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## 1991: Abilene Christian College Bible Lectures - Full Text

ACU Press

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**PRAISING GOD:  
THEMES FROM  
THE PSALMS**



**PRAISING GOD:  
THEMES FROM  
THE PSALMS**

*being the*

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Abilene Christian University  
Annual Bible Lectures

**1991**

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## PREFACE

The Lectures and the featured classes contained in this volume are those which were given at the 73rd Annual Bible Lectureship at Abilene Christian University on the theme: "Praising God: Themes from the Psalms."

Our worship ascends to the Father. We long for words of praise and adoration, but such words do not come readily to our lips. We rarely use such words in everyday communication and we sometimes hear them used glibly by others. But our hesitation and reluctance rob us of an element of worship that is extremely important.

We know that our God deserves our praise. We want our lives to praise Him, but we desperately need to express that praise in public as well as private times of devotion. The focus of this year's lectureship is designed to give us opportunities for praise including opportunities to develop our attitudes and language for more effective worship.

The primary purpose of the Annual Bible Lectureship is to further the cause of Christ in the world. The Lectureship Committee seeks each year to bring outstanding men and women of God to the campus to speak on the most relevant and helpful subjects facing the people of God. It is hoped that these lectures will be helpful not only to those who were able to attend in person, but also through this volume, to thousands of others for years to come.

Carl Brecheen  
Lectureshp Director



# THEME SPEECHES

# HUMBERTO RIVAS

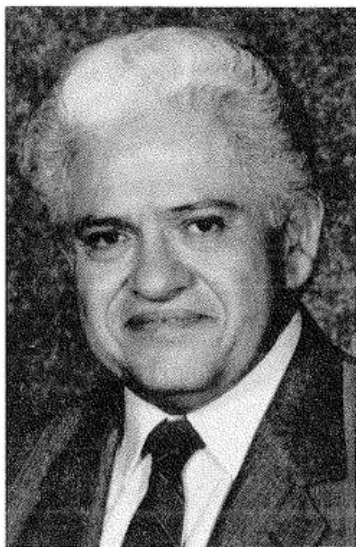
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He is the son of Pedro R. Rivas, who began the first Church of Christ in Mexico in 1932 and started the small preacher training school there that still exists. Now, 500 congregations have been established in the country — many of which were begun by men trained by Pedro Rivas.



# Praise and Thanksgiving

## Psalms 30, 32, and 40

By Humberto Rivas

“Till we all come...unto a perfect man...” Eph. 4:13

One of the most beautiful characteristics of the Christian life is the fact that those who are the children of God can rejoice even in adversity. But the most important reason for us to rejoice is the forgiveness God gives us when we accept our sinfulness and submit ourselves to His will.

David had been through a series of very difficult problems caused by his enemies most of them within himself. He loved the Lord deeply, but his own human passions were an obstacle that did not allow him to be a better servant. Nevertheless, he was forgiven; and in that forgiveness he found many reasons to rejoice.

David wrote Psalm 30 for the dedication of the temple, a temple that the Lord did not allow him to build, a temple he never saw, but that meant much to him. Being so, this psalm is a true summation of David's relationship with God. One of the main discoveries he makes is that “the Lord's anger lasts only a moment,” not so with His favor, because it “lasts a lifetime.” David had to go through the experience of feeling too secure to find out that we cannot take God for granted, that His blessings will be sent only to those that show Him an obedient love. When David is forgiven, praise and thanksgiving become the main themes of his life.

It is not wrong to feel secure, if that security is built on God's love. In fact, the Christian must be a secure person trusting his whole life to the Lord. But the problems start when we try to outsmart Him who made us and begin to think, with Satan, that we can be gods. One way to find out how much we trust in ourselves is to ask us how much of our time and resources we use to buy some kind of security.

But the main message in Psalm 30 is that if you are suffering, God can turn a time of wailing into a time of dancing. In other words, if we surrender our lives to God, we will always have many reasons to rejoice in Him, reasons that we will never be able to purchase in any way.

In opening Psalm 32, David uses some words that remind us of what he says in Psalm 1:1. He had been deceiving himself and, as a natural consequence, he had to go through deep suffering in which he felt as if he were dead. The man who thinks that he is "almost perfect" and "almost all powerful," is prone to deceive himself. That is exactly what had happened to David. Being a king must be very difficult for someone who would also like to be humble at the same time. And humility is the attitude that lets us get closer to God and be forgiven. As long as we live in our sins, the Lord's hand is going to be heavy upon us. We deny ourselves the privilege of having love, joy, and peace in our lives. David had to realize that only through the Grace of God can we be truly happy.

In Psalm 40, David once again tells us that the Lord had lifted him out of a slimy pit. From this trash the Lord takes David to set his feet on a solid rock. The Lord's love for David and for everyone who seeks Him is so great and amazing that He is willing to forgive David's and our sins as soon as we truly repent and confess them to Him, asking His forgiveness. And God's forgiveness is of such a nature that He is ready to lovingly welcome us, in spite of the fact that we don't

deserve it. How astonishing is the Grace of God!

Any human action cannot be a work of merit. And in Psalm 40 we see the shadow of what became obvious in the work of Jesus the Christ: Salvation is a work of God through grace and not a work of merit through sacrifices and offerings. Faith shown through an attitude of believing and submissiveness to the will of God is the only way the power of the Lord is going to lift us out of a slimy pit. Once we have been lifted out, praise and thanksgiving are going to be so spontaneous and deeply meaningful to us that our lives will be filled with love, joy, and peace.

One of the most difficult problems we have to deal with is the sense of guilt that some people cherish so much. We need to understand, with David, that God's forgiveness is perfect and because of it we have been called to lead a holy life in which giving praise to our Lord is an essential part.

# WILLIAM J. LONG

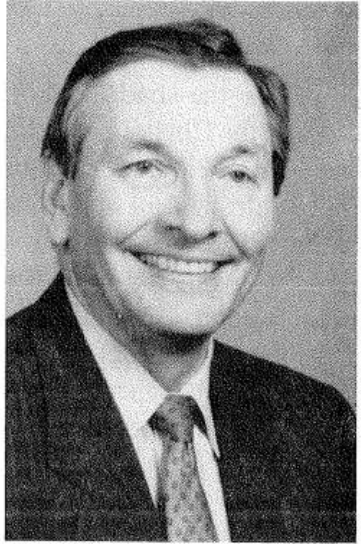
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## Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So

By William J. "Bill" Long

"PRAISING GOD" IS NOT JUST A THEME OF THE PSALMS, BUT OF THE ENTIRE BIBLE. In speaking of man, God through Isaiah said, "...whom I created for my glory." (Isaiah 43:7) Since man was made in the likeness of God, a spiritual creature, he naturally needs relationship with God.

The age-old questions of "Who am I?," "Where am I from?," and "What is my purpose in life?" are answered as we understand that God made man to glorify Him. Both God and man are at their best when man is fulfilling his purpose of praising God. The Psalmist summarized the feeling man has for God when he said, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1)

The ultimate praise of God is for man who understands his own redemption by God to make His name known out of a desire to please God. "Let the redeemed of the Lord, say so." I will develop this theme in the following three sections: (1) God's desire for man, (2) Man's motivation in redemption, and (3) To "say so" is the natural response of redeemed man who wants to praise God.

THE SETTING OF PSALM 107:2 GIVES BACKGROUND TO THE IMPACT OF THE VERSE. Almost coincidentally by its location, Psalm 105 is a record of God's compassion toward Israel from early days to their deliverance from Egypt. It foreshadows the redemption later from

Babylon. Psalm 106 reviews the Israelites' sinful conduct in the wilderness and their fickleness in the promised land, yet it shows that God loved them.

Psalm 107 is an expression of praise to God for His repeated deliverance of the people. Verses 1-3 reflect on the destruction of Jerusalem and the complete captivity of the last of God's people by the Babylonians. God redeemed them from that. Verses 4-9 speak of their redemption from perils of travel in the wilderness and in exile. Verses 10-16 speak of their redemption from the deep dark and gloomy cells of prison where they were in iron chains and enslaved in bitter labor. Verses 17-22 speak of them in sickness to the point of death, but God redeemed them. Verses 23-32 speak of their redemption from perils of the sea. Verses 33-42 review the constant goodness of God to Israel as He has redeemed them from so many of their troubles. In this setting we see the praiseworthiness of God, the joy of man in his redemption, and the purpose of God's being satisfied as redeemed man "says so."

**THE ULTIMATE DESIRE OF GOD IS TO BE PRAISED AND FOR HIS NAME TO BE MADE KNOWN TO ALL THE PEOPLE.** Several years ago, a missionary returned from Japan and said it was no problem to get the Japanese to accept God, but they wanted to accept Him along with all their other gods.

God's demand for exclusivity was made known in the first three of the ten commandments. "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3) He followed by telling them they could have no idols and they were not to take His name in vain. It is important that we catch this emphasis throughout the Old Testament. When God sent Moses to tell the Israelites He was going to deliver them, He emphasized "...then you will know that I am the Lord your God." (Exodus 6:7)

God directed Moses to say to Pharaoh, "...so that you may know there is no one like the Lord our God." (Exodus 8:10) God used the ten plagues "...so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land." (Exodus 8:22) No doubt, God wanted to deliver the Israelites from slavery, but He could have done that with much less fanfare if that were his only purpose. He wanted His own people to know that He was God, but He also wanted the strongest nation in the world to know that He alone was Lord.

Repeatedly, Israel was reminded, "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God ... There is no other." (Deuteronomy 4:39) On the brink of the promised land, Joshua admonished the people to "throw away the idols they had adopted and serve God. He reminded them that they had a choice, but they could not continue to serve the idols of their forefathers and God also.

The battle that took place between Elijah and the prophets of Baal was to show the world that Jehovah is God.

"...If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." (I Kings 18:21) "When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'the Lord, He is God! The Lord — He is God!' " (I Kings 18:39)

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets saw their primary role being to call the people to acknowledge that Jehovah is God.

God has never changed in His desire. When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment of all, he responded: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37) In His requirements of discipleship in Luke 14, Jesus makes it clear that one cannot be a disciple and put family, self, or things ahead of God. HE WANTS TO BE ON AN EXCLUSIVE THRONE IN

## OUR LIVES.

NOT ONLY DOES GOD MAKE IT CLEAR THAT HE ALONE IS TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED AS GOD, BUT HE ALSO WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO MAKE HIS NAME KNOWN TO THE NATIONS. Through Abraham and his descendants God promised to bless all nations. This was not just a Messianic prophecy, but a commission to all men of faith to make God's name known to all nations.

When Israel was in Egyptian bondage and had been absorbed in the idolatry of Egypt, God sent Moses as their deliverer so

“The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord...” (Exodus 7:5) God said to Moses, “But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Exodus 9:16)

God told the Israelites as the last of the plagues were being inflicted upon the Egyptians that they were not only to acknowledge God as God themselves, but they were to teach this to their children as well. The passover memorial was instituted so the people could remember and teach their children to remember that God was the deliverer. He wants His name made known to all.

Through the Psalmist God says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10) Every messenger of God has been commissioned to make God's name known to the nations.

When God sent Jesus into the world, He sent him to reveal Himself to man so that man might know God and be saved. Jesus' summary statement at the end of His ministry was the marching orders for God's people until the end of time.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19)

**GOD’S DESIRE FOR EXCLUSIVITY DEMANDS TOTAL SUBMISSION FROM MAN. THIS MUST BE THE HIGHEST MOTIVE THERE IS FOR MAN TO SERVE GOD.** In Numbers 14, there is a description of God’s feelings when the Israelites turned their backs on Him in the wilderness, but Caleb followed Him “wholeheartedly.” Caleb was rewarded, but the others were rejected by God.

Moses, the faithful servant of God, missed the promised land because on one occasion he failed to “sanctify God” in the eyes of the people. (See Numbers 20.)

When Saul did not heed God’s instructions and presumptuously did the work of a Priest in offering sacrifices, God told him,

“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” (I Samuel 15:22)

God would not occupy second position with Saul.

The psalmist well expressed it, “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere Him.” (Psalm 33:8) He further says, “To do your will, O my God, is my desire; your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:8)

Jesus demonstrated what God wanted while He was on the earth.

“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:4) “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work.” (John 4:34) “For I have come down

from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me.” (John 6:38)

Jesus best depicted the attitude God wants in the garden when He prayed. First, He prayed fervently for God to find another way to accomplish redemption because He did not want to go through the suffering. He immediately made it clear though that His higher value was, “Not my will but thy will be done.” Jesus was not motivated by any selfish or personal motives. He had nothing to gain by going to the cross. His whole desire was to do the will of God.

I recently had a conversation with a former ACU student who is no longer active in the church. While a student there, he was given an assignment in a Bible class to write a paper on “The Assurance of Salvation.” As part of his research, he went to a Catholic Priest and asked him if he was saved. The Priest’s response was, “I don’t know.” The student challenged this uncertainty and the Priest’s response was, “That doesn’t matter. What is important is that I live my life to please God. If that includes being saved, fine.” The student was shocked at the answer, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that is the attitude God wants all men to have.

When Paul prayed to God that he would be willing for his soul to be lost if this would result in the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen (see Romans 9:1-3), he was saying that doing God’s will was more important to him than his own personal salvation.

Can you imagine what would happen in our lives individually and as a church if we had that strong a desire to do the will of God? Just imagine what an enthusiastic assembly we would have. What would happen to our outreach? Our wildest imagination can’t begin to envision what would happen to

the Lord's cause with this kind of spirit.

**BECAUSE WE ARE REDEEMED WE HAVE REASON TO SPEAK.** God's ultimate glory is the redemption of man. He made man for His glory and to praise Him. He wants to be known and worshipped as God. His supreme act of love was the giving of Jesus on the cross. That happened because man had so degraded himself in sin: Redemption not only responded to man's greatest need, but also became the means through which God's greatest desire could be satisfied. Instead of man cursing God and neglecting God, redeemed man will sing His praises.

To appreciate what it means to be one of the redeemed, one needs to realize from what he was redeemed. The Israelites were well aware of the Babylonian captivity, the imprisonments, the illnesses, and the perils of the sea. They should have been full of praise and gratitude for God, but the Psalmist is admonishing them to be more aggressive because they have been redeemed.

We are the redeemed of God today. To appreciate fully what that means, we need to consider from what we have been redeemed.

“Don't you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (I Corinthians 6:9-11)

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness

and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13,14)

Paul further says, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” (Colossians 1:21-23)

It may be almost coincidental that within this one passage Paul reminds them of how bad off they were and how well off they became after they were redeemed and then how responsive they were to that redemption by spreading the gospel all over the world.

We must realize that we are sinners deserving to go to hell and be separated from God eternally. It is only because of Him that we have any hope.

Not only is it motivating to know from what we have been redeemed, but to know to what we have come. Some of the expressions used in the book of Ephesians by Paul impress us with who we are as the redeemed. We are “chosen,” (Ephesians 1:4) “adopted,” (Ephesians 1:5) “redeemed and forgiven,” (Ephesians 1:6) “dead, but made alive.” (Ephesians 2:1-5) Peter says we are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, belonging to God.” (I Peter 2:9) All of these designations give the Christian a sense of security and significance. Too many Christians are not motivated to service because they do not realize who they have been and



who they have become. To be redeemed, forgiven, chosen, adopted, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and saved is to be special. We have something to “shout about.” Unless we feel this deliverance, we will not be motivated to respond to God in praise or to others in evangelism.

Paul saw himself as the chiefest of sinners, yet redeemed. Because he realized where he had been and how hopeless his life was, he could say,

“I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.”  
(Romans 1:14,15)

He was delivered from being a hopeless, misinformed sinner to being a child of God with full assurance of salvation. No wonder he could make it his primary goal to please God even if it meant the loss of his own soul.

Does the church have an identity problem today? I believe it does, but I do not believe it is what many have identified it to be. The identity problem is not a question of correct doctrine. It is not a question of liberals versus the conservatives. It seems to me that the identity problem is that too few see themselves as the redeemed of God with their sole purpose in life that of doing His will and accomplishing His mission. If we do not know who we are, whose we are, or what we are doing, we certainly have an identity problem. The self-serving mentality that has dominated the church in the last decade could never feel the sense of surrender and mission that Jesus felt in the Garden or that Paul felt when he said he could be lost for the sake of his kinsmen if this were God’s desire. We must want to please God more than any other thing in our lives.

AS THE REDEEMED OF THE LORD, WE MUST “SAY

SO.” Some might argue that the context of the Psalms limits “saying so” to expressions of thanksgiving and praise to God, but Delitzsch responds to that in his commentary on Psalm 107:2:

...their thankful confession of the divine loving-kindness and wondrous acts is not to be addressed alone to Jehovah Himself, but also to men, in order that out of what they have experienced, a wholesome fruit may spring forth for the multitude.<sup>1</sup>

God has always wanted His people to testify to the world of His sovereignty and greatness.

“...I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.” (Psalm 73:28) In response to their return from Babylon, Isaiah told them to “...say, the Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob.” (Isaiah 48:20) “I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders.” (Psalm 9:1) “...Proclaim among the nations what he has done.” (Psalm 9:9)

Personal testimony of what God had done was common among His people.

“The Lord is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1) “O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.” (Psalm 30:2) “Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of His works with songs of joy.” (Psalm 107:22)

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<sup>1</sup>See F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Vol. 5, p. 166.)

The timid Christian can find relief in understanding that he does not have to be a Bible scholar to “say so.” In the Simple English translation, Peter says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal group of priests, a holy nation, and a special people. You must tell about the wonderful things that God has done. He called you from darkness into His amazing light.” (I Peter 2:9)

When Jesus had cast a demon out of a man, he wanted to continue to follow closely with Jesus, but Jesus admonished him, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” (Mark 5:19) Not every Christian can teach a Bible class or preach a sermon or even sit down and teach one on one, but everyone who has been redeemed can “say so.”

The strength of the rapid spread of the gospel in the first century was in the personal testimony of all the members rather than in powerful sermons from the evangelists. In a study of the words that depict the communication of the gospel in the book of Acts, the word “preach” is seventh and “teach” is sixth in usage. The word that is used more than all the rest put together is the greek word “laleo” which means to “talk.” The redeemed of the Lord simply “said so.”

If we are to make the impact on the world that the Lord wants us to make, the redeemed must “say so” today. Many among us have lost sight of our purpose (to please God) and our mission (to make disciples of all nations). From time to time, as I have asked, I find that very few can clearly verbalize what the mission of the church is. Many are simply indifferent and dead. They are interested only in holding the necessary services and living upright lives. Others are more aggressive, but their activities are basically self-serving. Their goal is noble, but misleading, as they feel they are constantly

getting in a closer relationship with God and doing good to people. Social programs and fellowship activities are good, but they become bad if they are an end within themselves rather than a means to the end of accomplishing God's mission. Programs and activities can serve the Lord's mission well, if we understand the concept that there are different gifts and different functions but all serving ONE PURPOSE. (See I Corinthians 3:8.) Paul found himself engaged in many activities, but he always knew his mission. He took advantage of any kind of an opportunity to get to "say so." He said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (I Corinthians 9:22) Here, Paul explicitly reveals the heart of the redeemed. How could one be redeemed and not "say so"?

There are yet others who are perhaps a bit more aggressive than either of the two categories already mentioned. They preach "evangelism" and "mission work" and devote a lot of money and time to programs that are designed for that purpose. I often think we are much like the story of the "Gospel Blimp," a modern satire on evangelistic methods. We have all kinds of schemes, promotions, programs, and use of modern technology to the fullest, yet we do not really convert anyone. These promotions and programs often get in the way more than they help. For one thing, they make Christians feel that they are fulfilling their mission by either sending money somewhere or by engaging in some kind of impersonal extravaganza. Any of these programs might help to spread the gospel, but they will not do it without the redeemed of the Lord "saying so."

We were ordained as ambassadors for Christ when we were baptized. (See II Corinthians 5:18-20.) We have no choice about our role. Our only choice is faithfulness or unfaithfulness relative to it. It is as natural for the redeemed

to “say so” as it is for a boiling tea kettle to let off steam. “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20)

Quoting the Psalmist, Paul said, “I believed; therefore I have spoken” (II Corinthians 4:13). In the same context, Paul also said, “For Christ’s love compels us...” (II Corinthians 5:14) Just prior to that he had said, “So we make it our goal to please Him...” (II Corinthians 5:9)

If we see ourselves as the redeemed we will “say so” and nothing can stop us.

I want to challenge the elders and preachers here to refocus their efforts. What is your mission? Are we more concerned about maintaining an orderly church and conducting uplifting services than we are about the Lord’s mission? **WE’RE THE REDEEMED. WE MUST “SAY SO.”** Is your primary focus, “Not my will, but thy will be done”? This makes you forget “our needs being met” and think of “telling others.”

Look at your budgets, your time usage, your activities. Look at the number of visitors you have to any church activity. How many conversions are you having? Do you feel that baptisms do not matter? We must understand that God wants us to make His name known to the nations. We live in a world of lost people. We are the redeemed, and if we don’t “say so,” a lost world will stay lost and God will not be glorified. Do not treat it lightly if you are not converting the lost. If it is not happening, make changes, train, and motivate the people. Do not keep doing the same things you’ve been doing and teaching with the same emphasis you have been giving. Feel your own redemption and help your people to feel theirs and encourage all the redeemed to “say so.”

What happens with the message of this lesson is not

dependent on the nature of the people in your congregation. Each individual needs to so want to do God's will that he will praise God and tell others wherever he goes whether others are doing this or not. "We cannot but speak those things which we have seen and heard."

In my opinion, the spirit I am trying to communicate in this message is the spirit of God, Christ, and the entire Bible. For us to miss the spirit of "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so" is to miss the heartbeat of God and that for which Jesus died. We need to go back to our pulpits, classrooms, neighborhoods, and work places knowing and feeling that we are the redeemed of God, with a burning desire inside to "say so" wherever we go.

If we can instill this spirit of wanting to please God above everything else in our lives and through that desire to tell the world of our redemption and what a great God we serve, the church will have an identity. We will not be an aimless movement that has stalled with all of our energies introspectively looking at ourselves. In spite of many of the differences in our brotherhood, we must all see ourselves as the redeemed of God and "say so" to a lost world. While we try to decide what our identity is and what hermeneutic is most appropriate, there is a lost world going to hell, about whom our God in heaven weeps, because the redeemed of God are not "saying so." We must stop encouraging the "serve me" mentality by catering to it and find those who are committed to a "thy will be done" Christianity, work with them, and encourage the redeemed of the Lord to "say so."

A few years ago I was at Sea World in Orlando, Florida, and a young mother came up to an information booth where I was standing. She frantically reported that her child was lost and she needed help to find him. The lady behind the desk indifferently said, "I'll be with you in a minute." This

repeated itself two or three times. I thought to myself how much we are like the lady behind the desk. She had no doubt heard that plea numbers of times. She was used to it. On the other hand, I thought, how much like the young mother we should be in our feeling about the lost of the world.

