritual warfare, I became ill. On Friday I still had nothing on paper, so I got on my knees and prayed that God would bless me that day by showing me that he was alive. I was gathering illustrations from our missionaries to illustrate this material, and I had forgotten some of the details of a story that Dudley Weiner, our missionary in Paris, had told me concerning their first weeks in France. Ten minutes after I prayed, to my amazement, Dudley telephoned me from France!

This is the account of their battle as they attempted to plant a church in Paris. Dudley was to learn that the city boasts more licensed Satanic priests than pastors. When the Weiners were making their way to the city a few years ago, Dudley's wallet was stolen from their car. Shortly after their arrival, his wife Janet was hit by a car while she was walking. Then their car was broken into again. A few days later, while Janet was sleeping in their apartment, someone broke in and stole her wallet. A month later, their car was broken into yet again. Everything was stolen, and the thief left a pentagon-shaped pin, a Satanic calling card, as it were. It was as if Satan was saying, "Welcome to the war, Dudley." On a number of other occasions both Dudley and Janet woke in the night and sensed a strong, demonic presence in their bedroom. Then both of them fell very sick. They were still feeling ill when a severe thunderstorm hit the city, but they began to praise God and pray to him. As they were praying, they heard a loud crash. A tree in the little park across the street from their apartment had come crashing down. When at last the storm finally came to an end, they said they could physically feel the demons leave. They had followed the apostle's advice: they did not flee, they put on Christ, and they *stood firm*.

Imagine yourself as a new recruit to Christianity. Paul, the battle-scarred veteran of the faith, awaits you and greets you with this letter in hand. "Welcome to the war," says the great apostle of the faith. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

The great dragon was thrown down...and his angels were thrown down with him... "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down...and they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death." (Revelation 12:9-11)

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THE CALL TO BATTLE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 914
Ephesians 6:14-20
Twenty-first Message
Brian Morgan
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Planes. Oh! I love them! But this time everything was different. It was the evening of July 15th, 1988. I boarded a Lufthansa Airlines flight out of Frankfurt, Germany, in company with 12 others, to fly *East*. Once on board, we dispersed and sat alone in silence. The time for smiles and laughter was over. My throat was dry, my palms sweaty. I had never traveled behind that forbidding Curtain before. A multitude of questions whirled in my head: Would we make it through customs? Would our Bible commentaries with their phony covers be detected? (Some of the more fearful had already jettisoned their books in Frankfurt.) Would our teaching outlines hidden in our money belts be discovered? Would we be followed? Would our hotel rooms be bugged?

Our seasoned leader, of Italian descent, a tile-setter by trade, had spent hours briefing us on what do at every juncture. Step by step he drilled us on strategy. But nothing he said prepared me for the wave of fear I was feeling. It didn't help when the plane made sudden, sharp turns as if to miss unwanted air space. I wondered what was I doing traveling to a country whose very name evoked ancient memories of the Roman Emperor Trajan. His territorial expansion, in the first century A.D., had given the nation its language and culture. It had also given it its initiation into bloody persecution.

The reigning emperor of this land had followed in Trajan's footsteps. He had starved his country to feed his belly, and built his palace on the blood of thousands of martyrs. He had no use for religion. He confiscated Bibles and turned them into toilet paper. An anti-Christ supreme, he had organized a network of secret police whose web covered all of society in a stranglehold. One out of every three citizens was an informer. His secret police, hand-picked from orphanages in Libya, Iran, and Iraq, were absolutely loyal to him. He had nurtured them and schooled them in intimidation and brute force. They knew no morals; they had no ethical base. Their reward was a life of ease and profit for a job done well. And here we were, 13 foreigners, a threat to everything the dictator stood for. We would be monitored night and day. Any contact with nationals was forbidden. If we were caught in their homes, they would pay a high price: a year's wages.

The plane touched down. Here we were at last in enemy territory—Communist Romania! Would God really do battle with us? I wondered. Paradoxically, it was here, in the most dangerous place I had ever ministered, that I discovered the true joy of putting on the full armor of God. In the words of a contemporary theologian, "One is safest in the fight."