### Conclusion

In summary:

1. God desires to be praised, and we were made for that purpose.
2. We are redeemed; therefore, we have something to tell.
3. Therefore, we must “say so” to a lost world.

Let us feel what God felt as He saw His creation on the way to hell. Let us feel the thorns and the pain of calvary as we look at our own lost and undone condition from which we have been redeemed.

Two contrasting stories challenge us. A missionary in a foreign land could not go to a nearby village where they wanted him, so they walked away pointing an accusing finger and said, “We’re going to tell God on you.” The other is the story of a dying lady who called the preacher who converted her to her bedside, thanked him for sharing the gospel, and told him, “I’m going to tell God about you.” Will there be people ahead of us to tell God “on” us or “about” us?

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# **The Death and Rebirth of Praise: A Journey Alongside the Lament Psalms**

**By Andre Resner, Jr.**

## **I. Introduction**

President Teague, ministers of the gospel, elders and deacons of the church, saints of the kingdom and friends of the kingdom: I have some good news for you tonight. I also have some bad news. It has been said that without any bad news we wouldn't know what good news is. Be that as it may, I think most of us would prefer to see if we could recognize good news without bad news. But as it is in this world, we don't have that option. As it stands in this world, we are hedged in all around by bad news: personal safety is threatened daily by violent crime, global safety is threatened daily by deranged political leaders, and the environment groans more than ever for its redemption as we saddle it with more and more garbage and pollutants. Our familial safety is threatened by a rapidly moving culture which makes the world a neighborhood and, in the process, eliminates the possibility for neighbors. And the community of faith suffers because any long-term continuity among leaders, preachers, or resident families has ceased to exist. The church community has become as stable as the corporate make-up of its members.

And it is difficult to stay insulated from the bad news that surrounds us, though we continue to try. Indeed, much, if not most, of our lives seem to be spent doing just that: insulating ourselves from the harshness of the world, escaping

from the seemingly all-pervasive bad news of our times. You know your ways of escape; you don't need me to tell you of them.

But we each of us get caught. Denial can only carry us so far. Life's easy, placid waters do not leave any of us alone for long. "The valley of the shadow of death" does not allow itself to be treated lightly for too long. Small adversities creep up on us; large tragedies hit us like a ton of bricks.

Why do I begin this lecture tonight as I do? Because I have been assigned what is at once the largest number of the Psalms material, yet probably the most neglected and misunderstood: the Lament Psalms, those Psalms that make up about 60 of the total 150. And since lament doesn't spring up in our lives from good news, we are going to have to linger a while in the valley of the shadows; perhaps longer than our comfort levels usually allow.

I invite you to walk with me on a personal journey through the valley of the shadow of death, and observe how this man has come to understand the Biblical laments as strange and surprising gifts of God's grace. It is worth the journey, I believe. Because when we've finished we look back on the long trail and see that some important sights were seen: 1) the God that we braved to question has given us a personal hearing, and 2) our relentless pursuit of our question "Why?" before God has opened up a world of truth and honesty that now allows us to invest again in life, and to live each moment to the full, as God's bold and truthful witnesses.

## **II. A Personal Journey Through the Valley of Death's Shadow**

Give ear to my words, O Lord,  
consider my sighing.

Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,  
for to you I pray (Ps. 5:1-2)

The bad news of death, separation, loss, and grief begins very early in life. It doesn't take long before we begin to experience the death of those we love.

It was the early sixties in Killeen, Texas. A very large crowd had gathered for Claude Kelley's funeral. He had been helping his son, Garland, put in a sidewalk around his house. They had just finished the grueling work, Claude wiped the sweat off his brow and said, "Well, that job's done," when he silently collapsed of a massive heart attack. I was there at the funeral. You see, Claude Kelley the elder, the honest businessman who owned the garage to which just about everybody brought their cars for repair, was my grandfather. We called him "Pa." We knew him as the man who would take us for rides around the family ranch in the back of his green '49 Chevy pickup. But now I sat up front with all the other relatives dressed in the clothes of mourning. We walked up past the casket, and I can still remember as clear as day looking at Pa's face one last time before they closed his casket. As this five year old passed I wanted to say something to him. I felt that he and I were playing a game and no one else knew it. Surely we would let everyone else in on it and Pa would sit up, smile, and we'd surprise them all. But to my mild surprise he didn't. My mother nudged me along since I had stopped to stare and was holding up the orderly procession. I walked on through and sat down.

A bit of time passed after the funeral. I was over at my grandmother's house with my mother. I was going through the side door of the house when I noticed Bubba (that's what we called my grandmother) crying. She was saying to my mother, "People don't even mention his name anymore. They

act as if it's been fifteen years." I heard what was said, but couldn't believe my ears. Had it been fifteen years already? So, with my mother holding her mother and consoling her with assurances that people still did remember Pa, I spoke up. And I remember them both looking at me in silence as I said, "Has it been fifteen years already? No, it couldn't have been. Because I still remember it like it was last week. I remember Pa, Bubba. I'll never forget him."

It was about 10 years later that I stood by Bubba's hospital bed where she was dying of cancer. Again, I thought it was some kind of odd joke between not only my grandmother and me but now God was in on it, too. She was thin and looked like she and the bed had grown to be part of one another. I was horrified. This couldn't be Bubba. This couldn't be the woman who, on Sundays after church, used to chase a chicken out at the ranch and when she'd caught it would ring the thing's neck, throw the body in a basket, and take it home to fry for lunch. This withered, passive old woman laying in the bed before me couldn't be the woman who had stopped the car as we were leaving the ranch one day because she saw a ten-foot rattlesnake heading across the pasture toward the barn. She pulled a loose fence post out of the ground and went over and smashed in the snake's head. And now here she was: wilted, strengthless; I realized that she really was dying.

I would go back to Bubba's house after the hospital visits and shut my bedroom door and collapse on the floor in tears and prayer. I prayed for God to end this joke. To show that faith can overcome cancer. "Show your power, God. Show all these who leave her room and speak in hushed tones in the hallway, saying, 'The sooner she goes the better.' 'It'll be good when she's out of pain.' 'Let's pray it happens quickly.'" I began an assault on heaven from another direction than

theirs. In my mind they had given up. They didn't believe in a God of power. They were letting the enemy win. I resolved that the enemy would not go down without a fight. I wanted God to show these people that He is the God of the living — that He has the power to take someone's body which has degenerated to the point of uselessness and put her up on her feet again. I even made grand promises to be God's child forever if He would only do what I believed He could do.

Unlike Pa's funeral, I don't even remember Bubba's. I think I was too much in shock. Everyone else seemed relieved. They got what they'd hoped and prayed for. I had expected my prayers to do something else. But they hadn't. I remember feeling a profound disappointment with God — a profound disappointment in faith. People thought I was upset about Bubba's death, and I was. But I think this time I was grieving more over God's silence.

My experience in religion to that point had put me at a fork in the road: I could decide either that God was the problem, or that I was. "The prayers of a righteous man availeth much," but my prayers — well, that was another thing. I chose the latter. Rather than indict God, I indicted myself.

But something had happened. I stopped praying with boldness. It seemed to me that God was going to do what God was going to do in spite of my most earnest pleading. So prayer became for me sort of a "revolving door": I would rush through the door, lay out a couple of requests (being careful not to be too demanding), and then utter the magic words of submission, "Thy will be done," and rush out again. After all, God knew what I needed before I asked so why clog up the great switchboard in the sky. Besides, God had a lot of more important calls than mine.

I still went to church and was very involved. Before I was

out of my teen years I was in ministry with youth, then off to Pepperdine as a Bible major and working with campus ministry and area churches. My sense of God's having set me apart for work in His Kingdom was undeniable. After some training for ministry at Pepperdine I took my family — Mary, and our four-week-old boy Andre "Tripp" Resner, III — to the east coast to pursue more training for ministry. It was there that my life was changed forever. After about a year-and-a-half, I found myself one Sunday morning administering CPR to my son as I drove to the emergency room. The doctors the day before, having examined him thoroughly, had sent him home with us saying that they didn't know what he had: "It's a virus of some kind. Let him sleep it off." After putting him to bed December 6, 1986, Tripp never woke again. It was there in the emergency room with my lifeless child being sustained some how by technology, only to languish for a few more agonizing days — it was there, that my life was forever changed.

The "revolving door" prayer life was abandoned. "Though He slay me" I was not going to let this question go unanswered. I had nothing to lose anymore. I had lost it all; I didn't care about the consequences. I was going to allow myself finally to be honest with God. I had no choice. When there is nothing to lose, when one has reached the end of life's tether, honesty is the only place to turn. The political niceties of prayer before a God that we would rather manipulate than relate to are no longer possible when you hold your own son dead in your arms.

Like David with his face on the ground as his child lay on the brink of life and death, like Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be consoled for they were no more, like the Psalmist facing the enemies seeking his demise, my world had shrunk to one question: Why? That is the ques-

tion which, when it ceases to be a theoretical pursuit and becomes an existential dilemma, changes faith's structure or eliminates faith altogether. Helmut Thielicke has said, "This question 'Why?' remains an open one. It remains also an open wound through which faith in the gods threatens to bleed to death."<sup>1</sup>

And so, like Habakkuk before me, I climbed into the watchtower to wait for an answer from the Lord concerning my complaint. The question could no longer be relinquished. Before, I could explain it away because of my own lack of faith, or because those earlier death experiences of my grandparents were now seen as part of the natural order of things. But now with my son dead — the only life that breathed both its first breath and its last breath in my hands — I was inconsolable. Even if my prayers were still ineffective because of my unrighteousness — and I allowed for that very real possibility — I knew in Tripp's case that there had been prayer vigils taking place not just all over the United States, but all over the world for his life to return to him. Surely there must have been one righteous in those crowds. Why, then, did he die?

### III. God's Response: Not an Answer But a Hearing

In the morning, O Lord,  
you hear my voice;  
in the morning I lay my requests before you  
and wait in expectation. (Ps. 5:3)

When lament has been carried out in the biblical fashion, one's soul has been emptied. There is nothing left. All the

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<sup>1</sup>*Living with Death* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983), p. 8.

hidden places have been exposed to the light. True lament is the throwing of oneself, and one's pain, one's broken heart, one's shattered hopes and dreams, one's destroyed expectations, and one's deepest questions before the throne of God. God is not threatened by our questions or our cries. In fact, if we believe these Psalms and take them seriously, He invites His children to lament. And unless we can muster at least as much faith as the saints in whose footsteps we follow, enough faith to cry out to God when life dislocates us, when orientation becomes disorientation, when glassy waters become stormy seas, when wounds become opened and we think our faith will bleed to death, unless we can in such times be honest with God, we will never really be able to be honest with life again. If true praise is to ever return to the life of the sufferer it will be through the stubborn door of lament.

And though the thing we usually desire most in our questioning is an answer, that is not in fact what we usually receive, or probably even need most. You see, lament does not allow prayer to be reduced to the "revolving door" syndrome. With honest speech before God, prayer now becomes a "sit-in." Lament that enters the watchtower, and refuses to come down until a response from the throne is given, is a sign that the believer has taken the relationship with God seriously.

Not an answer. That is not what we need most. Did Job receive an answer in the whirlwind? No. Only a Presence. Did Paul receive an answer for the thorn in his flesh that he begged relief from? No. Only a Grace. Did even Jesus receive an answer from the cross when He assailed heaven with the cry: "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?!" No. Only a blackened sky, rocks splitting, tombs opened, the earth quaking, and a curtain being torn from top to bottom in the place where humans had been separated from God's presence. There in His anguished cry was a Presence that



didn't answer the question with what even He was looking for.

We have cried and the heavens have responded. But just as we observe in the Psalms of Lament, in Job, in Habakkuk, in Jeremiah, and elsewhere, rarely is an answer given to those who question, in the form that the questioner was seeking. A consistent result from the persistent lament is, however, the assurance that **God has heard**. And such an assurance, we see, is transformative in the sufferer's life.

Rarely in the history of the human race has an individual been more closed off from life than Helen Keller was. After a terrible illness at 19 months of age she was left blind and deaf. It took seven years before that scene at the water pump that we are all so familiar with from the movies of her life.

But the movie of Helen's early life gave me an image to understand just what gaining a hearing can do to an individual's world that has completely been shut down, with no seeming relief in sight. Do you remember the scene at the water pump? Just before it we were at dinner in the Keller house. Helen was back home after spending some time locked up alone with Anne in the guesthouse. Anne and Helen had accomplished much in that short time and that night was a celebration with all of Helen's favorite foods. Before they sat down at table, Helen went to each of the dining room doors to make sure that they were unlocked. She then took the key to the doors, went over to her mother, and put it safely in her pocket. She knew with the key there that she was safe from being locked up again by Anne.

Shortly into the meal the test began. Helen pulled her napkin off and dropped it on the floor. Anne put it back. A struggle ensued and Helen threw a glass of water which just happened to hit Anne. Helen burst from the room and ran outside. Anne followed her out with the pitcher in order to draw more water and fill the glass again.

After more struggle, Helen was reluctantly filling the pitcher while Anne signed the letters w, a, t, e, r into her hand while muttering, "It has a name, w, a, t, e, r." All of a sudden Helen dropped the pitcher and thrust her hand willingly, anxiously into Anne's hands so that she would spell there again. The other she thrust under the flowing water. It was the moment of breakthrough. Anne was looking at an expression on Helen's face that she'd never seen before, because Helen was hearing for the first time, and in her spelling the letters back she was being heard. Everything did have a name. Helen frantically raced from object to object wanting it named for her. And gleefully, she now spelled the names back, no longer as a parrot or a pet, but as a person. With one word her world had opened up.

In the commotion Helen's parents came running outside and embraced their daughter. Finding her mother, she had m, o, t, h, e, r spelled into her hand and for the first time her mother had a name. They embraced and rocked until Helen suddenly interrupted the moment, pushed away from her mother and began groping her way across the yard to find Anne Sullivan. Helen wanted to know who this person was who had the persistence and patience to stay with Helen until her world had opened up. Anne Sullivan spelled into Helen's hand "t, e, a, c, h, e, r. I have a name." Helen ran back across the yard to her mother, but wouldn't let her mother embrace her. Instead, she reached into her pocket and took out the key she had put there earlier. She hurried back to Anne while her mother collapsed in tears on the ground. When she came to Anne, Helen put the key firmly into Anne's hand and then hugged her.

The one she'd thought was her tormentor, she now knew as her teacher. The one she'd thought was closing her world down, she now knew as liberator. Anne Sullivan hadn't

allowed her love to capitulate over into mere pity. Her love was of such a nature that it risked being misunderstood in order that this little girl's world could really open up.

The most persistent difficulty that interpreters have in the study of the lament Psalms is "the hinge." The laments typically move from the lament to the confession of trust without a break in between. The perennial question is: how can such a radical move be made? What happens in between these two verses? How is the cleavage bridged? The question is real, no doubt. But it seems to me that the answer can only be arrived at in the watchtower, never in the ivory tower. Scholars have to probe the question because their commentary is incomplete without some answer there. But sufferers who've braved the watchtower know that what happens between lament and confession of trust is not something that can be easily put into words. It is something that can't be explained, it must be experienced. For one who has lived it, no description can give it justice. Almost all our words of genuine encounter with God only reduce that encounter. And that's why I think these Psalms of Lament, once they have turned the corner to the vow of confession, move then very quickly to praise. For doxology and praise is the language we use to address God in times of awe and thankfulness, when human words will not do. And the Holy Spirit intercedes with utterances too deep for words in these times, just as this same Holy Spirit interceded with groans too deep for words in our lament.

"The hinge," as I've called it, is the unutterable moment that we catch a glimpse of in Helen's face at the water pump. One moment angry and dejected, the next filled with wonder, awe, excitement. One moment stands in between the two — a silent moment of awakening and recognition. This awakening I have called a "hearing." I wanted to tell you a personal

story of my own watchtower experience and what happened between the time that I ascended the stairs with my question, and the time that I descended the stairs with God's response, and returned to life. But I discovered that I couldn't describe it. I discovered that I could at best tell a story like that of Helen Keller that images it.

Lament is the new language that the believer must learn in the midst of suffering if his/her world is to ever open up again. It is a new way of talking to God; one that Christians are often discouraged from learning. We aren't comfortable with it. That's usually the case because when we've shrunken our functioning Bible down to the New Testament, or in many cases even smaller (to just John, Acts, and Hebrews!), we shrink our faith's perspective, our understanding of God and ourselves, and our understanding of faith's words. Our vocabulary of faith, of understanding life, or prayer becomes retarded. That would be fine if our world and life's experiences would remain just as small and placid. But our hearts have known pain, death, and deceit. We have known betrayal of friends and family. We have had our lives changed unexpectedly and permanently. And our hearts know the words that necessarily go with such experiences. But we repress them and put them away and pray prayers to God that mean nothing, because they don't have anything to do with our real lives, or our struggles, or our pain. And soon we wonder where God is in our lives and in this world, because we have perpetuated a faith and worship that is so distant from real life that it really has no relevance for us. As Rodney Ashlock commented to me this past summer, and so "we wonder where God is because we don't know how to address Him." Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a book of reflections after his son's death, writes of this new way of talking to God:

Faith endures; but my address to God is uncomfortably, perplexingly, altered. . . . I must explore The Lament as a mode for my address to God. Psalm 42 is a lament in the context of a faith that endures. Lament and trust are in tension, like wood and string on a bow.

‘My tears have been my food day and night,’ says the songwriter. I remember, he says, how it was when joy was still my lot,

‘how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.’

Now its different. I am downcast, disturbed. Yet I find that faith is not dead. So I say to myself, ‘Put your faith in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.’

But then grief returns and again I lament, to God my Rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?’

Again faith replies: ‘Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.’

Back and forth, lament and praise, faith and lament, each fastened to the other. A bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness.

‘As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul pants for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Lament for a Son*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 70-71.

The land of the living, and of praise, is accessed by the sufferer not by mere “answers,” as if suffering, pain, and death were theoretical problems. Rather, the land of the living is accessed by a **hearing** which empowers one to live in the present in spite of the incongruities of loss and grief. God does not merely answer questions; God answers persons. In our questioning we receive not mere answers; we receive a hearing with the Answerer. A hearing, a personal encounter with the Holy, the assurance that the Creator and Sustainer of the universe has heard our cry and knows our pain more than even we do, may not be all that we have sought. We may have sought something logical, or something that would undo the wrong and make things right now. But even though we may not have received all that we wanted, we are assured that we have received what we need most and we are assured that what we have received is enough right now. It is enough. It is enough.

#### **IV. Honesty: To Risk Investment Again and to Live in the Now**

Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;  
their heart is filled with destruction.  
Their throat is an open grave;  
with their tongue they speak deceit.

But let all who take refuge in you be glad;  
let them ever sing for joy.  
Spread your protection over them,  
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.  
For surely, O Lord, you bless the righteous;  
you surround them with our favor  
as with a shield. (Ps. 5:9, 11-12)

But is that all? Do we come out of the watchtower with only a better grasp of things, a sense of Presence, and an assurance of the Relationship? Is life any different now?

I believe that life becomes an almost completely different reality for the person who has braved the watchtower and persisted with his/her question before the Almighty long enough to gain a hearing. The difference is honesty: honesty that is willing to risk investing in life again, and honesty that resolves to live in the now. And an honest people is something our world desperately needs. Listen to the words of H. Richard Niebuhr in an essay entitled, "Faith in Question:"

We see this possibility — that human history will come to its end neither in a brotherhood of man nor in universal death under the blows of natural or man-made catastrophe, but in the gangrenous corruption of a social life in which every promise, contract, treaty and "word of honor" is given and accepted in deception and distrust.<sup>3</sup>

Lament is honesty before God. It is truth in the presence of the Holy One. In the watchtower we learn how to tell the truth; we learn that we can no longer tolerate life with a thin veneer of deception over it. And I don't think that it is any coincidence that truthfulness is the fundamental qualification for a witness (Acts 1:8): "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Witnesses need to learn what honest speech about life is, what it sounds like, and that begins on our knees, and frequently through tears.

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<sup>3</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 1.

We all know that there is something refreshing about speaking to an honest person. You know how it feels. We also know how rare it is, even in the church, even in the Christian school. Talking to an honest person, someone whom you know will tell you the truth, makes one confident of words again, and of relationships. It affirms that relationships can really happen. Relationships without games, without hidden agendas. Even when an honest person tells us true things that we do not like, it is better than lies that we do like. We can live in truthful pain; we cannot live in padded falsehood.

And a life that honestly faces pain and injustice before God is one that leaves the watchtower knowing that life, if it is to be lived at all in this world, is really a series of investments in people and events that put one at further risk of loss, pain, and injustice. To do less than invest, even at great personal risk, is to allow the last enemy to continue to win battles in the present, even though the war may be over.

In his book *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Elie Wiesel writes of a man named Michael who returns to his hometown after WW II. He hadn't been there since he and his family were led away to the concentration camps. He goes to the home of a man that he remembers that day they were led away. The man was only a blank, expressionless face in a window across the courtyard from where the Germans had herded all the Jews together. He saw it all, but he did nothing, not even grimace, or weep. Michael remembers, and goes to the man's house, these many years later. He walks in the door, down a hall and into the living room, and seated in a chair reading a book was the man.

After some discussion, in which the man tries to exonerate himself of any guilt, Michael says,

You think you're living in peace and security, but in



reality you're not living at all. People of your kind scuttle along the margins of existence. Far from men, from their struggles, which you no doubt consider stupid and senseless.. You tell yourself that it's the only way to survive, to keep your head above water. You're afraid of drowning, so you never embark. You huddle on the beach, at the edge of the sea you fear so much, even to its spray. Let the ships sail without you! Whatever their flag — Communist, Nazi, Tartar, what difference does it make? ..... You cling to your own life. It's precious to you. You won't offer it to history or to country or to God. If living in peace means evolving in nothingness, you accept the nothingness. The Jews in the courtyard? Nothing. The shrieks of the women gone mad in the cattle cars? Nothing. The silence of thirsty children? Nothing. All that's a game, you tell yourself. A movie! Fiction: seen and forgotten. I tell you, you're a machine for the fabrication of nothingness.<sup>4</sup>

Elie Wiesel's voice is a difficult one to hear. Just as the tortured story of Helen Keller is. Just as the tormented words of Jeremiah, and Habakkuk, and Rachel are, and maybe especially those voices of our own hearts that yearn for release.

The good news of the gospel is not only that the sting of death has been conquered and we wait expectantly for the return of Christ when that will be fully realized. The good news of the cross also reminds us that while we wait, even

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<sup>4</sup>Wiesel, Elie, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), pp. 161-162.

while we experience the last pangs of death's very real sting in the present, that faith's vocabulary is big enough to accommodate life's incongruities. Faith's vocabulary can, in the midst of the good news of the cross, cry out to God, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" And the disciple of that Lord who uses the lament psalms in his cross experiences is assured, that even as we carry our cross every day, that such Psalms can guide our speech to God when we don't know how else to be both honest with our present pain and faithful to our God.