Today we come to our final study in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Our text, from the closing verses of this marvelous epistle, expounds the Christian's call to battle. Every day the Christian must don his spiritual clothes, leave his home, and enter into enemy territory. As we study the inspired words of this text this morning my prayer is that you will learn to put on the armor of Christ every day before you enter out into the fray. We must do this, for Paul says that life is a constant struggle with the devil himself.

In these closing texts from Ephesians now, the apostle will

instruct us on how to implement God's strategy for dealing with an extremely wily and potent enemy.

Paul writes:

Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:14-17)

In earlier studies we learned that the apostle wrote this letter while he was imprisoned in Rome, chained day and night to a member of the Praetorian Guard. Paul did not have to look far for an analogy to help him illustrate his call to battle. His exhortations here are based on the battledress of a soldier about to enter the fray.

The first thing to notice is that the initial three pieces of armor are to be put on prior to entering into battle. (Note that the verbs are all in the past tense.) The next two pieces of armor, on the other hand, are taken up as the Christian advances into enemy territory; while the last weapon (which, incidentally, is the sole offensive weapon) is used when contact is made with the enemy.

I. Preparing for the Battle (6:14-15)

...having girded your loins with truth...

(a) A Soldier's Belt: The Readiness of Integrity

A Roman soldier's belt was fashioned from a piece of leather 6 to 8 inches wide. This belt actually was more a part of his under-garments than his armor as its function was to gather up his long tunic in order to help make him ready for battle. Today, we would say that he was "rolling up his sleeves" in readiness.

What is it that enables Christians to be prepared for the spiritual battles we face every day? According to Paul, our belt is "truth." His words are a direct quote from Isaiah 11, describing the clothes which would be worn by the coming Messiah. (The Greek word "truth" is a translation of the Hebrew word for "faithfulness.") Isaiah 11:5: "Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And *faithfulness* the belt about His waist." Christ always wore the belt of faithfulness. He was utterly sold out to his Commander-in-Chief.

The first thing that makes us ready for battle is our willingness to be true, faithful people. If we insist on going into battle half-heartedly, we'll get blown away. It's impossible to fight the deceiver if we are holding onto deceit. Whenever Israel had to go into battle, draft dodgers didn't have to look hard for an excuse to stay home. Anyone who had built a new house, or had just planted a vineyard, a recently engaged man, or anyone who was fainthearted was excused from the battle to come (see Deut. 20:5-7). The issue is clear: God's bat-

bles are won by faith. Anyone entering the fray with a divided heart, or lacking integrity, is doomed.

A Christian, then, must first “gird his loins with truth,” donning his belt of Christ’s faithfulness, before he goes out into the world to join the spiritual battle.

Here is the second thing he needs:

(b) A Soldier’s Breastplate: The Assurance of Righteousness

The soldier’s breastplate was constructed of leather-covered metal and shaped like a sleeveless vest. It protected his vital organs from both the front and the back. Again, we find a reference in Isaiah to the clothing of the Messianic King: “He put on righteousness like a breastplate” (Isaiah 59:17).

This is a frequent theme in the Psalms. The king did not feel free to go into battle unless his relationship with the Lord was on a solid footing. Often, that relationship came under attack. For example, if difficult circumstances were causing the king to suffer, he could be open to ridicule. In such times he would pray,

**The Lord judges the people;
Vindicate me, O Lord, according to my righteousness
And my integrity that is in me...
My shield is with God,
Who saves the upright in heart.** (Psalm 7:8, 10)

Here, the king was saying, in effect, “God, I have done right by you. Will you now do right by me? Take up my cause and vindicate our relationship.”

Christians, too, come under attack and ridicule. The devil will question our relationship with God and accuse us before we even reach the battleground. Unlike the king, however, when this happens we must pray, “Vindicate me, O God, before the accuser, according to *your* righteousness”—according to Christ’s righteousness. We can pray this with confidence because we know that we are accepted in the Beloved. This assurance gives us a clear conscience, enabling us to do battle. G.G. Findlay wrote: “The completeness of pardon for past offense and the integrity of character that belong to the justified life, are woven together into an impenetrable mail.” If we lack a clear conscience, of course, we are paralyzed and unable to fight.