Because prayer is either the deepest truth of our heart or the deepest lie, prayer reveals whether a person has given up or not in his/her quest for God. And if we have stopped being honest with God, it is a short step toward dishonesty with ourselves, and our family, and our church. Honest prayer, however, does not allow us to deceive ourselves.

Lament deals honestly with life's times of disorientation. In so doing our present, our real present, can be received again in the truth of its pain as a gift to be exhausted. Because honesty now knows that there is a time to be born, and there is a time to die. Honesty admits that there is a time to mourn, and a time to dance. An honest life knows that there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh. And an honest life that truly mourns when it's time to mourn and dances when its time to dance, knows that a wise life — one which affirms that **this** is our Father's world — consists in knowing just what time in life it is and seeks to live each time to the absolute fullest (Ecclesiastes 3:1ff.).

When Thornton Wilder, the great American playwright, began writing his plays in the early part of the 20th century he did so because of his own growing dissatisfaction with the theatre of his day. Searching for a word that would describe what theatre had degenerated into he said: "I found the word

for it: it aimed to be **soothing**. The tragic had no heat; the comic had no bite; the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> Because the theatre had ceased to be a sharpening entity for society and had become something which helped perpetuate the status quo, a rumbling was taking place. Wilder wrote concerning the situation, “The air was loud with questions that must not be asked. These audiences fashioned a theatre which could not disturb them.”<sup>6</sup> Wilder’s solution? “I began writing ... plays that tried to capture .....reality.”<sup>7</sup> Of “Our Town” he writes, “The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us.”<sup>8</sup> And the way that “the passion to know what life means to us” is gained in “Our Town” is, of course, through the eyes of death.

The cold, hard reality of death opens up Emily’s past world. She now sees things that her eyes glossed over before. As you remember, after Emily’s death in giving birth, she is allowed to return to her home 14 years earlier, when she was just 12 years old. She returns this time not as a participant, but as a knowing observer. One who knows because of death. She sees them, but they cannot see her. Peering in the window at her family busying themselves for the morning she says more in wonder than in grief,

“I can’t bear it. They’re so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I’m here. I’m

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<sup>5</sup>*Three Plays by Thornton Wilder: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), p. viii.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. x-xi.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. xi.

grown up. I love you all, everything — I can't look at everything hard enough." Emily's mother says, "Chew that bacon good and slow. It'll keep you warm on a cold day." Emily, with mounting urgency says, "Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it — don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. **Let's look at one another.**" Off stage Emily hears her father calling out: "Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?" Emily then turns to the stage manager: "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another." She breaks down sobbing..... "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back — up the hill — to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. 'Good-by, Good-by world. Good-by Grover's Corners. Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.' She looks toward the stage manager and asks abruptly, through her tears: 'Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute?' The stage manager responds: "No....The saints and poets, maybe — they do some."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The preceding is excerpted from *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

The saints do, because in the death of Jesus, our Lord and our Messiah, we have been given the lens of death with which to see the world, our families, the past, the present, and the future. The church is the only people on earth who really know what to do with death. The church is the only community who can look death straight in the eye, even though the eye may be filled with tears. The church is the only community on earth who does not have to explain death away, or even describe it as less demonic than it is. For we know that death is the last enemy. We know that death and God are not friends, and that in Christ God has dealt, is dealing, and will yet deal decisively with death. And so we wait now, and we groan expectantly for our full redemption and we look death straight in the eye and we do not minimize it in our message. In fact, we maximize it. For every Sunday when we gather and take hold of the mystery of a small piece of bread and a small cup of wine, we extend out to the world in word and deed a claim of death. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). Why didn’t Paul say, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s resurrection until he comes”? Why didn’t he say earlier in the letter, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him raised,” instead of “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2)? Why did Jesus say, “Whoever would follow after me, let that one deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23), rather than “Whoever would follow me, let that one deny himself and take up his resurrection tomb and follow me”? Because it is the lens of death that opens up what life is like in the present. The lens of death puts reality in focus and does not allow us to deceive ourselves about the way things are. The writer

of Ecclesiastes was on the mark when he wrote: “It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). The saints are those who know the truth because they stubbornly refuse to look away from the deterioration and death that is all around us. God refused. Jesus refused. Paul refused. We refuse.

And what we’re then given, in our refusal to look away, is our life now — life lived in the present tense. We can look at one another every minute, because we really see one another in the immediacy — in the twenty-twenty vision — that the lenses of death give the believer. In our society the church and its message must never degenerate into being a soothing panacea for the perpetuation of society’s (or American religion’s) status quo.

The church is the one community on earth that knows what to do with, and how to live in, the present tense. And if we never break through to honesty in our speech with God, if we always short-circuit the necessary question of lament, we will have to substitute the present with the cheap future. And that is where I think so many of us become neurotic. Because if we’re always writing checks for our life based on the next paycheck, we’re going to bounce some big checks along the way. God didn’t make the present merely so we could think about the future.

Praise that is acceptable to God is that which is truthful to real life. God wants praise from His people that has been forged in the fire of real living, praise that truly knows the depths from which it cries out the “Hallelujah!” And often, the “Hallelujah!” is only accessed by the stubborn gates of a former cry to God, namely the cry of “Why?!” What we learn from the Psalms is that the ancient writers of the community of faith’s hymnbook seem to have realized that the

cries of “why” and “how long” had as much validity as the cry of “hallelujah.”<sup>10</sup>

## V. Conclusion

I am convinced that our world needs, as it never has before, an honest people. And we, the church, are called to be that honest people. The world has little need of a people who are not willing to look as seriously at life, and its bad news, as they are. They don't need a people who seem to have no concern about the incongruities of life, politics, the environment, and social issues, much less the personal issues of death and

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<sup>10</sup>I am grateful for Robert Davidson's very stimulating discussion of this in *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM Press, 1983, p. 12). Since my previous lecture on lament [which was published as “Lament: Faith's Response to Loss,” *Restoration Quarterly* 32 (1990): 129-142], in which I discussed the absence of hymnbooks that incorporate the Psalms unedited or unembellished, I have come across what looks to be a very exciting compilation of the Psalms. In the *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988) all 150 Psalms are set to music and arranged together as the first 150 hymns of the songbook. A cursory look has shown that even such laments as Psalm 88, which never exhibits “the hinge” to a vow of praise, is arranged to music without editing or embellishment. The lament remains unrelieved, just as it does in Scripture. Also refreshing is an index that includes these categories: “Afflictions,” “Brevity & Frailty of Life,” “Doubt,” “Enemies & Persecution,” “Laments,” “Pilgrimage & Conflict,” “Poverty,” and “War & Revolution.” Hymns like #576, “A Congregational Lament, are very encouraging additions to the community of faith's worship. All six verses of this hymn begin with the question “Why?” set in contemporary terms, and the last five verses end with the prayer, “We plead: Repair the brokenness we share. Chastise no more lest it destroy your creatures. Hear this lament as intercessory prayer, and speak your powerful word to make us hopeful.”

grief. The world won't listen anymore to a people who seem to have hocked the present, given up on it in pursuit of some heaven which seems far, far away. A hyper-eschatology — one that flees the present in pursuit of the future too quickly— is thin comfort for a world that hurts as much as our world does now. Lament opens our eyes to the Presence of God in this world. The world needs an honest people, ones who will tell the truth.

“Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent.” It could be that we have spent so much time delineating where the Bible does not speak, that we have neglected one very important way in which the Bible does put words in our mouths: through the honest lament to our God in times of suffering.

What is at stake in this loss for the community of faith? Plenty: spiritual health, physical health, emotional and psychological health, relevancy and witness to the world, the holistic message of our gospel — cross and resurrection — the integrity of our worship, and the integrity of our personal lives.

I began tonight's lecture by saying that I had some good news for you. It is a strange good news that I have pointed to, I know. But I wasn't assigned the “Thanksgiving” or “Praise” Psalms. My topic was the Lament. And lament doesn't happen in a person's life because he has happened upon some good news. Lament happens when bad news enters our lives and we're honest enough to admit it before God. I believe, though, that the good news from these Lament Psalms has a lot to do with the mere presence of lament in the Bible. Its very presence in our Scriptures, on our forbearer's lips, sounding out the painful cries of faith in the face of loss — this is good news. For we are affirmed to cry out in our own pain. But even though this first reason is good



news, there is more than a sort of psychological benefit to these Psalms: they are first of all interested in theological ends. We cry, yes, but we cry to One who hears. The second point of good news is the hearing that we receive before the Almighty, a hearing in which we are assured of His care and His future. And a third benefit of these laments has to do with the after-effect of earnest lament, what I have called an honest, truthful life. When we face the truth about life, we can face the truth about ourselves, our families, our church, and our world. Such truthfulness is not only refreshing it is good witness. The death of praise is given the seeds for rebirth in the honest, faithful, and Biblical act of lament to God.

Praise be to the God who encourages our cries, who hears them, and who carries us through them back to life, and back to praise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>For those who would like to explore the Psalms of Lament further in the secondary literature, I suggest the following works: Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* and *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, 1989); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986); Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989); and Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

# EDWIN F. WHITE

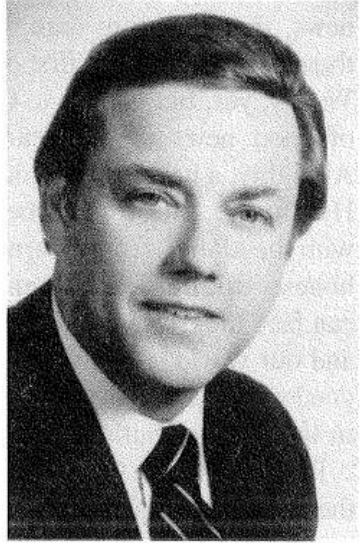
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# **Praise in Repentance**

## **(Psalm 51)**

**By Edwin F. White**

Our story begins in the afternoon. The sun is beginning to give way to shadows. The shadows will soon give way to darkness. It isn't yet dark outside but it is already dark in David's heart. He doesn't have a lot to do. He isn't where he ought to be. Usually kings are with their armies this time of the year, but David has put Joab in charge, and he remains at home, idle in the royal palace.

David goes out on his roof garden. As he walks around on his roof he sees her for the first time. She is nude and bathing. David sees her not just with his eyes but with his intent, with his heart, with his lust, and he quickly sends a messenger to ask who she is and whether she is married. The answers come quickly. Her name is Bathsheba. Her husband is a Hittite. He is with Joab and the armies of Israel. His name is Uriah.

Stirred within himself for her, David sends for Bathsheba and she comes into the palace. It is an astonishing scene. Faintly in the distance there is the music of a harp. There is the smell of sweet flowers and the aroma of perfumed oils. The bed is open and made. David approaches her and begins to talk. David is a poet. The beauty, repetitions, and melody of Hebrew become useful tools as he begins the romance. Like a vulgar dance, David begins to make love to the sound

of the harp, the smell of the flowers, and the pungent aroma of perfumed oils on his body.

David completes the act of adultery. Bathsheba leaves. No one notices. Then comes the bad news: "I'm pregnant." David sends for Uriah to come to Jerusalem under the guise of state business. "After Uriah spends a night at home, David reasons, "he, and everyone else, will believe that Uriah is the baby's father." The plan fails. Uriah is more faithful to Israel than David. He refuses to enjoy his wife and home while Israel's armies remain in the field, poised for battle. David gives a party and gets Uriah drunk. Still he refuses to go home. In desperation, David orders the murder of Uriah. David didn't call it murder. He made it look as if Uriah were just another causality of war, but it was murder.

David's fall is complete. He has committed adultery and covered his transgression with treachery, deceit, and murder. He is fifty years old and should know better, but in one grand fling David seems to throw his life away.

How could David, chosen of God for the integrity of his heart, make such a mistake? This is the David whose name means "beloved." He is the gifted, handsome shepherd boy that the scriptures describe as having bright eyes and auburn hair (1 Samuel 16:12, 18; 17:42). This is the David who had such a wonderful spirit that "Jehovah chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the ewes that have their young he brought him to be the shepherd of Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. So he was their shepherd according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Psalm 78:70-72).

This is David, the immensely popular king who "executed justice and righteousness unto all his people" (2 Samuel 8:15). This is the David of whom the people sang, "Saul hath slain

his thousands, And David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7).

This is David, the son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, the youngest of eight brothers. He is a direct descendant of Judah by Tamar (Ruth 4:18-22). His great-grandmother is Ruth the Moabitess.

This is the gifted and versatile David. He was an astute diplomat, warrior king, and consummate politician; yet he was spiritually sensitive as “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1). David’s genius for music and poetry stood without equal in all Israel’s long history. Other shepherd-boys had harps but David alone could make his instrument work cures of the mind. His beautiful psalms led worshipers to God, and they will continue to live wherever men feel the urge to praise and pray.

This is the incomparable David. No other person in Israel’s history compared to him in the complexity of his elements of passion, tenderness, and generosity. He breathed the desert wind, and his blood ran hot with it. Like the desert wind his emotions were fierce. He worshiped God fiercely, prayed fiercely, sorrowed fiercely, and was fiercely loyal and compassionate. He was a shepherd, musician, poet, priest, prophet, soldier, statesman, king, romantic friend, chivalrous leader, and loving father, all in one. Shakespeare’s depiction of Brutus might well describe David:

His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world, “This was a man.”

Yet David fell completely. No apology can excuse him. Although there were constant reminders of his sin, David remained silent for a whole year. Then came the turning point for David. The prophet Nathan, with an exquisite parable of the “Ewe Lamb,” brings David to himself. David received

with meekness Nathan's indictment, "Thou art the man," and acknowledged freely that he had sinned. No king in history ever made so frank a confession as David did in his prayer:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.

Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar (Psalm 51).

### A Psalm of Praise

For centuries sinful men have come to this beautiful prayer for assurance and consolation. David's prayer fits into every fold of the human heart, instilling the knowledge that God's mercy is measureless and his love unceasing.

The greatest story of Psalm 51 is not David's repentance, but God's acceptance. David went so far from God that one wonders how God could receive him back. David's lust, immorality, and murder reveal human sin in its ugliest forms. Hypocrisy can be added to the list of his sins because David made an effort to appear casual when the news reached him about the death of Uriah. He said to the messenger, "Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another" (2 Samuel 11:25). In effect, David tried to pass off the whole episode of Uriah's death with the flippant comment, "Death is no respecter of persons."

Although David tried to appear casual, his spirit churned in agony. In Psalm 32:3, 4, David reflects on his misery during his period of unforgiven sin: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

David committed unspeakable sins and went so far away from God that only a God of endless love could forgive and receive him again. David knew the seriousness of his transgression. He did not begin his prayer by saying, "My God," for his horrible conduct had alienated God. His first action

was to confess his sins. He used three words to describe the depths of his fall. “Transgression” is from a Hebrew word that means “rebellion.” “Iniquity” means “warped” or “crooked.” “Sin” is “missing the aim or mark.” Thus David confessed that his blunder was a deliberate, twisted, or unnatural sin against God.

Just as David used three words to describe the horror of his conduct, so he used three verbs to state his wish for God to do something for him that he could not do for himself. He prayed: *Blot out, wash me, cleanse me.* This is the language of the launderer. David wanted God to cleanse him so thoroughly that not even a hint of stain might be seen.

David prays not just a prayer for cleansing, but for a new life and a new heart as well. Repairs are out of the question. Sin infects David’s whole being. The Creator must do his work again. David wants salvation, not only from the specific sins of the moment, but from sin itself.

Pathetically David begs God not to banish him from his presence, and for a restoration of joy and gladness. He cries out, “Purge me . . . I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”

### God’s Grace Revealed

What does this all say about God? Each petition of David’s earnest prayer assures us that God hears and answers our cries for forgiveness. Not a single verse of this timeless prayer manifests doubt about God’s willingness to receive the sinner.

God granted David’s request and blotted out the record of his transgression. The Septuagint uses the word *exaleiphein* to translate David’s request that God “blot out” his sinful record. New Testament usage finds the word used twice,



literally, in Revelation 7:17 and 21:4, to describe the wiping away of tears. Revelation 3:5 uses the word to describe the wiping of a name from a roll, and Acts 3:19 uses the word to describe the wiping away of our sins.

In Colossians 2:4, Paul uses the word when he speaks of Jesus “blotting out the handwriting of ordinances which was against us.” A more common word for canceling a debt is *chiazein* (to write a “chi,” one of the letters of the Greek alphabet that appears like the English letter “X”). The “chi,” written across a debt, crossed it out, or canceled it. The problem is that everyone could still read beneath the “X” that crossed out the debt. *Exaleiphein* on the other hand means to wipe it out as with a sponge.

*Exaleiphein* always conveys the meaning of erasing. In New Testament times Paul wrote his letters either on papyrus, a kind of paper made from the pith of the bulrush, or vellum, a material made from animal skins. The ink consisted of soot, mixed with gum and diluted with water. Because such ink lacked an acid base, it could not bite into the material. It would retain its color and last for a long time if allowed to dry, but if wiped (*exaleiphein*) soon after written, it could be removed like water with a sponge.

Psalm 32, written simultaneously with Psalm 51, shows how effectively God erased David’s sinful record:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin  
the LORD does not count against him and in whose  
spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones  
wasted away through my groaning all day long. For  
day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my  
strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah.  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover

up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD” — and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’S unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

David’s enormous sins were no match for God’s overwhelming grace. Not only does God blot out David’s record of wrongs, but he promises David that he will watch over him in his troubles. When the mighty waters rise, they will not touch David. God will be David’s hiding place, and he will protect him, instruct and teach him in the way he should go, and counsel and watch over him.

### **The Old Testament Prodigal**

Scholars sometimes speak of David as the prodigal son of the Old Testament. Like the story of David, the story of the New Testament prodigal also portrays a God with open arms to receive, at any moment, those who seek his forgiveness.

According to the Lord’s story, an old man had two sons. The younger son came to his father one day, asking for his

share of family wealth. The young man then went to a foreign country where he wasted everything in sinful living. Destitute and without friends, the young man took a job feeding hogs, a demeaning job for a young Jew who considered swine ceremonially unclean.

One day, he “came to himself” and decided to return home to his father. He said, “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men” (Luke 15:18-19).

Before the young man got all the way home, when “he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

Have you ever asked how, on the particular day the prodigal returned home, his father happened to see him coming down the road? How long was the prodigal son gone from home? I suspect he had been gone for a long time — long enough, at least, to spend all his money and eventually realize his mistake. How is it, then, that after the passing of months, perhaps years, the father met his son on the road the one day he chose to return? I believe a father’s love watched that road every day, looking — longing — to embrace a wayward son.

Have you ever noticed that the old man is the one who recognized his son at a great distance? Have you also noticed that it is the old man who “ran” to his son? Usually, the eyes of the old are weak and their limbs and lungs are incapable of wind sprints.

When love watches the road along which a prodigal son must return, the slightest movement gets full attention. In Jesus’ story of the prodigal, we learn that God longingly watches for us to make the first move toward him. Grace then puts wings on the Father’s feet as he speeds out to embrace

us, kiss us, and give us his best blessings.

Sadly, there are many who would argue with the God about his decision to be so merciful to the Old Testament prodigal, David. "David made his bed," they would say, "now let him lie in it." God answers, "The Messiah, David's heir to the spiritual kingdom, will say to sinners, 'Your sins are forgiven . . . Get up, take your bed and walk' " (Mark 2:11).

Some would say to God, "David committed worse sins than Saul, and you rejected him as king; you must reject David also." God answers, "I see, not as man sees, for I see the heart, and based on what I see in David's heart, I want him to remain on the throne, and not only will David remain on the throne, but I will keep my covenant with David that one of his descendants will remain forever on the throne of Israel."

Others would complain, "Well, what about Bathsheba? She should be stoned, or at least sent away; David may not keep her as his wife." God answers, "Bathsheba must live, and remain as David's wife. Solomon, their son, will be Israel's next king, and I have other, extensive plans for their marriage; I will sanctify their union with the birth of my Son who also will be the son of David by Bathsheba" (Matthew 1:6).

"You can't do that, Lord. The law is specific. The marriage of David and Bathsheba is unholy; you cannot sanctify their union. The Lord replies, "I may do with my law what I wish. The law is not greater than the lawgiver. Neither was man made for the law, but the law for man, and I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy."

## Conclusion

I frequently see a bumper sticker that gives the following frightful advice: "If you love something, turn it loose; if it

doesn't come back, hunt it down and kill it." Many, I fear, have a view of God as one who wants to "hunt down and kill" sinners who turn away from following him. David's story dispels this distorted view of God. David's rebellion was a deliberate journey away from God; yet God received David the moment he repented and turned back from his transgression.

Have the fertile imaginations of men ever conceived a God half so tender, half so gracious, half so loving as the God of David? Micah answers, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18-19).

Because God's love is unceasing, the sinner may open his heart and soul to God's view, knowing that God will forgive and receive. With confidence the sinner may "turn again to the Lord, lifting up his heart with his hands unto God in the heavens" (Lamentations 3:40, 41).

# KEN NELLER

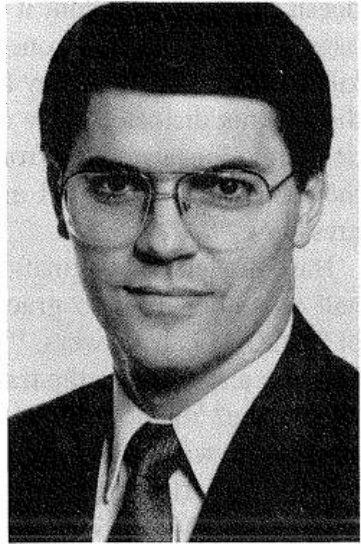
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# Safe in God's Arms: Enjoying Comfort, Closeness, Confidence

## Psalm 16

By Kenneth V. Neller

I was given a black eye by the local high school bully.

My family had just moved to a new home. I was in junior high and, with a new-found friend, I attended the first school football game of the season. Little did we know that the obnoxious fellow standing in his seat, talking in front of us, and repeatedly blocking our view was the local high school bully. Our kind request for him to be seated went unheeded, and when we became more insistent and louder, he became offended. His invitation for us to step outside the stadium in order to settle the matter was politely declined.

Nevertheless, we knew we were in trouble. In an effort to avoid a conflict, we left the game early and waited outside the stadium for my mother to pick us up. He and his buddies found us.

I don't know why he deemed me the more punchable one — I guess I was bigger and would make a better trophy for his tormented ego. Whatever the reason, I became the focus of his attention. He pushed. He insulted. But still I kept my hands in my pockets, refusing to fight. Frustrated and enraged, he slugged me in the face, knocking me to the ground. My face throbbed and I could feel a small piece of tooth in my mouth. I got up, put my hands in my pockets, and refused to fight. He was disappointed. Further taunting proved

useless, so he pronounced himself the victor and, mercifully, left.

Now, I wish I could claim for myself some noble reason for not fighting. I knew that Jesus had talked about turning the other cheek, but the bully also had about eight friends with him and I just knew that even if I did fight it would not likely have been one-on-one. So I was more frightened than faithful.