There is the third piece of armor we must don before the battle:

(c) A Soldier’s Shoes: The Mobility of Peace

In his *Jewish War*, Josephus says that in order to promote facility of motion, soldiers wore shoes thickly studded with sharp nails. William Hendriksen comments: “One important reason for Julius Caesar’s success as a general was the fact that his men wore military shoes that made it possible for them to cover long distances in such short periods that again and again the enemies were caught off guard, having deceived themselves into thinking that they still had plenty of time to prepare an adequate defense. In the victories won by Alexander the Great this same factor had played an important role.”

What is it that enables us as Christians to be ready to fight and ensures mobility and stability? It is this peace that the apostle speaks of: “having shod [our] feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” Nothing paralyzes the will more than a lack of peace. And this refers not merely to arming our own hearts with the gospel of peace, but being ready on all occasions to take that peace into the world in order to reconcile all men to Christ; to announce the good news that the tyr-

anny is over, that Jesus Christ is victor. Once more, this image comes from the prophecy of Isaiah:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”** (Isaiah 52:7)

The most comforting sense of peace we can know is found in the fight. If we lack peace, it may be due to the fact that we are more concerned with getting our own rights than dedicating ourselves to being soldiers for Christ.

If Paul had insisted on writing to Christians to lobby for his release from prison, we would never have had this wonderful letter to help us in our struggles with the adversary today. What he did rather was tell rulers like Agrippa, “I wish you were like me (a Christian) except for my chains.” He knew that God was behind his imprisonment, and that his confinement would not hinder but rather spread the gospel of peace. Do you want peace at work, at school, or abroad in the community? Then you will have it if you wear your shoes of the gospel of peace. When I was in college, a pastor who disciplined me would not let me escape any arena without first sharing Christ. Whenever the gospel was challenged, it was there I shared my testimony. This helped me overcome my natural timidity and brought me a peace that truly passed all understanding.

So there we have the Christian’s wardrobe for the daily spiritual battle: the belt of faithfulness (the preparedness of integrity); the breastplate (the assurance of righteousness and a clear conscience); and the shoes of peace (which assure freedom and mobility).

Next, the apostle lists some other things the Christian needs as he enters the fray.

II. Entering Into the Battle (6:16-17a)

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation...

(a) The Shield of Faith

The Roman soldier carried two shields, one small and round, the other (the one to which this text is referring) rectangular, measuring about four feet by two feet. This shield “consisted of two layers of wood glued together and covered first with linen and then with hide; it was bound with iron about and below” (Armitage Robinson). It was specifically designed to extinguish flaming arrows which had been dipped in pitch, lit and fired. A legion of soldiers would march in rank toward the enemy, undaunted by his attacks, with shields raised to form a solid iron canopy.

When Christians advance into enemy-held territory, the devil launches flaming missiles at us because he is threatened. For instance, out of nowhere we suddenly find ourselves thinking strange, lewd thoughts; we begin to hear slanderous accusations against us that have no basis in fact; we are overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy. These flaming arrows are designed to terrorize and paralyze us. The devil launches them at us because he is terrified of the coming confrontation. But our faith demands that we keep advancing, undaunted by intimidation, sheltered from the attack under the shield of faith. This was what the psalmist meant when he said, “For it is You who bless the righteous man, O Lord, You surround him with favor as with a shield” (Psalm 5:12).

It is the enemy who should feel intimidated, not the Christian.

(b) The Helmet of Salvation

The Roman helmet was made of bronze or iron. "An inside lining of felt or sponge made the weight bearable. Nothing short of an ax or hammer could pierce a heavy helmet, and in some cases a hinged visor added frontal protection" (Barth). In Thessalonians, Paul makes reference to putting on "the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the *hope* of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8). The helmet of salvation keeps the mind calm, clear, and free from chaos and confusion by reminding us that the outcome of the battle is assured. God is utterly committed to our salvation. The battle is his; salvation is not up to us.

Second Chronicles records the great story of how King Hezekiah reformed the land and purged the nation of idolatry. But then came a Satanic attack on what he had accomplished in the person of Sennacherib. His Assyrian hordes came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. Sennacherib sent messengers to Jerusalem and blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah responded by putting on his helmet of salvation. He went around the city wall and told his people, "Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria, nor because of all the multitude which is with him; for the one with us is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles." After Hezekiah and Isaiah prayed, the Lord sent an angel who destroyed every mighty warrior in the camp of the king. So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Returning home to his own temple, Sennacherib was assassinated by one of his sons (2 Chron. 32:7-8, 20-22).

Psalms 46 in all probability was inspired by this great victory of the Lord. Inspired in turn by the psalm, Martin Luther wrote the wonderful Reformation hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

So when you are face to face with the enemy, raise your shield of salvation to extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one; and put on the helmet of salvation to keep your mind clear and calm in the face of attack.

There is one thing left.

III. Engaging in Combat: The Sword of the Spirit (6:17b)

...[take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

(a) David's Use of the Sword (1 Samuel 26)

The life of David is a story of spirit and word overcoming flesh. Saul loved to brandish his spear, but David was skilled on the harp. Saul, who towered over David, went around seeking to impale someone, but David sang songs of praise to his God. The sword was no match for word and spirit. Once Saul was encamped with his army of 3,000 choice men, his spear by his side, surrounded by his troops (1 Samuel 26). The Lord caused a deep sleep to fall on Saul's men, and David sneaked down into the camp. Abishai recognized a perfect opportunity for David to rid himself of his pursuer. "Let me kill him with the sword," he pleaded. But David would have none of it. Instead he took Saul's spear and departed to a nearby hill. Then he woke up the entire camp and cried: "Behold the spear!... the LORD delivered you into my hand, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed. Now behold as your life was highly valued in my sight this

day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the Lord, and may He deliver me from all distress." David returned the spear to Saul, refusing to become involved in bloodshed. Instead, he used the sword of the spirit, with continual allusions to Scripture, to convict Saul of his sin.

(b) Jesus' Use of the Sword (Matthew 26:52)

A scene similar to David's encounter with Saul was repeated on the night when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. A horde of soldiers came seeking him, and Peter, like Abishai of old, responded by grabbing a sword and cutting off a man's ear. But Jesus told him: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?" (Matt. 26:52-54).

What is the lesson we must learn from David's and Jesus' use of the sword? It is that the kingdom of God is not advanced by the sword; it is advanced only by Spirit and word. The writer of Hebrews describes the effectiveness of the word in his letter: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and the intentions of the heart" (4:12).

Here is how Martin Luther put it in his hymn:

*The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him.*

Christians are effective only to the degree that the Word is hidden in their hearts. The word is the arsenal that the Spirit uses when we are in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. Philosophy won't work. Anger is ineffective. Authority is useless. It is the word and only the word that will prevail. So learn the word! "But," you say, "there are 66 books in the Bible. I can't learn it all." Then do what Jesus did. Major in Deuteronomy (the law), Psalms (the writings), and Isaiah (the prophetic writings). Those were his favorite books. Then begin with three books from the New Testament: Mark, Acts, and Ephesians. There is an arsenal that the Holy Spirit can use.

And one final word: Use the word gently. Do not shout it. A surgeon does not use his scalpel like a spear, does he? He washes and soothes his patient and gently uses the scalpel to do the work of cleansing and healing. This is how Christians should use the word of God. If we do, his word will penetrate deeply and advance God's kingdom (see 2 Tim. 2:25-26).

So there we have the Christian's armor.

This brings us to a soldier's posture.

IV. A Soldier's Posture: Constantly Alert (6:18-24)

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Not only must a soldier be properly dressed for battle, he must also be alert to his commanding officer at all times in order to survive the battle and defeat the enemy. Likewise, we

must be alert to pray at all times, keeping open the lines of communication with our Commander by praying at all times, with all perseverance.

Why is this?

(a) Constant Danger of Attack

We should pray at all times because, in the words of Peter: “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We must pray at all times because we are in danger at all times.