The ride home in the car was a silent one except for the minimum information about the football game which my mother could pry out of us, most of it provided by my friend. When we dropped him at his house, however, I could control myself no longer. I began to sob uncontrollably. My face hurt, but my wounded pride screamed with pain. I was shamed in front of my friends, in front of strangers, and tomorrow the whole school would know that I was a chicken, a coward, a wimp.

Between sobs I told my mother what happened. When we got home, I fled to my room. She came in and held me in her arms, trying to comfort me. Her softness helped, but somehow I felt she really didn't understand my shame. After a while, she left me to my grief.

Presently my father entered. He took my shuddering soul into his arms and held me tightly. I knew he understood my pain.

"You're going to be all right. This will make you a better man. I'm proud of you, son. I love you."

And I believed him. His tenderness and strength helped to ease my wounds and gave me courage to face the coming days at school with their questions, whispers, and giggles.

Have *you* ever longed for a place of refuge and comfort? Someone to hold you and understand you and comfort you



when you are bruised, cut, and deflated in the struggles of life? To some degree we can find that place in the arms of a person — a spouse, a friend, a parent — but there is no more satisfying and secure place than in the arms of our mighty and merciful God.

But how do we get there? How can we experience the comfort, closeness, and confidence of being safe in God's arms?

Certainly David, the writer of Psalm 16, knew how. The whole psalm is a poem of such conviction and confidence that any reader recognizes that David knew what it was like to be close to his Creator and Lord, for in verse one David prayed: "Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge." So we learn that not only had David taken refuge in the arms of God, but his prayer and expectation in the psalm was that God would *always* be there for him. To enjoy God's protection and comforting presence, David had taken certain steps which, if we follow them, will allow us to find refuge in the very arms of God.

First, we must **recognize our dependence** upon God. Verse two says, "I said to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.' " David declared God to be his Lord, his Owner, his Master. He also acknowledged that apart from God he had nothing good; he was totally dependent upon his Lord's graciousness. In other words, David was saying, "I cannot be happy or whole without you, Lord."

When we approach the Lord, the only acceptable way is with reverence and humility. How could we ever expect to be close to the Creator of the universe and Sustainer of our lives if we do not acknowledge his greatness and grace along with our helplessness and need?

I know some parents who are not close to their son, Jay, although he is a gentle, obedient child. They are not close because when Jay is worrying or suffering for some reason,

he will not let them close to him.

He holds them at a distance, preferring to suffer alone and seeking to deal with the situation himself. Consequently, his parents are never sure of his love, and, apparently, he is not sure of theirs. We cannot maintain an independent and self-sufficient attitude toward our heavenly Father and be close to him. We must recognize our dependence.

Second, we must **declare our allegiance**. Psalm 16:3-4 is a very difficult passage to translate, as a comparison of the various English versions will demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> The NIV has:

As for the saints who are in the land,  
 they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.  
 The sorrows of those will increase who run after  
 other gods.  
 I will not pour out their libations of blood  
 or take up their names on my lips.

Yet your Bible may have a footnote indicating that verse three could be taken negatively, referring to pagan priests or idols instead of to faithful followers of God.

Let it suffice to say that two concepts from verses 3-4 seem possible. The psalmist is saying either "I will not associate

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, in the KJV and NIV the word "saints" (the translation preferred by C. A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907], 1:119) may also be translated "holy ones" — referring to other gods (cf. W.E. Barnes, *The Psalms* [London: Methuen, 1931], 1:67f. and Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I, 1-50*, Anchor Bible 16 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965], pp. 87f.). For other possibilities, see A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:142. Obviously, the translation one chooses for this word radically influences one's understanding of vv. 3-4.

or approve of the actions of backsliders; I will attach myself with God's people" or "I will not try to hold on to God and serve idols at the same time; I will serve God only."<sup>2</sup>

In any event, the point is clear: God is pleased with those who are faithful to him, but displeased with those who "run after other gods." Obviously, those who seek to serve God with a divided heart cannot be close to him.

That is why God told the Israelites that they were to worship *only* him (Deut. 6:13; cf. Mt. 4:10). That is why Jesus told his disciples that they were not able to serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). And that is why people who half-heartedly serve Jesus make him sick to his stomach (Rev. 3:15-16).

Our allegiance, our faithfulness to God, must be clear — in our words, in our actions, in our companions, in our dress. How can we feel close to God and comfortable with him when our heart is divided or when we are trying to hide something from him? Think about the man involved in an affair. Do you think he really feels close and comfortable with his wife? Doesn't he live with continual fear and guilt? And doesn't this fear and guilt affect his relationship with God?

If we want to feel close to God and have confidence as we approach him in prayer and as we stand before him on the judgment day, we must clearly declare to him our allegiance!

Third, in order to be close to God we must **express our thankfulness**. In verses 5-6 David said:

Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;  
 You have made my lot secure.  
 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant  
 places;  
 Surely I have a delightful inheritance.

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<sup>2</sup>For the latter understanding, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), pp. 153ff.

Now, in order to be thankful, we must have a measure of optimism and, to be honest, this is an area which all too often interferes with my closeness to God. For instance, I just hate it when a person comes up to me and says, “Hi, Ken! Tell me something good.” Tell you something *good*?! Here I am trying to help God straighten out the world and you want to know something good? Ask me about a problem and I have a ready answer; ask me about something good, and it may take me a minute to think of something.

Yet, we cannot really be thankful until we count our blessings and we cannot count our blessings unless we have a somewhat positive attitude. In verses 5 and 6 David counted his blessings.

Moreover, he recognized the *source* of his blessings: “Lord, *you* have assigned me my portion and my cup; *you* have made my lot secure,” and in verse 2: “apart from *you* I have no good thing.” So he was not only thankful, but he knew whom to thank. In order to be close to God, thankfulness is so important.

Some time ago, I was caught in one of my fits of Elijah-complex and I was grouching to my wife about the problems in our congregation and the struggles that some of the people were having — how it seemed as if I was the only one who was capable of doing anything about them; how tired I was; and how upset I was that my wife did not seem to share my weighty concerns!

She replied, “Well, I just think that God has blessed our family with good health and a nice home. Our children are doing well, our parents do not have any major health problems, our brothers’ and sisters’ families are all fine. Our congregation is at peace and doing more work for the Lord than we have ever done before. We are loved and we have lots of friends. And I know that things are not always going to be

this way, so I am just trying to be thankful for what we have *now*.”

You know, nothing ruins a good pity-party like someone who is optimistic and thankful. But she was right! And I dare say that she was a lot closer to God at that time than I was. You know why? Because God doesn't come to pity-parties! So, if we want to be close to God, we must recognize God as the Giver of all our blessings, express our thankfulness, and snuggle into his generous arms.

Similarly, we must **develop our awareness** of his presence. If we want to be close to God, we need to realize that he is close to us. As David said (verses 7-8):

I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;  
Even at night my heart instructs me.  
I have set the Lord always before me.  
Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

In this beautiful description of spiritual intimacy, we see God guiding David's life and David listening to God's counsel and seeking to keep God near him. The same closeness can be ours if we develop our awareness.

God is near to us, and he will teach us and guide us, *if we will listen*. As he did for David, God gives us counsel and advice through his word and through his Spirit working in our hearts and consciences. So the question is not “Will God be near to help us?” The question is “Will we listen?”

In college, I struggled with the sin of lust. I knew it was wrong, but I remember distinctly not wanting to listen to God about it. I rationalized. I covered up. I made excuses. Do you think I could still feel close and confident before God? Of course, I couldn't!

Yet so many times we do the same thing when we are considering whom to marry, whether to take that job offer, when

we are involved in certain business practices, certain recreational activities, certain dating behavior. We just don't really want to hear from God. We *avoid* his counsel and his presence. In so doing, we push him away and intimacy is lost. So, if you ever catch yourself avoiding God, look out: You are almost certainly sinning and running from the security of God's arms.

On the other hand, note that spiritual intimacy with God does not just happen — it must be *developed*. It was not only at night when David received instruction and guidance from the Lord; he “set the Lord always” before him. Awareness of God's presence comes through study, reflection, and prayer with a receptive and sensitive heart. Then, over a period of time, we will become increasingly aware of God's closeness, and confident of his favor and help. We will have the comfort of knowing that, no matter what struggles we face, we “will not be shaken.”

When we have recognized our dependence, declared our allegiance, expressed our thankfulness, and developed our awareness, we can then **enjoy the confidence** of being safe in God's arms. It is apparent from verses 9-11 that David certainly did:

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;  
my body will also rest secure,  
because you will not abandon me to the grave,  
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.  
You have made known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

The first word in these verses is crucial: “therefore.” It tells us that confidence before God is no accident. Like a theorem in mathematics, it would seem to indicate that if

certain steps are followed, the “therefore” can be reasonably expected. The closeness and comfort of God’s arms, then, is the result of prerequisites, of commitment to the Lord and diligence in the pursuit of this spiritual goal. We should not think that lasting closeness with God would come after a single “mountain top” experience or warm “holy glow” we might feel.

Nor should we conclude that the safety of God’s arms is a gift available to only a fortunate few — the “super spiritual.” We are made particularly aware through Jesus that God’s arms are extended and open to all. Because God has made the first move toward intimacy, and because he shows no favoritism, *anyone* who truly desires to be close to God and confident before him can be. We must simply heed what precedes the “therefore”: we must be aware of our need for God, trust him, be thankful to him, diligently seek to know his will, and draw near to him. It is a relatively simple formula and certainly not a secret one. And, when we follow it, we will experience the kind of confidence that David enjoyed.

What wonderful confidence God gives! David spoke of the deep joy he felt because he knew his relationship with God was secure and that God would never abandon him — in this life or even in death. David knew with assurance the “path of life.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>This concept may be analagous to the New Testament idea of “eternal life” — an enhanced quality of life while here on earth which will be fully realized in the next age. This understanding, however, is not certain and has been actively discussed in recent literature. In addition to the commentaries, see Werner Quintens, “Le chemin de la vie dans le Psaume XVI,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 55 (1979): 233-42, and Klaus Seybold, “Der Weg des Lebens,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 40 (1984): 121-29, for further discussion and bibliographical information.

Whether David is speaking in v. 10 of the hope of the resurrection of the dead is an interesting question. Probably he is not. Resurrection was a hope which Jews centuries after David expressed only with reservation. You may recall that even during Jesus' day the issue of resurrection was a topic of debate among the Pharisees and Saducees.

Instead, David was probably thinking of God's presence with him in Sheol, the realm of the dead.<sup>4</sup> The concept of God being with the faithful dead in Sheol is not extraordinary. For instance, in Psalm 139:7-8 we read, "Where can I flee from your presence? . . . If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Thus David was so confident in his relationship with God and so confident of God's protecting arms that he knew that even after he died, God would be there with him and take care of him. Nothing could separate him from God's loving arms.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, that for which David hoped imperfectly *is* realized in the resurrection of the dead of which Jesus is the firstfruit, the beginning. The end of this psalm is quoted as being prophetic of Jesus' resurrection by Peter in Acts 2:25-32 and by Paul in Acts 13:35. It is so fitting that these words should be applied to Jesus, for who was and is more safe in God's arms? (As a matter of fact, it is an enlightening exer-

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, The Cambridge Bible (Cambridge: University Press, 1902), pp. 72-73, 77-78; and Briggs, 1:121f. This point may be disputed, but too much attention should not be expended on trying to determine *how* David believed God would be with him in death. The important point is *that* David believed that God would always be with him — even in death. See the very prudent comments of Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 176-78.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Rom. 8:35-39.



cise to read this whole psalm through the eyes of Jesus.) So if David could feel safe in God's arms, how much more can we who hope in Jesus! Spiritual security in this life and in the next can be ours, if we really want it.

I have always admired and been envious of anyone who could play a musical instrument, especially the piano. For a long time I have wanted to play the piano. But there is a big difference between wanting to play and *wanting* to play. For if I really *wanted* to play the piano, I could. There is nothing to prevent me from playing — I could take lessons and practice. Although I may not have the innate ability to excel at playing the piano, I am sure I could play some songs adequately if I made it a priority in my life. It is just a matter of really *wanting* to play.

Closeness with God is like that. Many of us admire and are envious of others (like David) who seem so sure of their relationship with God, so secure and safe in his arms. "Wow," we say, "I wish I could have that kind of relationship with God. That would be so wonderful." Be assured that your heavenly Father wants that kind of relationship with *you*. It is simply a matter of our *wanting* to be close to him.

To be close to God, we have to hunger and thirst for his presence in our lives. We have to make our relationship with him our top priority. In Psalm 16, David shows us how to draw close to God. If we recognize our dependence on him, clearly declare our allegiance to him, express our thankfulness to him, and develop our awareness of his presence in our lives, then we can enjoy the closeness and confidence with him that we have always admired and *know* that we are safe in God's arms.

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## God Is Great — What Am I?

By David Jackson

Fred Craddock describes the act of preaching as orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. The same triad may be used to describe the message of the Bible. God makes us aware of his ideals, “orienting” us to who and what we are in his plans. We are “disoriented” as we become aware of how far short of this ideal we come on a daily basis. And we are “reoriented” by the power of the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

The book of Psalms carries out all three of these themes in powerful words and, often, even more-powerful emotions. The prayers of God’s faithful people before Jesus came from Nazareth serve even now to carry us into the presence of our Creator and Father. The present focus is on the voice of praise in the Psalms, and especially that praise resulting from the contemplation of the created world around us.

The Psalms elicit praise from all of creation. Every part of our world gives the Creator his due. But, as James B. Torrance points out, there is a significant difference in human praise from all the rest: only humans, of all God’s creation, can *know* that we are his, and can purposefully and consciously direct our thoughts heavenward!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship,” in Ray S. Anderson, ed., *Theological Foundations for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 348.

## The Heavens Declare His Glory

In Psalm 19 the psalmist speaks of a language of praise to God unlimited by cultural or human language barriers. It is an “Esperanto” of Creator to creature revelation. Heaven, earth, and sea, remarked C. H. Spurgeon, are three pages in the book of nature, and they all point us to God.

Psalm 29 gives expression to the awe we feel as we recognize the tremendous powers which our God possesses. Even the angels are moved to worship this great God whose powerful voice shakes the earth. After all, he merely spoke, “Let there be. . . ,” and whatever he imagined came to be.

Such a realization helps to shape our worship. Do we come merely for what we can get out of it? Do we shop around, cafeteria-style, until our personal wants are satisfied? Or do we offer worship purely and simply “because he is worthy?”<sup>2</sup>

The treatment of creation in Psalm 104 is from the poet’s eye-view. It covers the same ground as Genesis 1. It is possible to follow the six days of creation throughout the psalm, but the approach is different. More clearly does the reader perceive God as monarch of all creation, and self as his humble servant. Neil Postman has well observed that modern society is awed by very little, due to the influence of television. God recedes in importance, while newscasters and televangelists take on larger-than-life importance.<sup>3</sup> This psalm helps to correct that mistake. We are enabled to acknowledge that God is infinite, sovereign, ultimately holy, and continues

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<sup>2</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 123.

to work in ways beyond our comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

A comprehensive view comes from Psalm 148, in which all the orders in creation from high and low standing are called to praise God. If there occurs an initial tendency to share with C. S. Lewis an aversion to all this invitation to praise of the Father;<sup>5</sup> this psalm provides two comprehensive reasons for that praise. The first is that he alone is the Creator of all. The second is that he comes to the aid of his people. Realizing that, how can we but praise him? What can we do, if, as Brueggeman observes, finding ourselves in God's presence, we must speak, but we realize God needs nothing we can offer? The only thing appropriate is praise and celebration.<sup>6</sup>

### The Majesty of God

Psalm 8 begins as orienting language. As with the other Psalms, it is directed toward God on behalf of faithful people. It is reminding us of who we are, what we are about, and what our relationship to God is. It helps us keep our compass pointed in the right direction.

Eugene Peterson, in *Answering God*, talks about the great contrast between people who are trying to be God's people versus the lifestyle that is mostly common in the society where we live. He points out that this culture usually runs on raw power and intimidation. Instead, the language of Psalms helps

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<sup>4</sup>See C. Leonard Allen, Richard T. Hughes, and Michael R. Weed, *The Worldly Church* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), pp. 90-91.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Brueggeman, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 2.

to train us to enter God's realm, a place of wonder, mystery, and God's presence.<sup>7</sup>

Psalms 8 helps us to deal firsthand with wonder and with God and with mystery. It begins by calling us to the Lord's praise: "Majestic is your name in all the earth." In all the earth God's name is to be glorified. That is, everywhere you go there is some sign of God having been at work. In fact, there is really no other adequate explanation for how this particular world should exist out of all possible worlds, why this world should be ordered as it is, why life should be as it is other than the intervention of God himself.

God's creative power is so great that when any opposition is faced, when there are any enemies, any challenges to the status of God in the world, God is ready. He is so secure, so truly unchallenged in his power and position, that he can trust his defense to children and infants. "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. All that infants can do is cry. Yet they are God's defense. Children say the most simple things and yet they view the world with wonder, with awe. And in those simple things sometimes there are the most profound truths; and sometimes the most embarrassing.

Recently my wife had outpatient surgery. Jill, our 4-year-old, and I were in the waiting room early in the morning. It was as quiet as could be and Jill was in the middle of the floor drawing. Suddenly she stopped and loudly asked, "Daddy, how do you make love?" The question echoed off the walls. You would have thought E. F. Hutton had just been

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<sup>7</sup>Eugene Peterson, *Answering God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 23.

asked for investment advice as all activity froze to await the answer. I tried desperately to decide where that question came from. What was in her mind? Fortunately I didn't say anything until she said, "Is it l-o-. . ." I said with great relief, "Yes, that's right, v-e. Love, l-o-v-e."

### **The Majesty Above**

Children and infants declare the praise of God. But that leads on to something else. The psalmist knows as we do that everywhere we are impressed by the majesty above us.

For instance there are an estimated 100 billion galaxies, each with an average of 100 billion stars. The closest galaxy to our Milky Way is 2 million light years of empty space away. (A light year is the distance that light can travel in one year's time traveling at 186,000 miles per second, or about 6 trillion miles.) Traveling at reasonable rocket speed, 19,000 miles per hour, it would take us 144,000 years to get to the nearest star. You begin to be impressed with the bigness of space.

Our sun is just a medium-sized star, not especially impressive when you compare it with all the possibilities in the universe. It is 93 million miles from the earth. It's core temperature is 10 million degrees Kelvin. In the solar system, Jupiter, the largest planet, is 1,400 times as large as Earth; Pluto, at the outer edge, is 1/70th the size of Earth. No wonder that Immanuel Kant (German philosopher of the 18th century who worked to show that you cannot prove the existence of God) said he could not discount the existence of God because of two things: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. The starry heavens above point to the majesty of the creator's mighty hand.

## I Feel So Small

But if the universe is that big, then how very small we are! “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” The choice of words is telling — “mindful” and “care.” The two words are most common in the Psalms of lament. When we are at our very weakest, when we cannot stand proudly and show our accomplishments, when we need the most, then he is mindful and he cares. But, why? What rationale is there if the universe is so grand and we are small? Here is disorientation at work.

The psalmist gives his own answer. “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings,” the NIV says. King James says, “angels.” The American Standard and Revised Standard say, “You made him a little less than God,” and that is probably the preferred translation.

God cares for us, he is mindful of us because we are made with the image of God. This is a reflection back to the original account of creation, Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; 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.



We lack but little of God. The Psalmist continues,

You crowned him with glory and honor. You made him rule over the works of your hands. You put everything under his feet, all flocks and herds, the beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, all that swim in the paths of the sea.

That is why God cares, that is why he is mindful of human beings. He has invested in us something that exists nowhere else in creation — the image of God. There is no other creature in heaven or on earth that reflects God's nature back to God. Nowhere can you learn more clearly the inherent dignity in each individual human being than here.

You get a very different view if you take God out of the picture. We live in an age in which people are reluctant to affirm the existence of God. If you eliminate God then there are no inherent qualities in human beings that set us apart from anything else. Then, we are indeed insignificant in the total picture.

So this psalm carries with it a very important point for us to understand. It is exclusively human beings that are crowned with glory and honor, male and female, to share the image of God, to share his glory, to share that honor to rule over the rest of creation. The psalm does not lead us to praise nature just for nature's sake, nor to glory in our position in the world, but because to do so reflects God's glory.

### **An Unfinished Story**

Before we conclude with the psalmist's last verse, which reaffirms the majesty of the name of God, there has to be a footnote. The truth of this psalm is incomplete as it stands,

just as the Old Testament is incomplete. Something else must be said.

What do you experience in the life that you live? Is there any element which demonstrates that this lofty description of human dignity is lacking something? The psalm says we are intended to be ruler over the works of God's hands: "You put everything under his feet." Are we in control of creation? Can you say that you are in control of your own life? Rather, the record shows that human pride and self-will carries within it seeds of its own failure and self-destruction.

We are currently faced with problems of destroying our environment. The possibility of the extinction of species of both plants and animals is a continual reminder that we have not controlled ourselves in any sense of the word in the right way. We are aware of the destruction of relationships with those who are closest to us. Almost one out of two marriages ends in divorce. The problem of child and spouse abuse is growing. The inhumanity of people to other people makes us shudder, as drugs destroy lives, and wars continually rage in parts of the world.

Even our good deeds are frequently tinged with self importance, with being sure that we receive the pat on the back. The truth is that God made human beings as the crown of creation to rule over everything, and we've blown it. It must be a great disappointment to our Creator. Did you ever spend hours working on a school project or something for leisure time and it didn't turn out the way you had hoped? We experience great disappointment when that happens. How much more so it must be for God.

This psalm must be completed by the second chapter of Hebrews where part of it is quoted. The Hebrew writer recognized that things are not as they ought to be. He says, "In putting everything under him, (that is human beings) God

left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.” It is our present problem. It is life that falls short of the glory of God. It is the source of our anxieties and our frustrations, our disappointments with self, the disappointments of others in us, and surely it must be the root of God’s disappointment with us.

Is the conclusion of the story that God’s wonderful experiment is a total failure? It would be, except for God. The Hebrew writer provides the solution: “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9).

Jesus became one of us to shoulder the role that we dropped in the mud and then stomped on for good measure. Jesus descended, taking on the form of a human being, the role of a servant, and suffered the humiliating death on the cross in order that what God intended for us to become might finally be fulfilled. By his union with our life we can experience the glory and honor with which we should be crowned because we carry the image of God. That image is still there; it is just harder to see now. But Jesus rescued that image in us as he took our place.

Here is where we truly find the grace of God. Only He could bring to its intended completion his creation of human beings as the crown of all creation. We can then experience victory and receive the crown of glory through our union with the perfect man, Jesus Christ.

Now, we are ready to chorus the conclusion of Psalm 8. “O, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” What we were intended to be we can become through union with Christ, because he has accomplished it already. It helps us to understand how vital is our union with Christ. Without him life is utterly hopeless. But with him life becomes

all that it was meant to be when God the creator first dreamed of his human creation. It makes all the difference.

### **Did We Win?**

In earlier days I worked during the summer at a day camp for boys. It was often my lot to work with the “Pee-Wees” — five- and six-year olds. We would play kickball or softball for an entire hour in the hot sun. The problem with the “Pee-Wees” was that they hadn’t quite found the competitive edge, that total concentration that is the secret to great sporting events. Many of them didn’t even know the basic rules. They would as likely run to third base when they hit the ball as to first. Mostly they had rather chase butterflies or play in the dirt than to play kickball for a solid hour.

But invariably, when the period was over, every player had one question. “Did we win, coach? Did we win?” And since they had no idea what the score was you could tell them anything you wanted. If the answer was, “Yes, you won,” then they were happy for the rest of the day, regardless of their individual performance. If the answer was, “No, you didn’t win,” then they were equally dejected. So I learned quickly to answer, “It was a tie!”

That comes back to me as a parable for life. When all is said and done, the question most important to us will be, “Did we win?” If we have made the mistake of defining winning as, “Grab all the gusto you can,” then we will be much more disappointed than the Pee-Wees on the short end of a kickball score. But if we will allow ourselves to be oriented toward praise of our Maker by the powerful prayer-language of the Psalms, and ultimately by union by faith with his Son, then

we too will hear, “Yes, you won!” Then we will join the chorus of angels and saints of all ages in singing, “O, Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!”

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# The God We Praise

By John T. Willis

The scriptures repeatedly summon all creation, including men and women, to praise God. This summons in Hebrew is very familiar because we have anglicized it: “Hallelu jah,” that is, “Praise the Lord.” Human beings can never praise God adequately. The psalmist recognizes this when he poses the question:

Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or show forth all his *praise*? (Psalm 106:2).

The obvious answer is: “No one!” Yet he summons us to praise him. The Bible reveals several aspects of God’s nature which elicit human praise. Let us reflect on six of these.

## 1. The God We Praise Is Incomprehensible.

It is impossible for God to explain himself to human beings completely, because they do not have adequate sensory or intellectual capabilities to fathom him. There are ways in which he is like a caring father (Jeremiah 31:20), or an unselfish husband (Hosea 2:2-17), or a fountain of running water (Jeremiah 2:13) or a roaring lion (Amos 1:2; 3:7-8) or a compassionate mother (Isaiah 49:15; 66:13), or a triumphant “man of war” (Exodus 15:3; Isaiah 42:13). But the biblical similes and metaphors for God reveal mere snippets of his full character. They are but tips of the unsearchable iceberg

that remain forever hidden to human vision.

In reality, God is unique; he is incomparable. One psalmist writes:

Let the heavens *praise* thy wonders, O Lord,  
 thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!  
*For who* in the skies *can be compared to* the Lord?  
 Who among the heavenly beings *is like* the Lord?

(Psalm 89:5-8)

(See also Isaiah 40:18, 25; 46:5). But if God is “incomparable,” it is impossible for human beings to *comprehend* him. Paul says:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge  
 of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and how  
*inscrutable* his ways!

“*For who has known* the mind of the Lord,  
 or who has been his counselor?” (Romans 11:33-34).

If men and women could comprehend or understand God fully, he would not be the proper object of praise. Our God is without equal, incomparable, incomprehensible; *that is why we praise him*.

## 2. The God We Praise Is Unrestrained.

As creator and sustainer of the universe, the God we praise acts without restrictions of any kind. He does not have to justify anything he does. He is not bound by his own law, by human law, or by any human notion of how he should act. When Job accused God of not acting like God should act (Job 16:7-17), and boasted that he could prove that God had made him suffer without just cause if he were given a fair chance



to defend himself against God in a lawsuit (Job 23:3-7), God's reply was:

Gird up your loins like a man;  
 I will question you, and you declare to me.  
 Will you even put me in the wrong?  
 Will you condemn me that you may be justified?  
 (Job 40:7-8)

We live in God's universe. God is a person, not a machine or a robot. Men and women are in no position to say how God will or should act in any given situation. He never responds in exactly the same way to circumstances, no matter how similar they are, but does what he pleases in each state of affairs. One psalmist calls:

*Praise the Lord.*  
*Praise the name of the Lord,*  
*give praise, O servants of the Lord. . . .*  
 For I know that the Lord is great,  
 and that our Lord is above all gods.  
*Whatever the Lord pleases he does,*  
 in heaven and on earth,  
 in the seas and all deeps.

(Psa. 135:1, 5-6)

One thing which distinguishes the true God from all other gods is that he does whatever he pleases. Another psalmist asks:

Why should the nations say,  
 "Where is their God?"  
 Our God is in the heavens;  
*He does whatever he pleases.*  
 Their idols are silver and gold,

the work of men's hands.  
 They have mouths, but do not speak;  
 eyes, but do not see.  
 They have ears, but do not hear;  
 noses, but do not smell.  
 They have hands, but do not feel;  
 feet, but do not walk;  
 and they do not make a sound in their throat. . . .  
 But we will bless the Lord  
 from this time forth and for evermore.  
*Praise the Lord!* (Psalm 115:2-7, 18).

After the Lord had humbled Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, by driving him from among men, making him dwell among the beasts of the field, and causing him to eat grass like an ox, and then had restored his reason to him, Nebuchadnezzar "*blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him,*" saying:

His dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
 and his kingdom endures from generation to  
 generation;  
 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as  
 nothing;  
 and *he does according to his will* in the host of  
 heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
 and *none can stay his hand*  
*or say to him, "What doest thou?"*

(Daniel 4:34-35)

Our God has a mind of his own. He is not bound or restricted by any law or rule, divine or human, or by human ideas as to how he should be. Our God is unrestrained; *that is why we praise him.*

### 3. The God We Praise Is Wounded by Human Sin.

God pours out his heart into his creation, especially into the lives of human beings. Although he is totally different from all that he has made, he is deeply concerned with the welfare of every creature. He demonstrates this by giving his creatures far more abundantly than all that they need or deserve. And he does this because he loves them. Thus, when they receive his gifts and blessings, then pervert them by using them in ways God did not intend, or to worship other gods, or to achieve self-centered ambitions, they wound God.

When men and women wound God, he reacts in two ways: he is angry with those who offend him by abusing his gifts and punishes them; then he is compassionate and forgiving, and delivers them from their distress. Psalm 106 presents a very balanced picture of these two divine reactions to human ingratitude by summarizing some of the major events in Israel's history from the exodus from Egypt to the return from Babylonian captivity. For example, the psalmist recalls that when God gave the Israelites the promised land, they did not utterly destroy its inhabitants as God commanded, but worshiped their gods. Consequently, God's anger was kindled against them, and he gave them into the hands of their enemies to carry them away into exile. But as he watched their captors oppressing them, he had compassion on them and delivered them from their foes. The psalmist says that when they conquered the promised land:

They did not destroy the peoples,  
as the Lord commanded them,  
but they mingled with the nations  
and learned to do as they did.  
They served their idols,  
which became a snare to them. . . .

Thus they became unclean by their acts,  
 and played the harlot in their doings.  
 Then *the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people,*  
 and he abhorred his heritage;  
 he gave them into the hand of the nations,  
 so that those who hated them ruled over them.  
 Their enemies oppressed them,  
 and they were brought into subjection under their  
 power.  
 Many times he delivered them,  
 but they were rebellious in their purposes,  
 and were brought low through their iniquity.  
*Nevertheless he regarded their distress,*  
 when he heard their cry.  
 He remembered for their sake his covenant,  
 and relented *according to the abundance of his*  
*steadfast love.*  
 He caused them to be pitied  
 by all those who held them captive.  
 Save us, O Lord our God,  
 and gather us from among the nations,  
 that we may give thanks to thy holy name  
 and *glory in thy praise.*

(Verses 34-36, 39-47)

This delicate balance between God's anger and compassion, which emanates from his heart wounded by human ungratefulness, evokes the praise with which this powerful psalm begins:

*Praise the Lord!*

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
 for his steadfast love endures for ever!

Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,  
or show forth all *his praise*?

(verses 1-2)

Using the figure of a loving husband and his self-seeking wife, Hosea vividly portrays the wrenching struggle which takes place in God's heart when he showers his people with countless gifts, only to watch them use his gifts to play the harlot with the Canaanite god Baal. First, in the anger of his wounded love, the husband gives his wife a divorce (God sends Israel into Assyrian captivity) because she gives her lovers (the Canaanite Baals) credit for her gifts. He makes it impossible for her to find her lovers, and takes back all his gifts. God says:

Plead with your mother, plead —

for she is not my wife,

and I am not her husband — . . .

Upon her children also I will have no pity, . . .

For their mother has played the harlot; . . .

For she said, "I will go after my lovers,

who give me my bread and my water,

my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink." . . .

She shall pursue her lovers,

but not overtake them;

and she shall seek them,

but shall not find them. . . .

And she did not know

that it was I who gave her

the grain, the wine, and the oil,

and who lavished upon her

silver and gold which they used for Baal.

Therefore I will take back

my grain in its time,

and my wine in its season;  
 and I will take away my wool and my flax. . . .  
 And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals  
 when she burned incense to them  
 and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,  
 and went after her lovers,  
 and forgot me, says the Lord.

(Hosea 2:2, 4, 5, 7, 8-9, 13).

Then, without explanation or logical motivation, the husband (God) states his intention to rewoo and rewed his ungrateful and unfaithful wife.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,  
 and bring her into the wilderness,  
 and speak tenderly to her.  
 And there I will give her her vineyards,  
 and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
 And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,  
 as at the time when she came out of the land  
 of Egypt.

(Hosea 2:14-15)

Our God gives human beings incredible gifts just because he loves them. When they show their ingratitude for his gifts by misusing them, they wound God's heart, and he reacts in anger and wrath designed to bring men and women to their senses, cause them to realize the seriousness of sin, and turn back to him. He also reacts in understanding compassion to deliver them from their own self-imposed misery. Our God is wounded by human sin; *that is why we praise him.*

#### 4. The God We Praise Is Alive and at Work in His World.

That which sets the *true* God apart from all *false* titular deities is that he is alive and at work in the world which he created, while they are lifeless and do nothing in the world. Jeremiah articulates this contrast powerfully:

The customs of the peoples are *false*.  
 A tree from the forest is cut down,  
 and worked with an axe by the hands of a  
 craftsman.  
 Men deck it with silver and gold;  
 they fasten it with hammer and nails so that *it*  
*cannot move*.  
 Their idols are *like scarecrows* in a cucumber field,  
 and *they cannot speak*;  
*they have to be carried*,  
 for *they cannot walk*.  
 Be not afraid of them,  
 for *they cannot do evil* (i.e., they cannot punish),  
*neither is it in them to do good* (i.e., neither  
 can they bless). . . .  
 But the Lord is the *true* God;  
 he is the *living* God and the everlasting King. . . .  
 It is he who made the earth by his power,  
 who established the world by his wisdom. . . .  
 When he utters his voice there is a tumult of waters  
 in the heavens,  
 and *he makes the mist rise* from the ends of the  
 earth.  
*He makes lightnings* for the rain,  
 and *he brings forth the wind* out of his storehouses.  
 (Jeremiah 10:3-5, 10, 12-13)

The scriptures proclaim repeatedly and invariably that God *preserves* (Nehemiah 9:6), *holds together* (Colossians 1:17), and *upholds* the universe (Hebrews 1:3). If this is true, then he did not create the heavens and the earth, set up “natural laws” according to which his world is to run, and then leave it to operate on its own until he determines to bring it to an end.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and to pray for them who persecute us. The reason he gives us for doing this is: “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven;” in other words, so that you may follow your heavenly Father’s example of loving his enemies. But how does our heavenly Father show his enemies that he loves them? Jesus gives two examples: (1) “*he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good;*” and (2) “*he sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*” (Matthew 5:45). Yet if God does not actively and deliberately *make the sun rise* or *send rain*, if sunrise and rain are nothing but “natural laws” which God set up when he created the universe, the motivations Jesus gives for loving our enemies do not stand up in court; his examples are incorrect, empty, not convincing.

The Biblical writers state that God “sends rain” (Amos 4:7), “gives rain” (Jeremiah 5:24), “waters the mountains” from his “lofty abode” (Psalm 104:13), “gives snow,” “casts forth ice” (Psalm 147:16-17), “makes his wind blow” (Psalm 147:18), “causes the grass and plants to grow” (Psalm 104:14), “gives” food to all his creatures (Psalms 104:27-28; 145:15-16; 147:9), “heals” people from all their diseases (Psalms 103:3; 107:20; James 5:14-15), “makes wars cease” (Psalm 46:9), “saves his people from their foes” (Psalms 3:7; 44:7), and so on.



To be sure, events recur in nature, in history, and in the lives of individuals. We can depend on the stability of our world because of God's "faithfulness." One of the psalmists declares:

Let the heavens *praise* thy wonders, O Lord,  
*thy faithfulness* in the assembly of the holy ones!  
 For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?  
 Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord,  
 a God feared in the council of the holy ones,  
 great and terrible above all that are round about  
 him?

O Lord God of hosts,  
 who is mighty as thou art, O Lord,  
 with *thy faithfulness* round about thee?  
*Thou dost rule the raging of the sea;*  
 when its waves rise, *thou stillest them.*  
 Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass,  
 thou didst scatter thy enemies with thy mighty arm.  
 The heavens *are* thine, the earth also *is* thine;  
 the world and all that is in it, thou hast founded  
 them.  
 The north and the south, thou hast created them;  
 Tabor and Hermon joyously *praise* thy name.  
 Thou *hast* a mighty arm;  
 strong *is* thy hand, high thy right hand.  
 Righteousness and justice *are* the foundation of thy  
 throne; steadfast love and *faithfulness* go before  
 thee.

(Psalm 89:5-14)

In this psalm, the mixture of God's activity *in the past* (when he created the universe) and *in the present* (as he continues to uphold and sustain all creation) is striking. There is nothing

here to suggest that when God created the world, he set up “natural laws” to govern his creation, and left the universe to return to his dwelling place in the sky.

God’s continuing activity in *history* is unforgettably illustrated by Isaiah’s portrayal of the role of the Assyrians under Sennacherib during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. He declares that God is like a lumberjack using an axe (the Assyrians) to hew down a tree (Judah); God is like a carpenter using a saw (the Assyrians) to cut a board (Judah); and God is like a father using a rod (the Assyrians) to discipline his rebellious son (Judah) (Isaiah 10:15). As the lumberjack is in control of his axe, so the Lord is in control of the nations and all humankind. Our God is alive and at work in his world; *that is why we praise him.*

## **5. The God We Praise Hears and Answers Human Praying.**

Only when a person believes that God is alive and at work in his world can he petition God to act in his world, and thank God for acting in his world. If human beings do not believe that God works in his world today, there is no reason for them to pray; they are wasting their time praying; their praying is clear hypocrisy. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus instructs us to ask God: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). Later in the Sermon on the Mount he compares God with a loving Father who gives his children what they ask. He says:

What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more

will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

(Matthew 7:9-11)

Jesus' teaching here presupposes that God "gives bread" to those who ask him. Men and women ask him for bread, he hears their request and actively, personally, intentionally gives them bread. And when they "receive" bread or any food from God, the appropriate response is to thank him. Thus Paul writes Timothy:

God created [foods] *to be received with thanksgiving* by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected *if it is received with thanksgiving*; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

(1 Timothy 4:3-5)

Sincere praying is founded on at least five assumptions: (1) God exists; (2) God is alive and at work in his world; (3) God can do things for human beings which are beyond their own abilities; (4) God is genuinely concerned about the well-being of his creatures, and wants to supply their needs and deliver them from their distresses; and (5) God can be influenced by human requests to do things he would not have done if the one praying had not asked. The words of the psalmist reflect these assumptions:

*I will bless the Lord* at all times;  
*his praise* shall continually be in my mouth. . . .  
*I sought the Lord, and he answered me,*  
*and delivered me* from all my fears. . . .  
*This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him,*  
*and saved him* out of all his troubles.

(Psalm 34:1, 3, 5)

Our God is like a loving father who provides everything that his children need or desire if it is in their best interest. He invites, he even urges, human beings to “ask” him for what they need or want; he hears their petitions, and gives them what they ask when it is according to his will and best for them. Our God hears and answers human praying; *that is why we praise him.*

## **6. The God We Praise Is Gracious and Merciful, Slow to Anger and Abounding in Steadfast Love.**

As a comprehensive description of God’s fundamental nature, the New Testament says: “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). This is not a new description of God which originated with Jesus or the early church. The Old Testament describes God in exactly the same way by using an almost stereotyped formula eight times:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

(Exodus 34:6; Number 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17 [see verse 31]; Psalms 86:15 [see verse 5]; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

Everything God says or does is, in some way, an expression of his essential character. He *hates*

haughty eyes, a lying tongue,  
and hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked plans,  
feet that make haste to run to evil,  
a false witness who breathes out lies,  
and a man who sows discord among brothers

(Proverbs 6:16-19)

because he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” and these self-seeking human expressions of ingratitude obstruct the dissemination of these features to and among men and women.

God is *provoked to anger* when human beings forsake him for their own preferences and pleasures, because he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” and such behavior repudiates the only pure and genuine concern and care available to men and women, and turns to people and things which have no substance. In Ezra’s great prayer to the Lord, he recalls how the Lord had dealt with the ancestors of the Jews of his day when they forsook him. Among other things he says:

They (The Israelites) and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey thy commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders which thou didst perform among them; but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their bondage in Egypt. *But thou art a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,* and didst not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a molten calf and said, “This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,” and had committed great blasphemies, thou *in thy great mercies* didst not forsake them in the wilderness. . . . Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against thee and cast thy law behind their back and killed thy prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to thee, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore thou didst give them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer; and in the time of

their suffering they cried to thee and thou didst hear them from heaven; and *according to thy great mercies* thou didst give them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rested they did evil again before thee, and thou didst abandon them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they turned and cried to thee thou didst hear from heaven, and many times thou didst deliver them *according to thy mercies*. . . . Many years thou didst bear with them, and didst warn them by thy Spirit through thy prophets; yet they would not give ear. Therefore thou didst give them into the hands of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless *in thy great mercies* thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them; *for thou art a gracious and merciful God* (Nehemiah 9:16-19a, 26-28, 30-31).

God *disciplines and reprov*es those whose activities thwart his purposes and who turn against him, because he is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The wise man counsels:

My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline  
or be weary of his reproof,  
*for the Lord reprov*es him whom he loves,  
*as a father* the son in whom he delights.

(Proverbs 3:11-12; see Hebrews 12:4-11)

Now, that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” means that he “forgives” people when they sin. When God first revealed his fundamental nature to Moses on Mount Sinai just before giving him the Ten Commandments for the second time, he described himself in this manner:

The Lord, the Lord, a God *merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love* and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.*

(Exodus 34:6-7a)

From beginning to end, the Bible proclaims that the true God forgives human beings of their sins. One psalmist writes:

*The Lord is merciful and gracious  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger for ever.

*He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor requite us according to our iniquities.*

For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his *steadfast love* toward those who fear  
him;

*as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

*As a father pities his children,  
so the Lord pities those who fear him."*

(Psalm 103:8-13)

Another psalmist exclaims:

If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?

But *there is forgiveness with thee,*  
that thou mayest be feared.

(Psalm 130:3-4)

The fullest manifestation of God's basic loving nature expressed in forgiveness is his sending of his own Son, Jesus

Christ, to die for us while we were yet sinners. Paul says: “*God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*”(Romans 5:8).

No human being can fully comprehend the enormous personal emotional loss which God has to bear in forgiving human sins. He did not withhold his only Son from enduring human abuses and indignities, even death on a cross as the ultimate sacrifice for sin, so that we might be forgiven. And each time we forsake him or rebel against him or disobey his will, God continues to absorb the ingratitude of human self-centeredness and forgives us. It is not surprising, then, that one psalmist declares:

I will extol thee, my God and King,  
 and *bless* thy name for ever and ever.  
 Every day I will *bless* thee,  
 and *praise* thy name for ever and ever.  
 Great is the Lord, and *greatly to be praised*,  
 and his greatness is unsearchable. . . .  
*The Lord is gracious and merciful,*  
*slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*  
 The Lord is good to all,  
 and *his compassion is over all that he has made.*

(Psalm 145:1-3, 8-9)

Our God loves us with a love transcending all human imagination. We sin against him, and he forgives us. He has cast all our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17), even into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). Our God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”; *that is why we praise him.*



# JOHN O. YORK

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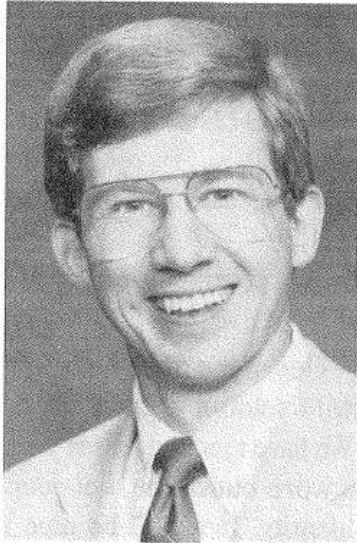
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## **Praise For His Steadfast Love**

**By John York**

Texts: Psalms 107; 136; 119:41, 64, 76, 88

One of the more haunting questions of our time, often asked with seldom a good answer, is the question “Who am I?” We have reached a time when the words “identity crisis” form a worn-out cliché, but people still are struggling to find their identity. It would be nice if we could say that the struggle was solved once people came into the church. While that may be true ideally, practically it is not the case. The interest in so-called “New Age” thinking or even the perennial attempts by pseudo-guru’s such as Ron Hubbard to solve the problem have only increased confusion for the masses. One problem is that none of the sources by which people used to come to self-understanding serve as marks of identity anymore. It is not just in one’s name, or family, or nationality, or religion anymore. Once upon a time family and family name could provide one with a strong sense of identity and belonging. But we are less and less attached to family because of the tremendous mobility of our society. We have trouble maintaining immediate family ties, much less a strong sense of belonging to an extended family. And we live in a society where divorce, children born outside of marriage, and various kinds of abuse leave literally millions of people without a sense of family identity.

There was a time when our national identity provided a sense of personal identity and purpose. But the last twenty-five years have been marred by racial turmoil, government scandal, wars we were unsure of, and a growing uncertainty about our future. Look at the latest developments in the Middle East. Americans have rallied together in support of our Armed Forces overseas. But has that given Americans some sense of identity by which the minds of otherwise hurting individuals can find sustenance? That is not to mention the turmoil and anxiety created by loved ones called away from home to fight. More and more people have turned to smaller regional and ethnic identities in search of roots. But whether we are black or brown or yellow or red or white, whether we are Texan or Confederate or Yankee, even red-neck or yuppie, there is the hollow realization that none of those labels really tell us who we are, much less provide us with any sense of who we want to be.

Consider, for a moment, our empty search for heroes in the past decade. Unable to find heroes among us, we turned to the mythical — to Rambo and Indiana Jones, and Superman, and Batman. Remember when Superman came to earth to stand “for truth, justice, and the American way?” In the movies of the 1980’s, not only did he no longer stand for the American way, he came to reflect the same anti-hero characteristics that we already despised in ourselves. Batman had his “dark side” which needed to be exposed because we all have our dark side. We paid to see the movie, but there was little to offer us in our search for meaning in life. And so the search for identity and place in the world and our country must look elsewhere.