Before the battle we are tempted to be fearful; we don’t want to fight. We are tempted to make peace or to compromise with the enemy. Then, during the battle, we are tempted to become discouraged and worn down. But we need endurance. Peter failed to pray in the garden, preferring to sleep instead. He fell prey to the devil, and impulsively made use of the wrong sword. Then, during the trial of Jesus, he denied his Lord three times.

And after the battle we are tempted to pride and lust. In his book, *Good-bye Darkness*, a personal memoir of World War II, William Manchester describes an incident when a shell wiped out his entire squadron and barely missed him. He awoke and found himself lying in bed, hallucinating about a prostitute (the “whore of death,” he called her) coming into his room. This, he said, was his moment of maximum temptation. “Desire is the sequel to danger,” he wrote. Even when the battle is over we still need to be on the alert.

There is another reason we need to be ready.

(b) Constant Opportunities for Witness

Keep in mind that the very attack you face is an opportunity for advance! God is always opening doors, utilizing attacks to advance his kingdom. In a way, the book of Acts is a divine comedy against the devil. No matter what he did to persecute the church—martyrdom, hypocrisy, or tribulation—throughout the book we find repeated use of the phrase, “and the church continued to grow.” No matter where you find yourself, or what happens to you, remember this: these are always opportunities to advance the gospel.

So Paul sees himself in prison, a victim of Satan’s attack, and he asks the Ephesians to pray for him that God might use his imprisonment to advance the kingdom. He asks for prayer that he be granted two things. First, boldness. “The word originally denoted the democratic freedom of speech enjoyed by Greek citizens. It then came to mean ‘outspokenness, frankness, plainness of speech, that conceals nothing and passes over nothing,’ together with ‘courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness, especially in the presence of persons of high rank’” (John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 285, quoting Bauer, Arndt, & Gingrich).

Wisdom was the second thing Paul needed in order to present the gospel. Everyone is different, so we need to be original and wise in our approach to them. We must dignify every person with a custom-made presentation of the glorious gospel. John Stott put it this way: “clarity not to muddle it, passion not to compromise it.” We need therefore to pray for freedom: not freedom from confinement, but freedom to witness.

That’s all very fine, someone says, but does God really hear our prayers?

(c) Constant Attentiveness In Heaven

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Reversed Thunder* (Harper & Row, 1988), describes a wonderful scene from the book of Revelation as the prayers of the faithful ascend to heaven:

When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour...While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from the devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman Empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were raged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn’t they have mental breakdowns? Why didn’t they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar with a censer. He mixed the prayers of the Christians with incense (which cleanses them from impurities) and combined them with fire (God’s spirit) from the altar. Then he put it all in the censer and threw it over heaven’s ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were “peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (Rev. 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert’s phrase, as “reversed thunder.” Prayer re-enters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it. (pp. 87-88)

Everything we say, every groan, every murmur, every stammering attempt at prayer: all this is listened to. All heaven quiets down.

In their prison cell in Philippi, Paul and Silas began to sing at midnight. Heaven fell silent, and an earthquake shook the city. The foundations of life fell apart, and the kingdom of the world collapsed in order that the eternal kingdom might be made manifest. The prison walls fell down, and the two men walked out. The Philippian jailer, terror-stricken, was led to Christ by Paul. The man took his captives home, washed and fed them, and he and his whole household were saved.

Does God hear the prayers of the faithful?

On Tuesday night, August 2nd, 1988, the 13 who had gone to Romania were sitting by an Austrian lake, now returned to the West, singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God. We would never forget our new-found Romanian friends. Suddenly the heavens opened and a lightning storm covered the lake. In the storm, we knew that God had heard. We knew, too, that if we endured in faith and prayer, an earthquake would follow. Fifteen months later, the earthquake struck, and a kingdom crumbled. On Christmas Day, Romania’s anti-Christ met the Christ, the Judge of all. The saying is true: “Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord.”

Paul concludes his letter with these words, which will be our benediction today:

But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. And I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts. Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible. (Eph. 6:21-24)

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