For a variety of reasons people have also found less and less security in church and church identity. Some would attribute the crisis to a simple lack of commitment — you just

can't seem to find people that are totally committed these days, and if you do, they end up seeming cultic and scary. In his recent book, *The Cruciform Church*, Leonard Allen entitles his opening chapter "The Search For Identity."<sup>1</sup> The obvious implication is that somehow we as a church are no longer confident of who we are. Allen suggests three reasons for this dilemma: First, the fact that all religious traditions inevitably undergo change in the process of passing the faith from one generation to the next. Second, these changes have been greatly accelerated by the demise of rural life and lifestyle. Third, the enormously secular mindset of our time, with its overpowering spirit of individualism, has made it exceedingly difficult to maintain any kind of focus on anything but the immediate present and the search for what is new and stimulating and gratifying at the moment.<sup>2</sup>

Almost 20 years ago now the prophetic voices among us were predicting that unless dramatic changes took place, Churches of Christ as we know them would no longer exist by the year 2000. At this point, with only 10 years to go, the prediction seems doubtful, on the one hand. On the other hand, we are not the church now that we were 20 years ago. Maybe that is good, maybe not. Some of us long for the good ol' days; others are champing at the bit to create more change, to catch us up to the decade of the nineties. In the midst of such diverse perspectives the complaint of many today is that we have become little different from all of the other churches on the horizon. The biggest flaw with that argument is the number of people who have left the church seeking the greener pastures of those other churches. Regardless of what these

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<sup>1</sup>The Cruciform Church, (Abilene: ACU Press, 1989). See pp. 1-18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

people have found in their search, we who have remained have been forced to reevaluate our self-understanding and purpose as a church.

The church suffers just as the individual suffers from the extreme mobility that now pervades our society. The move from the country to the city and the socio-economic changes that have accompanied that move have cut us off from our roots in 19th century rural America. Our mobility is seen both geographically and economically. We are now an urban church, not a rural church, and we are climbing the socioeconomic ladder by leaps and bounds. The idea of attending the congregation nearest you — a necessity in rural life — has given way to attending the church that best meets your needs or suits your personal tastes. With those changes has come a different reading of Scripture. “Blessed are the poor,” and “Woe to you Rich” do not mean for us what they used to mean. We do not know if we are the “Worldly Church” or a church struggling to make its methods, if not its message, fit the people in the pews — or the people no longer in the pews, as the case may be.

But perhaps most far-reaching in its effects is the spirit of individualism that has placed such a high priority on me, and my rights, and doing my thing, and doing it my way. As Allen goes on to state, the urgency of self-fulfillment in the present has detached us from our past, and from a sense of history in general.<sup>3</sup> While we do not join Henry Ford in saying “history is bunk,” our pursuit of feeling good or spiritual now has only an insatiable desire for that which is, not that which was. We complain of our membership no longer being “a people of the Book,” and that is a reflection of our disinterest

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 5ff.

in the past, even the Biblical past. People who have an identity crisis have no sense of being a part of history. Our church members have a declining sense or even an interest in heritage and history. The rapid growth of Robert Schuller-type community churches across the nation suggests that for many people, possibility thinking is far more helpful in the search of identity than the pursuit of self-understanding through the eyes of human history.

Within the churches of Christ, we have been a part of a legacy of the call to go back to the Bible, to restore first century Christianity. We usually date our roots to the beginning of the 19th century, and then put A.D. 33 on the cornerstones of our buildings. For a time we envisioned ourselves as the place where one could find all of the answers. But we are less confident of that now, having witnessed so many people who left us for places and churches where they said they felt more spiritual. We sometimes are no longer sure whether our identity is actually found in the Word of God or in Church of Christ traditions. All too often we do not know much about either. We often know even less about the greater legacy of church history since the first century. We sing “Tell me the old, old, story,” or “I love to tell the story.” But do we mean that? More often than not we operate under the misconception that the old, old story started and stopped 2000 years ago. We fail to recognize that the story of Jesus is part of a much longer story that incorporates us on the one hand and stretches back to Adam on the other. We disconnect ourselves from 1700 years of intervening history, much of which might provide mirror images that we need to see. We read the OT as nice background material for the story instead of understanding all of the OT as part of our own story. In the midst of an information explosion, we know less and less — about

ourselves, about our restoration heritage, about our place in God's story.

The search for identity is the search for story, a search for the sense of belonging. The story must have a past to reflect upon and a future to look toward in order to provide meaning to our present circumstances. Paul understood the importance of the past when he told the Gentile Christians in Rome that they had no right for boasting over the Jewish Christians because both were branches of the same tree. The Gentiles had been grafted onto the tree to share in the riches of its roots. Branches that were original or branches that were grafted on received sustenance from the same root. There could be no room for boasting, but instead one should stand in awe before the God who gives life to the tree (cf. Romans 11:17-24).

Do we hear what he is saying? We Gentiles have been grafted onto the Jewish tree. The Jewish heritage and identity have now become our heritage, our identity! What does that mean when we think of our story? It means all of this material has something to say about our identity — yours and mine. It's my history, my story. Remember how the Jews used to say, "My father was a wandering Aramaean, and he went down to Egypt, and WE were treated harshly there" (Deut. 6:5ff.). Paul says that's our story; if we want to know who we are and who our God is, this is where we look.

Think of how that changes our reading of the Hebrew scriptures. When was the last time you set out from Ur of Chaldeas with Abraham; or worked for 14 years with Jacob to gain Rachel as your bride; or sat in prison in Egypt with Joseph; or hid near the river with Miriam as you waited and watched your baby brother floating there in the Nile River? When did you last walk in the wilderness, or stand at the mountain of God and listen to the trumpet blast and the thunder and feel

the earthquake and experience the mystery and awesome power of God Almighty? Or march around Jericho? When did you last see Samson with his hands between the pillars of the stadium? How often do you recall Hannah or Eli or Samuel? When did you last go to battle with David against the Giant, or against Saul, or his own son, or his own sin? Or stand in Solomon's palace with the Queen of Sheba?

It is in the context of remembering the story, of reciting how God has acted in the past, that repeatedly we hear the words of the Psalmist, "His steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136). It is in reciting all of the human failures and prideful attempts to live life without God, only to be brought to their knees and cry out to God in despair, that we hear the words, "Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love" (Ps. 107). To praise God for his steadfast love is first and foremost to **remember**. It is to remember God's gracious acts of creation; to remember his decision to save Noah and his family; to remember the covenant with Abraham; to remember the deliverance from bondage in Egypt; to remember the conquest of the land. It is also to remember the serpent and Eve in the garden; to remember the sons of God and the daughters of men; to remember the tower of Babel; to remember Jacob and Esau; to remember Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery; to remember the whining and complaining of the people in the wilderness; to remember the persistent pattern of God providing a victory, the people chasing after foreign gods, the oppression of the enemy and the people crying out for help, and God hearing their cry and raising up a judge to provide the victory, only to have the people repeat the story. That's not just nice background information, that's our story (in more ways than one)! Some scholars have suggested that



all of the demands found in Scripture can be summed up by the single word **REMEMBER**.<sup>3</sup>

When was the last time your heart ached with God's over the divided kingdom, the repeated idolatry of your forefathers, the horrible mistreatment of the poor by the rich? When did you last look at the prostitute with Hosea, or walk the streets of Nineveh with Jonah? When did you last stand on a hill overlooking the destruction and weep with Jeremiah — wanting to scream “I told you so!” but being too sick inside over the loss of your people? When did you last turn in despair with him and say: *But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope, The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is thy portion says my soul; therefore I will hope in him* (Lamentations 3:22-24)? When did you last stand with Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones and hear God ask, “Son of man, can these bones live?” and then be overcome with wonder as bone began to connect with bone and cartilage and flesh began to appear.

The writer of Hebrews knew the importance of his audience hearing the story when he wrote the eleventh chapter. He knew the importance of having heroes of the faith, people that we could look to that had found their identity on this earth through faith, through a steadfast assurance in things hoped for but unseen. In order to both magnify their faith and maximize our assurance, the writer notes twice that all of these people never received the promise, but only viewed it from afar, that, apart from us they would not be made perfect (Hebrews 11:13, 39-49). When the Psalmist looked to the promise, he also

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*, (New York: Harper and Row, n.d.) p. 13.

reflected on the steadfast love of the Lord: *Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise* (Psalm 119:41, cf. vv. 76, 81). To praise God for his steadfast love is not only to look to the past but to envision the promises of the future. We live in the light of the cross, seeing much more fully the depth and wonder of God's steadfast love than the Psalmist ever could. In remembering God's promises we celebrate our hope for the everlasting future that lies before us.

But beyond celebrating his steadfast love by remembering the past actions of God, or by remembering the past failures of humanity and God's repeated overwhelming acts of gracious restoration; more than praising God for his steadfast loving in the promises that guarantee our future, there is an ultimate call to praise God for his steadfast love in the present. We do that by finding our place in his story. All of us, no matter who we are, are already part of God's story. Sadly, many of us have not yet recognized that fact because we have been too busy trying to write our own story, trying to write the church's story, doing everything but submitting to the reality that it is God's story in which we live. Personal identity and church identity suffer when we forget to remember it is HIS story, not ours. We praise him for his steadfast love by being living reminders.<sup>5</sup> We are to be living memories of God's great acts of steadfast love in human history. In so doing we remind others of their place in the story. As Nouwen suggests, the temptation is great to ask "how" questions rather than "who" questions. To ask "How do I become a living memory? How do I turn my story into his story?" is to miss the point that we already are in His story. The task is to iden-

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

tify who we are in that story and allow God to work and will his pleasure — his story — in our lives. Then, indeed, we discover with Paul that our identity is in Christ, our lives are hidden in Christ, and we proclaim “It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me” — we **are** living reminders, embodying the story, embracing his steadfast love.

We **are** living reminders through all of our efforts to remember, to embrace our biblical heritage and walk the streets of Jerusalem and Rome with the disciples. But we also must find our place in the story that stretches from the first century to the nineteenth. Just as we need to spend more moments at the cross, we need to spend more time with our more recent heritage. To remember the past is to catch glimpses of ourselves, and to weave ourselves into God’s story. It is a story filled with human frailty and failure and willful disobedience. It is a story replete with episodes in which humanity sought to take control and write its own story, only to make a horrible mess of things. It is also a story that consistently brings us back to a God whose ways are unsearchable, but whose grace and mercy are everlasting.

*But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope; The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion says my soul; therefore I will hope in him.*

# PRENTICE A. MEADOR, JR.

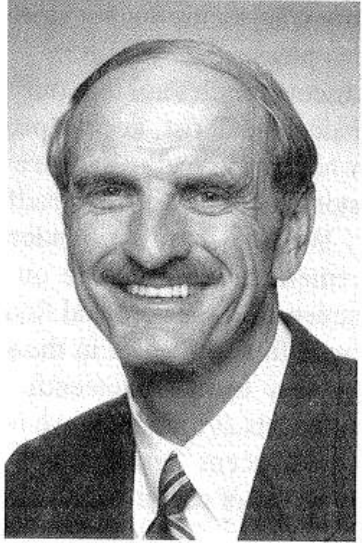
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**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Popular speaker for numerous Dallas civic and business groups. Some 85 child care agencies supported by churches of Christ have selected Meador as their Ambassador-at-Large for child care. In February, 1990, Meador received the "Excellence in Mass Media Evangelism" award presented by the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Abilene Christian University. In the last two years Meador has spoken in many foreign countries including New Zealand and Germany. He is a frequent speaker on lectureships and has authored several books. Recently co-authored *Walk With Me*, with Bob Chisholm.



## Hallelujah — Word of Praise

By Prentice Meador, Jr.

Picture a small Jewish man, 37 years old, walking across the Glienicke Bridge from East Germany to West Germany. He has spent the previous nine years in Soviet prisons and work camps. But on this particular day he walks into freedom and climbs into the car of the American Ambassador. His name — Anatoly Shcharansky. As he leaves oppression and walks into freedom, he carries with him his most valued possession — the Psalms.

Having been locked up with the Psalms in a Soviet prison, Shcharansky finds a new strength of will and a new power of faith. When Shcharansky writes his wife and mother from prison, he frequently refers to the power of the Psalms:

*The day after I received your telegram telling of Papa's death, I decided in his memory to read and study all 150 Psalms of David (in Hebrew). That is what I do from morning to evening. . . . What does this give me? . . . Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of bright hopes. I am denied the right to visit Papa's grave but when, in the future, I hear these wonderful verses . . . I shall remember Papa. It will be as if I had erected a memorial stone*

*to him on my heart, and he will be with me all the days of my life.’<sup>1</sup>*

Less than a year from his moment of freedom, Shcharansky and his wife would celebrate in Jerusalem. As he is being lifted high by his countrymen in front of the Western Wall, Anatoly carries the same book of Psalms that had given him hope during his imprisonment.

### Popularity of Psalms

Why do the Psalms yield such power? Why do many editions of the New Testament also include one Old Testament book — the Psalms? What attracts human beings of all sorts to the Psalms?

- Is it that through the Psalms man speaks to God?
- Is it that the Psalms are song-poems?
- Is it that the Psalms show remarkable variety from lament to doubt to trust?
- Is it that the Psalms have a strong theological certainty — people know what they believe and why?
- Is it that the Psalms show a special sense of historical and social responsibility — that history is really God’s story of how He acts in the world?

Why do the Psalms never wear thin? Part of the answer is that the Psalms have an elevated sense of worship — God is center stage! Nowhere is this clearer than in the close of the book. We now move to the fitting crescendo of praise which ends the Psalms.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Gilbert, *Shcharansky — Hero Of Our Time* (New York: Viking, 1986), n.p.

## Hallelujah

The dominant note in the Psalms is man's praise of God. Sir James Muilenburg writes that anyone who wants to praise God by studying the Psalms will:

*. . . gain more because he will be able to enter into the devotional life of ancient Israel in a new way; he will sense the spirit which animates the worshiper as he enters into the divine presence on various occasions of celebration and festivals; he will be listening to Israel's response to the divine revelation recorded in their other books of the Old Testament, and find himself perhaps participating in the ecstatic shouts of joy and praise. . . . He will hear Israel singing, Israel in her most authentic moods, and will come to discern something of that which lay deepest in the soul of the . . . worshiper.<sup>2</sup>*

So, John Calvin calls the 150 Psalms an “anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> Every feeling, thought, expression, and experience of which man is capable of bringing before God is found in the Psalms.

But if you are like me, you have also experienced some problems with praise. There are times when the words “Praise the Lord” have not come to my lips very easily. Like you, I have heard “Hallelujah!”, “Praise the Lord!” many times in worship services. But I confess that I have been made somewhat uncomfortable by these expressions of praise.

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<sup>2</sup>James Muilenburg, “Introduction,” to Hermann Gunkel's *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. vii-viii.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:xxxvii.

Because of my religious background and training, I have tended to view such expressions as “improper,” “inappropriate,” “out-of-place,” or “too emotional.” I did not doubt the sincerity nor spontaneity of the expressions, but tended to think that when such persons learned better, they would also be quiet like everyone else. I once thought to myself: “isn’t worship to be done ‘decently and in order?’ ”

But I’ve had another problem with saying “Hallelujah!” or “Praise the Lord!” There have been moments in my life when the word “Hallelujah!” would be the hardest word to ever express. How do you “Praise the Lord!” for unemployment, family problems, financial crises, times of suffering, and personal tragedies? These are the moments which Charles Swindoll calls “the grind of praise-less times.” In these moments, he writes “These words just don’t flow from our lips.”<sup>4</sup> During moments in which “Hallelujah!” didn’t flow from my lips, I found that I was usually totally preoccupied with myself. So I had to learn that it is impossible to focus fully on God while staring at myself.

Saying “Hallalujah!” has also caused me a third problem. Until I read C. S. Lewis’ *Reflections on the Psalms*, I didn’t know anyone else ever felt this way. Why did God so often insist on telling us to praise Him? After all, we all know how we feel about people who demand attention, admiration, and appreciation! So if God is truly good, why would He command man in the Psalms to praise Him? The Psalms would seem to draw the ludicrous conclusion that numbers are important: “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” (Psalm 119:164). But does God command praise for

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<sup>4</sup>Charles Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind* (Dallas: Word Publishing 1988), 2:390.



His good? Is He looking for some kind of eternal eulogy simply because He needs it? Or is praise to God for my good? Is it something I need to do to find meaning, purpose, and joy in life? Does praise to God give me the kind of satisfaction for which I was made to have? What do I need to learn about praise?

Another problem which I've had with expressions like "Hallelujah" and "Praise the Lord" is the clear possibility of the superficiality of such expressions. These words are so easy to exploit without sincerity. Like you, I have heard "Praise the Lord" manipulated into the most trite moments. I recall a woman who used the phrase "Praise the Lord" as a rote response rather than a creative and genuine expression of the heart for the dazzling gifts of God. Under such conditions, language becomes meaningless when actions are not consistent.

So I found myself in a spiritual dilemma. On the one hand, I wanted to follow God's word in every detail. If there was anything in praise that I was missing, I wanted it. On the other hand, I did not want my expressions of praise to God to be inappropriate, or empty, or insincere. For years, I just laid the matter aside and ignored it while living my Christian life.

To resolve the dilemma, I thought I needed to learn the language of praise. Where could I go to learn the language of praise? Where could I find Biblical praise not used just for special occasions, but used to include everything that is truly human within me — my heart, my mind, my soul, and my salvation? I found that our world is not particularly interested in the language of praise. And then one of the most obvious facts about learning the language of praise became clearer. For some reason, it had strangely escaped me. I realized that man does not have the capability, the intellect, nor the capacity to help me learn such a language. I must bring

myself to sit at the feet of God. If I were able to work my way through some of my problems concerning praise, only God could teach me out of His special book on praise — the Psalms.

### Psalms of Praise

If I were able to understand, I would realize that the entire book of Psalms had a special organization. One hundred fifty Psalms have been placed in five books. The organization became obvious once I was aware of it. Like so many obvious things, it's easy to miss it. "The significance of the five-book arrangement cannot be over stressed" states Eugene Peterson.<sup>5</sup> The organization into five books is accomplished by a special expression. Each of the first four books concludes with "Amen and Amen." Book one includes Psalms 1-41 and concludes with "Amen and Amen" (41:13). Book two includes Psalms 42-72 and concludes with "Amen and Amen" (72:19). Book three gathers Psalms 73-89 and concludes "Amen and Amen" (89:52). Book four includes Psalms 90-106 and the usual final "Amen and Amen" is replaced by "Let all the people say, 'Amen!' Praise the Lord!" (106:48). The fifth book includes Psalms 107-150 and concludes with "Praise the Lord!" or the Hebrew word "Hallelujah!" (150:6).

"Hallelujah!" now becomes the preeminent motif, the major mood, the dominant note. The movement from "Amen" to "Hallelujah!" signals us that the last five Psalms (146-150) form the most striking scenery of celebration that we could imagine! Notice that each of these five final Psalms begins and ends with the Hallelujah. "This grand conclusion," writes Eugene Peterson "booms out five hallelujah Psalms (146-150),

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<sup>5</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Working The Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 35.

one for each ‘book’ of the Psalter.<sup>6</sup> It is as though these five concluding “Hallelujah Psalms” consummate into a great crescendo of praise to God. We have already moved through all of the other Psalms — experiences of loneliness, distress, disappointment, guilt, anxiety, depression, and fear of death. The final pieces of music balance the earlier pieces of distress and heartache: the five Hallelujah Psalms — music to live by. But if I am to understand the language of praise in these Psalms, I knew I had to get closer to the word “Hallelujah.” First, I discovered that it appears 16 times in Psalms 146-150. Second, I noticed that it brackets or forms the bookends of each of these Psalms. I then learned that “Hallelujah!” is really a Hebrew word, not an English word. It is made up of two Hebrew words — *halal*, meaning “to praise, to boast, to exalt” and *Yahweh*, meaning “Jehovah.” Together, the literal meaning of Hallelujah is “exalt or praise Jehovah!” The main root of Hallelujah “connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful for and/or satisfied in lauding a superior quality or great acts of the object.”<sup>7</sup> So then, to say “Hallelujah” means “let’s sincerely praise and give glory to God for all that He is and has done.” “Praise the Lord” is, therefore, a frequent English translation of the Hebrew “Hallelujah.” This verbal expression of praise becomes the correct, appropriate, and satisfying response to God. Nothing else would make sense or would be appropriate. No wonder God demands praise. He is so loving, so beautiful, so powerful, so deserving. Nowhere is this made more clear by the Psalter than in the last Psalm, the 150.

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<sup>6</sup>Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>R. Laird Harris, (ed.), *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:217.

## Psalm 150 — Picture of Praise

I have come to see that all of the Psalms are designed to bring us closer to God. Each one is written in the presence of God. The Psalms teach us how to be honest with God. If you are upset with something God has done, tell Him so. If you're having a problem, tell God about it. On the other hand, if you're happy and joyful, tell Him that, too.

God never intended for thanksgiving and praise to be taken lightly. Virginia Stem Owens writes in her well-titled book *And The Trees Clapped Their Hands*, "It took 38,000 Levites to give thanks to God in David's day; every morning and evening the shift changed. Four thousand were needed just to carry the hacked carcasses of cattle and another 4,000 were needed to sing about it. . . . They did not cross-stitch their gratitude on samplers to frame and hang on the wall. They wrote their thanks in blood on the doorposts every year."<sup>8</sup> God does take praise and thanksgiving very seriously.

"In the Psalter," writes Eugene Peterson, "Four Hallelujah Psalms (Psalms 146-149) gathered all of the pain and lament of Israel out of the mud of unfinished judgments into a detailed elaboration of praise, and then fused them into the mighty Psalm 150, with its 13 salvos of praise, cannonading Hallelujahs through Israel and the church."<sup>9</sup>

One of the most obvious facts about Psalm 150 is that the Psalm not only begins and ends with "Hallelujah!", but each sentence begins with "Hallelujah!" Only six verses long, Psalm 150's brevity is breathtaking. It seems to me that the

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<sup>8</sup>As cited by Bob Benson and Michael W. Benson, *Discipline for the Inner Life* (Waco: Word, 1985), p. 334.

<sup>9</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 150.

Psalmist is saying that all has been experienced, all has been said, and now we can give ourselves to celebration — sustained delight in the presence of God.

I cannot improve on the organization of this Psalm as given by Derek Kidner and Clyde Miller.

### **150:1. The Where of Praise**

*Praise the Lord.*

*Praise God in his sanctuary;*

*Praise him in his mighty heavens.*

The call goes out through the universe to God's heavenly host and to all of God's people on earth. Heaven and earth will now be in unison as it sings God's glory. Praise of God fills the universe. After all it is "His sanctuary." As earthly beings and heavenly beings today mix their praises to God, so heaven becomes a place where angels and men eternally praise God. God invites us to come and delight in His presence.

### **150:2. The Why of Praise**

*Praise him for his acts of power;*

*Praise him for his surpassing greatness.*

So it is a ludicrous idea that God should in any way crave or need our worship like a vain man wanting a compliment. It is absurd to conceive of God as wanting His creation to satisfy His deepest cravings. The real reasons for praising God have to do with what He has done and who He is. His "acts of power" include not only creation; but his great acts of salvation, including the flood, the exodus, and the cross. I have begun to see that when I focus less upon myself and more upon God, it becomes more natural to bless, extol, and praise Him because of who He is. He deserves my admira-

tion, my worship, my sacrifice, and He wants me to enjoy His presence. The emphasis is upon joy. It is at this very point that a fact about praise, which had eluded me in the past, became clearer. Belief and joy are closely intertwined. If my doctrine of God focuses upon His nature and His saving acts, joy will overflow from my heart into praise. Joy always leads to praise. Perhaps, this is why the self-righteous and religious snobs never praise — they never experience joy!

### 150:3-5. The How of Praise

*Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,  
Praise him with the harp and lyre,  
Praise him with tambourine and dancing,  
Praise him with the strings and flute,  
Praise him with the clash of cymbals,  
Praise him with resounding cymbals.*

“The answer to the question, ‘how?’ is: with everything you have!”<sup>10</sup> The Psalter seems to be hinting at suggestions rather than giving an exhaustive list of all the ways to praise God. For instance, “the sounding of the trumpet” (the blast on the ram’s horn) is used for sacred moments and national celebrations such as the announcement of the year of the jubilee (Leviticus 25:9). Praise by the tambourine and dancing would suggest moments of victory in one’s life (Exodus 15:20; Judges 11:34). Praising God by the harp, the lyre, the strings, and the flute would suggest everyday moments which are not particularly special (Genesis 4:21). In short, God calls upon us to praise Him not only in the momentous events of our lives,

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<sup>10</sup>Derek Kidner *Psalms 73-150* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 491.

but in the daily grind of life with its tribulations, sorrows, and heartaches. By suggesting every kind of musical instrument, whether clashing cymbals, or melodic harps, everything is called upon to praise God. Remember that under the Mosaic Law, God's people literally danced for joy and played numerous musical instruments as they expressed their praise to the Father. When the Israelites victoriously crossed the Red Sea, Miriam danced her praises to God (Exodus 15:20-21). When the Ark was brought back into the city, David danced in the street (II Samuel 6:12-15). The dancing in the scripture was performed more out of a praise to God for what He had done than mere personal enjoyment. As the church, each of us becomes God's instruments for making music and melody as we express our praise and joy to Him. These three verses seem to be saying that we are to give God our complete and unrestrained praise regardless of the moment.

### **150:6. The Who of Praise**

*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.  
Praise the Lord.*

No creature of God is exempt from praise! From the grizzly bear to the teenager, from the caribou to the businessman, all life is called to praise God. Let there be one universal applause of praise to God. The Psalter calls upon every animate being to give praise to God. One of the most obvious facts about praise had in some way strangely escaped me in my struggle to understand it. Earlier, I had not seen that in the process of worshiping God, the worshiper becomes more like the object of his worship. This is always true. No wonder the Greeks and the Romans stole, cheated, murdered, and were faithless — so were the gods that they worshiped. Even so, we become more godly as we praise our Father.

But I had also not seen how that God, in worship, communicates His very presence to people. He also communicates His presence through nature, through the Word, and in other ways. But as we praise God, He gives us of Himself. No wonder He calls upon “everything that has breath” to praise the Lord.

### **A Final Reflection on Hallelujah!**

More than 25 years ago, I took a graduate course in comparative linguistics under Professor Henry Kahane, a world famous linguist at the University of Illinois. Adept in more than 70 languages, Kahane was able to share with us the subtleties of language, the mystery of language, and the immense difficulties of language. At best, we have theories as to how we learn language. Professor Charles Osgood, a noted psycho-linguist expert at the University of Illinois, has proposed theories as to what happens in what he calls the little black box,” that is our brain. We are so young when we learn language that it is impossible to clearly learn the process of how we did it. Apparently, language is spoken to us and we begin to realize that some of those words have something to do with us. We are immersed in language. At some point we begin to combine, select, and develop vocabulary along with gestures, facial movements, tears, and laughter. We begin to speak our own language because language has been directed at us. Our speech simply answers speech that has come to us first.

I have shared with you my struggle in an effort to develop my own language of praise. It would seem obvious that if I am to live in the country of praise, I must become affluent in its language. I must get acquainted with its vocabulary,



be immersed in its figures of speech, and learn its subtleties in shades of meaning. Put another way, if I am to run the marathon of praise as an adult Christian, then I must begin early to get in shape through special exercises of praise to God. The language that I develop must be both personal and comprehensive so as to cover the wide-ranging experiences of my life. Additionally, I must exercise regularly by developing habits of looking at the character and nature of God and giving Him appropriate exultation.

So I have learned that the book that contains the vocabulary of praise to God is Psalms. Inevitably, every experience that I will ever have is already expressed in the praise language of the Psalms. To become fluent in the country of praise, I must learn the language of the Psalms. Enough of trying to teach myself. That just led to dilemma, confusion, and misunderstanding.

In conclusion, here are some suggestions that come from those who are already fluent in the language of praise:

1. Read five Psalms a day.
2. Read the book of Psalms once a month, 12 times a year.
3. Read slowly until you can almost quote it.
4. Take special notice of the verbs which express emotions, feelings, and attitudes.
5. Look for the word pictures which paint the life scenes.
6. Look for special emphases about life, God, righteous living, etc.
7. Use the exact language of the Psalter in personal praise to God.

As you and I journey together through the land of praise, we will begin to gain the language that we've been afraid of

through constant use of it. After all, if we are going to communicate with God, fluency is important. The message of the Psalmist is clear — the godly man praises God, not by hearsay but by experience.

**FEATURED  
CLASSES**

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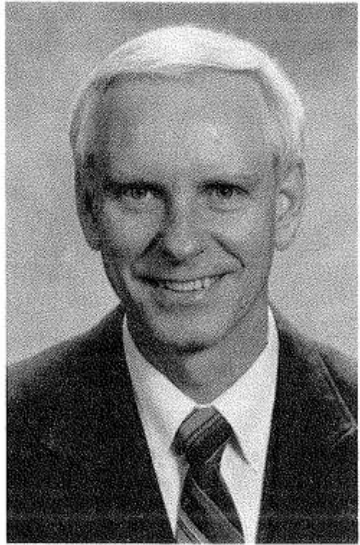
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# Learning to Love

By Willard Tate

## LESSON ONE

### Give Unconditional Forgiveness

Revenge! When you think someone has done you wrong, that's what you want to get, isn't it? But do you know how difficult it is to get even?

In the college class I teach, I try to get my students to do rational self-analysis, to write down their thoughts and analyze them. Well, one time a young woman was writing down her thoughts, and I said to her, "Okay, what happened in your situation?"

"My boyfriend did me wrong," she answered.

"All right," I responded, "what are you saying to yourself? What's your self-talk?"

She said, "Well, I'm saying things like I'd like to cut the tires on his sports car."

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*"People do the oddest things to get even."*

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"I see," I said, trying to hold back a smile. "And how many tires do you have to cut to get even? Four tires? How about three tires and a tube?"

She hadn't thought about that, but if she was going to get revenge that way, she'd have to make a decision, wouldn't she? And what if she ended up cutting one tire too many? Then she'd have to live with the guilt.

Do you see the problem you run into if you're trying to get even? You can never balance it out exactly. It's futile to try, a waste of time, effort, and emotion.

In the last chapter, we saw that one way to help people find a sense of self-worth is to give them total, unconditional acceptance. Now my second suggestion is to offer them forgiveness, to let them experience real forgiveness, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

As we've seen, people don't get much positive feedback in our society, and that's certainly true in the area of forgiveness as well. Ours is a very nonforgiving world. People don't forgive or forget others' sins. Instead, it's as though society were saying, "We've got all your mistakes here on our computer record, and we're not gonna forget or forgive. You've got to live with what you've done for the rest of your life."

Fortunately for all of us, that's not the way of our graceful God. In fact, if I were to try to describe God in human terms, I'd call Him *the God of another chance*. That's because *every time* we confess and repent of our sins, He offers us newness of life and the opportunity to start over with a clean slate. He *does* forgive *and* forget. He puts our sins away forever and declares us pure, which by His mercy and grace we are. "As far as the east is from the west," wrote David in Psalm 103, "so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

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*"Praise the God of another chance."*

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Through the prophet Jeremiah God said, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

### Forgiveness and Our Children

Other people are going to seek this forgiveness of God *after* they’ve first experienced it from us. And the logical place for us to begin is, again, in our own homes. When we’ve wronged our kids, we need to be able to say, “You know, I made a mistake. I blew it. I was wrong. Please forgive me.” That’s how they’ll learn to forgive, and that’s what will free them to offer the same quality of forgiveness to others.

We don’t do a lot of confessing to our children, but the results would be fantastic if we could learn to do it more. Maybe we just don’t think of it. Maybe we’re afraid it would make us look weak to admit our mistakes. But, Mom or Dad, I assure you your kids are already well aware of your faults. You can only gain their respect, not lose it, by admitting when you’ve wronged them and asking for their forgiveness. And there are precious few things you can do for them to better prepare them for life.

In addition to asking our children to forgive us, we also need to forgive them. They need a lot of forgiveness, of course, so we’ll get plenty of practice giving it to them! I think God has arranged family life so we’ll get lots of opportunities to let them start all over, don’t you?

Unfortunately, many parents are a lot like the referees I used to watch during my twenty years as a college basketball coach. Zebras, we called them, because of their striped shirts. Now, the referee’s job is to go around the court and find players doing something wrong so he can blow his whistle and stop them. And a lot of parents are like officials with

their kids. You might as well put the shirt on them and give them a whistle. They just go around and point out what their kids are doing wrong.

Another thing I noticed about officials is that they never give any compliments for good plays — probably because that's not their job. But it's kind of sad, actually. And when parents have that mentality, it's bad news. I also never saw an official admit a mistake, either. Now, I suppose that on a basketball court a referee has to maintain a certain image, but if you apply the same mentality in your home, you're going to have trouble. Are you playing referee with your kids?

There's a monologue I love that summarizes these things pretty well. It's called "Father Forgets," written by W. Livingston Larned, and it's spoken in the voice of a father who goes to his son's bedside after the boy has gone to sleep. The truths in it are the same if we're talking about a mother and her child. And the father is talking about the day he spent as a referee to his boy. This is what he says:

Listen, son: I am saying this as you lie asleep, one little paw crumpled under your cheek and the blond curls stickily wet on your damp forehead. I have stolen into your room alone. Just a few minutes ago, as I sat reading my paper in the library, a stifling wave of remorse swept over me. Guiltily I came to your bedside.

These are the things I was thinking, son: I had been cross to you. I scolded you as you were dressing for school because you gave your face merely a dab with a towel. I took you to task for not cleaning your shoes. I called out angrily when you threw some of your things on the floor.

At breakfast I found fault, too. You spilled things. You gulped down your food. You put your elbows on the table. You spread butter too thick on your bread. And as you started off to play and I made for my train, you turned and waved



a hand and called, 'Good-by, Daddy!' and I frowned, and said in reply, 'Hold your shoulders back!'

Then it began all over again in the late afternoon. As I came up the road I spied you, down on your knees, playing marbles. There were holes in your stockings. I humiliated you before your boy friends by marching you ahead of me to the house. Stockings were expensive — and if you had to buy them you would be more careful! Imagine that, son, from a father!

Do you remember, later, when I was reading in the library, how you came in, timidly, with a sort of hurt look in your eyes? When I glanced up over my paper, impatient at the interruption, you hesitated at the door." "What is it you want?" I snapped.

You said nothing, but ran across in one tempestuous plunge, and threw your arms around my neck and kissed me, and your small arms tightened with an affection that God had set blooming in your heart and which even neglect could not wither. And then you were gone, pattering up the stairs.

Well, son, it was shortly afterwards that my paper slipped from my hands and a terrible sickening fear came over me. What has habit been doing to me? The habit of finding fault, of reprimanding — this was my reward to you for being a boy. It was not that I did not love you; it was that I expected too much of youth. It was measuring you by the yardstick of my own years.

And there was so much that was good and fine and true in your character. The little heart of you was as big as the dawn itself over the wide hills. This was shown by your spontaneous impulse to rush in and kiss me good-night. Nothing else matters tonight, son. I have come to your bedside in the darkness, and I have knelt there, ashamed!

It is a feeble atonement; I know you would not understand these things if I told them to you during your waking hours.

But tomorrow I will be a real daddy! I will chum with you, and suffer when you suffer, and laugh when you laugh. I will bite my tongue when impatient words come. I will keep saying as if it were a ritual: “He is nothing but a boy — a little boy!”

I am afraid I have visualized you as a man. Yet as I see you now, son, crumpled and weary in your cot, I see that you are still a baby. Yesterday you were in your mother’s arms, your head on her shoulder. I have asked too much, too much.

One of the best investments you can make as a parent is to avail yourself of every opportunity for growth and development, and to expose yourself to the good material that is available. In my opinion, Dr. James Dobson is one of the top authors on parenting, and his books can be found in almost any bookstore.

### Forgiveness in Marriage

The same principle applies in the marriage relationship. There was a very popular book a few years back that was made into a big movie, and it was called *Love Story*. The favorite line that came out of that book was, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” That has a nice, sentimental sound to it, doesn’t it? But what a lie! Nothing could be further from the truth. The whole essence of marital love is saying “I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Let’s start over.”

I believe this so strongly that I’ll go so far as to say that *any marital problem can be solved if the partners are willing to forgive each other*. Let me turn that statement around to make sure you understand and it sinks in: I’m saying that a lack of forgiveness is *the only thing* that will ultimately separate a husband and wife and destroy a marriage. If, on

the other hand, the ones who feel wronged can find it in their hearts — or in the strength of the Lord, if the feelings aren't there — to forgive, any marriage can be saved and then made stronger than ever. I've known of any number of marriages, for example, where one spouse was unfaithful, and because the other spouse was willing to forgive, those marriages survived and grew even closer than before.

One time a young man came up to me during a seminar I was giving and said, "Boy, I'm really having trouble with this forgiveness you're talking about. You wouldn't believe some of the things my ex-wife has done to me."

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*"On life's road, you arrive at peace by the vehicle of forgiveness."*

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I said to him, "You know why I think it's difficult for you to forgive? You think that if you forgive her, it's going to make her right?"

"That's right," he said.

So I answered, "Don't you understand that forgiveness has nothing to do with rightness and wrongness? If she hadn't done anything wrong, you wouldn't need to forgive her in the first place." We like to think that by refusing to forgive, we somehow make the other person pay, but it's we who pay when we refuse to forgive and allow the cancer of bitterness to grow instead.

### **Forgiving Our Parents**

The next group of people we need to forgive is our parents. I know I may be hitting you right where you live when I say

that. During a seminar on the family at a retreat in the mountains of Colorado, (it was one of those terrible trips, you know, but somebody had to do it!) a man who was quite upset came up to me and said, "I'm so critical of my little boy. I'm always on him. He just never pleases me, and I can really tell it's affecting him."

"Sure," I said. "It's affecting your wife, too, because you're probably critical of her."

He said, "Yeah, what can I do?"

"Well," I answered, "I think you start by forgiving your dad."

He looked at me as if I'd hit him in the head with a hammer, and his eyes kind of rolled around two or three times. Then he said, "You know, that's right. Dad was always so critical of me; I never could do anything to please him."

"Look," I said, "till you forgive your dad, you're never gonna have any forgiveness to pass on to your little boy. That's where it starts."

I'm convinced that this need to forgive parents is at the heart of many of our problems. When we have any kind of resentment or bitterness dammed up against our parents, love and forgiveness can't flow through us to anyone else.

There was another time when I did a singles' retreat, and I knew I needed to deal with forgiveness. I started out thinking, however, that I'd need to deal with forgiveness toward former spouses because of things that were said and done during separations and divorces. But one exercise we did showed me the need they had to forgive parents as well.

We got in a little circle, and I set an empty chair in the middle and asked the singles to close their eyes. I talked quietly to relax them, and then I said, "I'd like for you to picture your mother or your father in that empty chair. Pull up all their features, their hair, their dress, their face. And then I'd

like for you to go over and give them a mental hug.” Well, I wish you could have seen the anguish and the anxiety and the straining and the tears.

And when the exercise was over, I asked how they had dealt with it. Over and over they responded with things like, “We couldn’t do it. We couldn’t do it.” It was downright painful for many of them.

Even when it’s difficult, however, and even when reconciliation is impossible because of death or some other reason, you can sit down, relax with music or a tape specifically developed for that purpose, and send thoughts of love and forgiveness to a parent — or anyone else, for that matter. Acknowledge the hurt feelings. Write them down if that helps. Recognize how often you’ve hurt God and how often He’s forgiven you. Then send thoughts of love and good wishes, along with a mental hug. You can let that old ball of resentment just kind of take wings and fly away.

There’s a book out that I highly recommend that gives some excellent exercises for forgiving your mom and dad and making peace with them. It’s called *Making Peace with Your Parents*, by Harold Bloomfield, and it could make a big difference in your life.

I’m also convinced that we can forgive because God tells us to do it, and He doesn’t ask us to do anything we can’t do. That’s why, no matter what’s happened to us, no matter how horrible it is, we *can* forgive if we want to forgive. God will show us how and give us the strength if that’s really our desire. He’s not interested in frustrating us by asking us to do the impossible.

There’s a great story about the need to forgive a parent in the movie “On Golden Pond.” The language in the film was terrible, but it taught some wonderful principles. You’ll remember that Norman and Ethel had gone to Golden Pond

to spend the summer at their cabin, and their daughter Chelsea, was coming from California for a visit, and wanted to leave her friend's son, Billy, there while she and her boyfriend went on vacation to Europe.

After Chelsea got back from Europe, she and her mother were talking as they walked down to the pier one day. Norman and Billy were out in the boat fishing, and their voices were echoing across the lake as they laughed and talked. Chelsea heard them, and you could just see the envy welling up inside her. She started saying things like, "Well, I guess it's better if you're a boy, isn't it? Dad never played with me like that."

After Chelsea had gone on like that for a while, her mother reached up and slapped her and said, "Chelsea, every time you come you start this! You've got a chip on your shoulder, and it's not very becoming of you. Life's getting on; why don't you get on with it? Chelsea, your father is nearly eighty years old. When are you going to establish a relationship with him?" All those years had gone by, and Chelsea had never forgiven her father, and it had made a bitter person out of her. Forgiveness — it's so necessary.

Some of us need to forgive God, too. Most folks look shocked when I say that, but deep down many of us blame Him for our lot in life. Why did He give me the parents He did? Why didn't He make me prettier or smarter? God isn't really at fault, of course, but because we tend to blame Him we also need to forgive Him if we're to experience peace of mind and heart. He'll understand; just go ahead and forgive Him if you've been holding something against Him.

### **Forgiveness Isn't Easy**

Now I don't mean to suggest that forgiveness is easy. It

almost never is, and often it's painfully difficult. It may mean giving up a long-held grudge or swallowing a lot of pride. But as much as forgiveness might cost, refusing to forgive is far more costly. It costs us peace of mind and good, loving relationships, time and energy, and maybe even our health. We would also do well to remember the command of Jesus, who warned us, "If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14-15).

How can we tell if we've really forgiven people? I have a simple but effective test. If we can think about them and wish them well, hoping they prosper in body and soul and find happiness, we've forgiven. However, if we wish the people misery and hope they fail in everything they try, we haven't yet really forgiven, no matter what we try to tell ourselves to the contrary.

I saw a sign in a shopping center once advertising the name of a hot dog stand, and when I saw it I said to myself, "That's the name of my next seminar." It was called "Puttin' on the Dog." My dog, K.C., used to run with Bobbie and me when we'd go jogging, about three miles or whatever. I didn't want to carry him much farther than that.

There were days when K.C. couldn't come with us, so I'd say, "K.C., you can't go today. You have to stay here." Well, he'd look so sad and disappointed. He'd tuck his little tail between his legs and just look miserable.

So what happened when we got back? Was he over in a corner, sulking, snarling, and refusing to have anything to do with me for a few days? No, you know dogs aren't like that. As soon as I had the door open, he'd be right there licking my hand and telling me he forgave me and was just glad

to have me back. The same thing would happen when we were away for a week or two and had a neighbor feed him. As soon as he saw us again, he'd wag his tail and smother us with love. When it comes to being offended, he has a very short memory. One night Bobbie and I were sitting around watching TV, and she looked at me and said, "Willard, I think I'm going to let K.C. be my example of forgiveness." And I thought, *How fantastic! That's exactly the type of forgiveness we need to extend to those who offend us.* So — when our marriage goes to the dogs, we've got it made!

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*"When your marriage goes to the dogs,  
you've got it made."*

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In a fit of anger, a guy threw a heavy stone at his dog and broke the animal's leg. And dragging the leg, the dog whined his way to his master, fell at his feet, and licked the hand that had thrown the stone. Friends, that's forgiveness, and if we can make a practice of it, we'll revolutionize our little corner of the world, and maybe a whole lot more.

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From the book, *Learning to Love*, by Willard Tate. Published by the Gospel Advocate Company 1988. Reprinted by Permission.



## LESSON TWO

### Become a People Builder

Tell me, have you ever had anyone come up to you and say, “I’ve got a problem, and I wonder if you could help me with it. I’m getting entirely too many compliments in my life, you know, and there’s got to be an end to it. I mean, it’s just ridiculous.”

That’s kind of a loaded question, because I think I know the answer already. I’ve never had it happen to me, and I doubt you’ve had it happen to you. However, I’ve had the opposite experience many times.

In any audience I’ve ever addressed, I could ask for a show of hands of those who would like to receive more compliments every day, and if people are being honest, I’d see a hand up from each and every person. I’d have people all over the place saying, “Man, where do I line up? Give me a double dose of that.”

We all want and need much more positive input in our lives than we usually get, and it’s so important in helping people gain a sense of worth and self-esteem. We’ve talked about giving people total, unconditional acceptance and about offering forgiveness, and now the attitude I’d like to try to instill is that we need to be people builders if we really want to turn this world around.

What do I mean when I say people builders? Well, first of all it means that I see people as the important thing in life, as worth fighting for. Most of the things we work and fight

for in life — possessions and prestige and all the rest — aren't really worth fighting for when you boil it down, but people are.

### Every Contact Important

Second, and this is so important, it means that I'm always aware that *every* human contact — every time two people interact in even the most superficial way — makes an impression. And every impression is either positive or negative. It either builds people up or tears them down. If we keep that in mind, in our families and whenever we go out in public, then life becomes full of opportunities to build people up.

I've been working on keeping this perspective for some time, so I can tell you this is true from personal experience. For example, once I was just sitting in a hotel lobby waiting for someone, and a hotel employee was going around cleaning out the ashtrays. He wasn't just going through the motions the way most people would, though. I've never seen anyone clean ashtrays with so much enthusiasm. He had a certain bounce in his walk that showed he was excited about what he was doing.

Now, I'd guess that most people in my position who had even noticed the guy would have smiled, and maybe even nodded at the guy. But that would have been it. When he came by me, however, I stopped him and said, "Man, you're doin' some kinda job. I can't believe this."

He said, "Yeah, I love my job."

I answered, "Well, you're not gonna be doing that very long. You'll probably own this place someday!"

He looked at me and just beamed with pride. With a few simple words, I had made his day.

I don't tell that story to make myself look good. It was a little thing I did, and anybody could have done it. There were lots of people going through that lobby who had a chance to make him feel good, who could have been people builders, but they didn't do it.

Another time just recently, I had lunch in a fast-food restaurant, and when I went to pay my bill after getting my food I gave the checkout girl some bills and change so that I wouldn't get a lot of coins back. When she gave me my change, however, it included a handful of coins. "I didn't use the change you gave me, I did it differently," she said. "Here's the change from your bills plus your other change back."

"I didn't want that," I said. "I don't want a pocket full of change pulling me over sideways. That's why I paid you the way I did."

The manager saw this going on, so he came over and said, "Oh, that's no trouble. We can take care of that." And then he gave me my change the way I had wanted it.

Afterward, all the time I was eating, I kept thinking, *I believe that girl must be new on the job. I think she didn't have the confidence in herself to make change the way I had wanted. And without meaning to, I've probably hurt her confidence.* So when I finished, I walked by the counter again and caught her eye. "Listen," I said, "you're doing a really great job! You have a good day." And like the guy in the hotel lobby, she just beamed in appreciation.

Again, this was no big deal. It didn't cost me anything, and it didn't take any more than a few seconds of my time. But it did require that I was sensitive to how even the smallest interaction between two people can have a tremendous impact on their lives.

On another occasion, Bobbie and I were flying together

to New Mexico, and Bobbie's purse was stolen. The airline representative in Albuquerque went out of her way to help us and put our minds at ease. So when we got Bobbie's purse back and the incident was over, I wrote a letter of appreciation to the woman's *boss* in Dallas. And he, in turn, wrote her a letter congratulating her for giving such good service to a customer. Now, how do you suppose she felt getting that kind of letter from her boss? And how do you think I felt knowing I had made her day? I got a lot of pleasure for the twenty-two cents it cost to mail that letter.

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*“Look for opportunities to praise.”*

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If we keep our eyes open for opportunities like that, we'll find them everywhere.

Let me offer a few brief guidelines for giving compliments:

- (1) Compliment the person directly and not just to others.
- (2) Look him or her in the eye.
- (3) Compliment the person for something he or she did, not something for which he or she isn't responsible.
- (4) Make it specific.
- (5) Keep it brief.
- (6) Be sure it's honest.

I must put in a good word for smiles, too. It's amazing the power they have to make people feel good about you and themselves. As just one example, a psychologist once gave a test to different students of comparable intelligence. He gave the same exam with the exact same instructions to two students at a time. The only difference in his presentation of the instructions was that each time he smiled at the second student as he explained the test. And the second student always got a markedly better score. Amazing! So let's be generous in our distribution of smiles.

## You Get What You Give

The third point follows right on the heels of that last one, and it has to do with what happens to *us* when we work at being people builders. How do you think *I* felt after my compliments had made the day for those two people I've told you about? I felt great! Making their day made mine, too.

The operative principle here is that we get back what we give out. Another way of saying that is that what we give to others, we ultimately give to ourselves. This may sound simple, but it's about as deep a truth as you're going to hear. It's so simple that we forget it very easily. If we're sending out criticism, griping, complaints, and general negativism, we're going to get back criticism, griping, complaints, and general negativism.

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*“What you give to others, you give to yourself.”*

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On the other hand, if we're sending out a lot of encouragement, love, acceptance, kindness, and peace, we're going to get back a lot of encouragement, love, acceptance, kindness, peace, and happiness. Life just works that way. We might call it one of the natural laws of God's universe.

However, there's one stipulation I have to add to that. We don't just get back what we give out — we get it back *multiplied*. We get back more of what we send out than we sent out in the first place, whether it's positive or negative. We don't just sow a bushel of corn to reap a bushel. We get back more than we sow.

For a long time I didn't understand it, but this is why people who always seem to gripe and complain have more to gripe and complain about. They've received back what they

sent out, multiplied. In the same way, the people who are always excited and happy and looking for good things to happen seem to have more to be happy and excited about. Whatever you give to others, you're ultimately giving to yourself.

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*“What you send out is what you get back.”*

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### **Bucket Fillers and Bucket Spillers**

People builders are what I call bucket fillers instead of bucket spillers. Unfortunately, there are more of the bucket spillers around. These are people who go around with the attitude, “Some person, or life in general, has spilled my bucket, so I’m gonna spill yours. I don’t want yours to be full if mine’s empty.”

That’s a common human reaction to life, isn’t it? And as I said earlier, it’s a big reason why people don’t encourage or compliment others. But if we want to help others and reap the multiplied benefits ourselves, we need to resolve to work at being bucket fillers instead.

Another set of names for these two types of people is candle glowers — those are the people builders — and candle blowers. The candle glower goes around helping other people’s candles to glow as brightly as possible. The candle blower, on the other hand, doesn’t like to see other people’s candles glowing at all, so he goes around blowing out as many as he can.

I read a very touching illustration of the principle that we’re giving to ourselves what we give to others in a book called *Man’s Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl. Frankl was

imprisoned by the Nazis in Germany during World War II, and he was stripped of everything — his books, his watch and wedding ring, the manuscripts he had been working on, and — most of all — his family. He had nothing left to live for except just the stubborn will to live in spite of it all.

Many people in his situation, however, didn't even have that motivation, and Frankl says they just gave up on life and willingly chose to die.

Some of the other prisoners would come to him and ask if he'd make a speech to all of them just to encourage them to hang in there for one more day and not give up all hope. Well, he said the last thing he wanted to do was make a speech, but he'd do it anyway. He'd tell the men to just hang on, that maybe when they dipped into their thin soup tomorrow, if they dipped deep in the bowl, they'd find a pea. That was a mighty slim hope to offer, but it was all he could realistically give them.

Well, by now you can probably guess what happened. Who did Frankl find was most encouraged by his little speeches? Whose hope was built up the most? His own, of course. What we give to others we're ultimately giving to ourselves.

Here's another way to remember the two types of people we're talking about. There are balcony people — they reach over the edges and pull up, or encourage, everyone they meet — and there are basement people, who pull everyone they meet down to the pits where they are. I want to be a balcony person.

Those basement people remind me of what a fisherman said once. He said he could keep crabs in a basket and never lose a one, even though there was no lid on the basket. Why? Because every time a crab started to climb out, another crab would reach up and pull him back down. I've seen a lot of

people like that. Haven't you? I guess that's why we call them crabby.

Now, I can't honestly tell you that if you start looking for opportunities to be a people builder and giving out compliments, you'll immediately, every time get a positive response. Remember, people aren't used to receiving or giving encouragement. In fact, they're so accustomed to having nobody make them feel good about themselves that you might shock some folks the first time around!

But hang in there. Somebody has to start giving out the compliments so we can all start getting them back. Somebody has to get the ball rolling. And that somebody is you and me. I don't know how long you'll have to hang in there, either, but you will reap what you sow. I get a lot of compliments today, but I sent out thousands and thousands before I started getting them back more than just once in a while. It's the sort of thing that may start slow, but it will build.

### **Be Prepared**

Here's another principle for you. I've talked about how we need to look for opportunities to build people up, and along with that, we need to have our hearts filled with love *ahead of time* so we can be ready to respond when we do find an opportunity. We have to prepare our hearts before we go looking.

My dad was a beautiful illustration of always being ready to take advantage of an opportunity to help. I grew up out in the country in Alabama, and we had a car, which a lot of other folks around there didn't have. When it got dark it was suppertime, and then after supper, very often Dad would say, "Well, I believe I'll run down to Partridge Crossroads



and fill up the car with gas. Somebody might need some help tonight.”

In those days, you see, the gas stations didn’t stay open until midnight, and Dad always wanted to have a full tank before they closed. And then I remember as a young boy hearing people rapping at the door at two or three in the morning. Some mother’s boy had been hurt in a brawl and needed to get to a hospital. Or somebody hadn’t come home, and could my dad bring his car and help them look?

And the amazing thing to me as I grew up was that not only was Dad always *willing* to go, but he was also always *ready* to go. He always had a full tank of gas.

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“*Fill your heart with love so you have plenty to give.*”

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In the very same way, we need to be not only willing, but also ready to take advantage of those opportunities to build people up that the good Lord is going to bring our way. We need to have our tanks filled with love so we’re ready to go and ready to give.

I think I’ve figured out something, and it’s that even though we set goals and work toward them, often the things that happen in our lives don’t come about because of our plans. Rather they come in *response* to our opportunities and our reaction to the situations in which we find ourselves. There’s so much that comes along that we can’t predict or control. But what we *can* control is how we react, and that’s where our Christianity really gets put to the test. And what I’m saying is that we determine beforehand how we’ll react by filling our tanks with love.

## Setting an Example

Let me say a word specifically to parents at this point. The best way for our kids to become people builders is for them to see it in us, for them to have our example to follow. This means first of all that we look for and take advantage of opportunities to build *them* up, to compliment and encourage them. And it also means they need to see us doing the kind of thing my dad did — putting people ahead of his own comfort and convenience and yes, even ahead of his pocket-book.

That's a real challenge to us, especially since it's harder today than ever to pass our values on to our kids. Television, public schools, peers, and our society as a whole have a tremendous impact on them and may be giving them a very different set of values. And if both Mom and Dad work, which is often the case, their influence on the kids is even less, because there's just no substitute for spending time together.

It used to be that Dad and Grandpa and the boys would work together in the fields all day long, while Mom and Grandma and the girls would work around the house. That was a great environment for talking and living an example, for passing on family values. But for the most part, those days are long gone.

I don't have any easy answers for this situation. All I can say is be aware of the need, be an example in how you live as well as in what you say, and make time to be with your kids. Take them with you when you go places, especially before they reach adolescence — when they still want to go out with Mom and Dad. Let them see you building up that clerk at the store, that guy at the gas station, that bank teller or waitress.

## Looking for Opportunities

Finally, let me encourage us all one more time to be looking for opportunities to fill a bucket, to make a candle glow, to pull someone up onto the balcony. We won't have to look far. There are fifteen to twenty million alcoholics in this country, each of whom touches four other people's lives in a significant way. That's sixty to eighty million hurting people right there. There are six million compulsive gamblers, and each of them touches four other lives. Three million young people run away from home every year. There's a suicide every twenty minutes, and in that same time ten unsuccessful attempts. There are a million divorces every year. Each of these lives touches four more.

It all adds up to a world of hurting people, many of whom live most of their lives in pain. But just that little spark, that little boost of encouragement from a people builder, can make all the difference to them. You can provide that spark, and what you give to others is ultimately what you're giving to yourself.

## What It's All About

I was going to a meeting with a group of college football coaches and Jerry Wilson, the defensive coordinator, got there a little early. We started talking and I said something about the session, and he responded, "Yeah, we're just so bushed." I looked in his eyes and could see the fatigue. I knew it was just a week before full-scale fall practice got underway.

"We have new lockers that were supposed to come in three months ago," he continued, "and night before last they came in at eleven o'clock. We were up until two or three in the morning putting them in. Last night I was here trying to get

the playbook ready to pass out when the players report on Sunday. We were up 'til two or three again. And if everything goes smoothly and we're fortunate, we might get out by three tonight."

"Jerry, is it worth all that work and late nights?" I asked. I noticed he had a championship ring on his finger, so I pointed to that and said, "Is that worth it?"

"No, man, that's not worth it."

"Then what's worth it?"

He pointed to a student who had come into the locker room, then to another. "That guy sitting right there," he said. "That guy over there. They're worth it."

Jerry knew the worth of people. He knew that they're worth our best efforts, and I hope the rest of us can learn the same truth. It's *people* God made in His image, *people* He loves, *people* for whom Jesus died. And as we build them up, we build ourselves as well, and bring a smile to our Father's face.

## LESSON THREE

### Learn to Express Love

Back at the turn of the century, there was something going on in orphanages around the world that was deeply troubling to authorities. Babies were dying even though they were well fed, properly clothed, and had no known diseases. No one could figure out what was happening. In fact, they didn't even have a name for what was going on, so they finally ended up calling it marasmus disease, which meant the kids were just wasting away.

Then one day Dr. Fritz Talbot went to Dusseldorf, Germany, where he visited a children's clinic. As he was walking down the hall, he saw a rather large woman carrying a baby. "Who's that?" he asked one of the nurses.

"Oh, that's old Anna," the nurse said. "When we've done everything we can medically for a baby, and it still is not doing well, we turn it over to old Anna. She's always successful."

That experience gave Dr. Talbot and other authorities the first insight into a key truth about human life, and it's that truth I want us to focus on in this chapter. Human beings desperately need loving physical contact. In fact, we can't live without it. We now know that an infant won't survive its first year of life unless it's touched physically and lovingly on a regular basis.

Thus, to cap off the giving of total and unconditional acceptance, the offering of forgiveness, and becoming people

builders, we need to learn to express love in appropriate physical ways. We need to learn to hug, to shake hands warmly, to put an arm around a shoulder.

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*“You can’t live without physical touch and you never outgrow that hunger.”*

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### **The Value of Touch**

Words of love and encouragement are important, but people need the physical contact, too. A lot of times a good hug will do more to lift a person’s spirits than all the words you could say in a day. A wise woman named Kathy Tobin wrote, “Hugs are not only nice; they’re needed. Hugs can relieve pain and depression, make the healthy healthier, the happy happier and the most secure among us even more so.

“Hugging feels good, overcomes fear, eases tension, provides stretching exercise if you’re short and stooping exercise if you’re tall. Hugging does not upset the environment, saves heat and requires no special equipment. It makes happy days happier and impossible days possible.”

I’ve had a lot of people tell me they just aren’t comfortable showing affection, but that it doesn’t bother their mates. However, when you talk to their spouses and get down to the bottom line, it’s always a different story. Sure, I know it’s easier to hug someone in your family or someone who’s been a family friend for years, but you can learn to hug others, and you can do it in a way that’s appropriate and will meet needs as nothing else will.

A writer by the name of Sidney Simon says there's a hunger in America today that's greater than all the stomach pains caused by lack of food. He calls it skin hunger — that great, great need to be touched in a loving way. It's a need we never outgrow.

I remember when I was taking a psychology class in college, and one day the professor walked in and said, "My son has a birthday today, and he's twelve years old. I went up to him this morning and said, "Son, you're twelve years old now, and that means you're a man. Men shake hands with each other; they don't hug."

Our son, Mark, was just a little fella at that time, and I thought to myself, "That's great. Isn't that something? I can't wait 'til Mark gets to be twelve and I can shake his hand and make him a man. That's exactly what I'm going to do."

You know it's funny, but we also had a daughter Elisabeth, who was younger, and somehow I knew I needed to keep hugging her. What was the difference in the two kids' skin, in the two kids' needs? None. None at all. And fortunately, with the patience of the Lord and a lot of help from a good wife, I saw the error of my way and changed my mind before it was too late.

Today, our son Mark is a dentist in Abilene, Texas, and he doesn't hesitate to hug his dad anytime. You may say, "Yeah? Well big deal." To which I would say, "Yes, it is a big deal." I can't tell you how good it makes me feel to be hugged by my children, and it makes me feel even better to know they're not afraid to do it in front of other people.

It's also a big deal because I can't remember my dad hugging me very much as I grew up. It's not that he didn't love me; I knew he did. He just wasn't brought up to think that men hug other men, or even boys. And since we parent the

way we were parented, I didn't start fatherhood as much of a hugger either. Now, though, that cycle is broken. We can learn and grow, as I have at least a little. Mark and Elisabeth also hug their children, and it will continue for generations to come. And so will I for as long as the good Lord lets me hang around. And that's really great!

We truly never outgrow the need for loving physical contact. After my dad died, I knew my mother was hurting, but I didn't know how to help. But on the weekends when we would go home, we'd visit her. One day we were sitting around talking, and almost out of the clear blue, totally unrelated to what we had been talking about, Mom looked at me and said, "Willard, if I just had somebody to hug me!"

I had been so blind, so dumb to her needs. If you had asked me to name her greatest needs after Dad died, hugging would have been the last thing on my list, if it made the list at all. But she named it first. There wasn't anything she needed more.

There's just so much power in a loving touch, in a good, healthy hug. We don't know exactly how it works — we just know it does, because that's the way God made us.

Several years ago, a social scientist by the name of Virginia Satir said we all need four hugs a day to keep the blues away, eight hugs a day for maintenance, and twelve hugs a day to grow emotionally. When she said that, everybody kind of laughed, and yet today I don't know of any social scientist or other person familiar with what makes people tick who would disagree with her. So use those figures as a yardstick to see how you're doing in giving as well as receiving hugs. And remember, what you give to others you're ultimately giving to yourself.

When a brother or a sister or a friend is hurting and you



don't know what to say, just give 'em a hug. When a child is crying, what can you do? Take him in your arms and love him. You may have thought that was something to do only when there was nothing else you *could* do, but there really isn't anything *better* you could do most of the time.

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*“Everybody needs 4 hugs a day to keep the blues away,  
8 for maintenance and 12 to grow on.”*

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A little girl arrived home late one day and told her mother she was late because her friend had broken her doll. Her mother asked, “Did you help her fix it?”

“No,” the little girl said, “I helped her cry.” She knew instinctively the value of loving touch.

Ted Sitton was the football coach at the school where I was the basketball coach, and one year he had a poor season. First, one of his top players died tragically at the beginning of the season. Then the team went through a losing season. As a fellow coach, I know what that's like. Unless you've been a coach you don't realize that it's almost like life and death, what you go through with the team. Finally, on top of all that, he got a call one morning saying his own son, Chuck, had died in a fire in a home across town.

I remember going to see Ted after I heard about Chuck, and he saw me coming. I never said a word; our bodies just fell into an embrace. We hugged each other until our bodies seemed to melt together. There was a communication there that was deeper than any words possibly could have been.

We instinctively know that many times a hug says things that are beyond the ability of words to convey. We've just got to be careful not to lose sight of the power of touch to express love in that special way.

### **Especially for Families**

Like most things we need to do and lessons we need to teach others, hugging should begin in the family. Your spouse and kids should be the first to receive your loving touch, and your kids also need to learn to do it from your example.

The best kind of hugs to get and give in a family are sandwich hugs. You get a piece of meat in the middle and a piece of bread on each side — group hugging, we might call it. Real family togetherness. But however you do it, *you* be the one to make sure everyone in your family gets four hugs a day to keep the blues away and eight hugs for maintenance and twelve to grow on.

Once after a seminar a group of us went out for dinner, together. Afterward one of the guys said to me, “Willard, can I talk to you?” I said sure, so we got in his van and visited for a long time.

Finally, after about an hour, he said, “My daughter is twelve years old, and it seems like we’re drifting apart and having trouble getting along, and I wondered if there was anything you could suggest that we might do that would help.”

I said, “Oh, I don’t know. I guess I would love her a lot. I’d tell her how special she is. I’d tell her how much I loved her. And maybe when she’s tucked in bed you can go in and turn the light out and say something like, ‘You know, when the light goes out in your room, it seems like it goes out in the whole world because you’re so special.’ I think maybe I’d have some special dates with her, too, just the two of you, maybe go out to dinner. Also, I’d hug her a lot.”

He looked at me, and his chin was quivering and his eyes broke forth like the fountains of the deep. He said, “Willard, why is it so hard to tell her? I know I love her. Why is it so hard to tell her?”

I said, "Because your dad never told you."

"How did you know that?" he said.

"Because that's where we learn our pattern of parenting," I told him.

"I never remember Dad telling me he loved me," he continued. "I never remember him hugging me."

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*"If you wait for emergency to cause you to recognize your blessing, you will probably wait too late."*

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This is very serious business. This man recognized he was losing touch with his daughter, both figuratively and emotionally, and it was mostly because he just didn't know how to express love. But we can learn. We can change for the better. I know, because I did it.

I ask my students to do interviews so I also interview people. I interviewed Dr. Jody Crumbliss when he had four children, the oldest of whom was 5, and he had no TV. Now, I figured he probably had enough money to buy a TV, but if he didn't we'd take up a collection for him. Either way, I wanted to know why he didn't have one.

He told me, "Well, I just decided I wanted to get to know my children, and my wife, too. I also made a promise to rock and read to each child every night."

I want to tell you, if we could get every father holding his kids and reading to them every night, giving them that physical, loving contact, we could throw away the keys to the jailhouse. There'd be enough love and security and warmth there to solve all the world's problems.

While we're talking about the family, I also need to say a few words about hugging in relation to the disciplining of children, especially spanking. When my kids were small, I

spanked them occasionally. And after I spanked them, I deliberately wouldn't hug them or give them any other signs of acceptance. I'd kind of keep them at a distance for a while, because I figured that if I hugged them, they'd think I wasn't serious about the discipline.

What a shame! If only I'd known better! When you discipline, that child needs more than anything to know that even though you disapprove of the behavior, you still love him or her. A little boy or girl desperately needs that assurance. So please, when you have to discipline your kids, follow it up immediately with a hug that says "I still love you; I always will no matter what you do."

### Saying "I Love You"

Even though we should all be striving to express our love clearly and directly, it's also true that many people who have trouble saying the words have other ways of expressing their love. For example, one time a young man drove up to Alaska and made a lot of money over the summer working in a fish cannery. At the end of the summer, when it was time to go back to school, he drove all the way back home to Alabama. And as he pulled up to the house and his parents came out to greet him, his father's first words were, "How's the car running?"

That might strike us as an odd greeting, but it was this father's way of saying "I love you."

I came across another example in the play *The Curious Savage*. In it these people are trying to get their mother committed to a mental institution so they can take her money. But she wasn't crazy, nor did they get her money. But she practiced total, unconditional love and acceptance on the other

people who were in the institution. One day one of the girls comes to her and says, "Nobody said they loved me today."

"Yes they have," the mother answered.

"Oh no they haven't," the girl said. "I've been listening for it. I would have heard it."

"Well, Florence told you this morning at the breakfast table. She said, 'Don't eat your food too fast.' "

"Is that love?" the girl asked.

"Why sure. There's a lot of ways of saying it without saying it, like 'Be careful,' or 'take your umbrella, it might rain.' "

And then the mother said a classic line: "You'll have to listen very carefully, 'cause most people won't be able to say it."

One way or another, we've got to let people know we care. We've got to express our love. A poem titled "If You're Ever Going to Love Me" captures this well:

If you're ever going to love me,  
     love me now, while I can know,  
 All the sweet and tender feelings,  
     which from real affection flow.

Love me now, while I am living,  
     don't wait till I'm gone,  
 And then chisel it in marble —  
     warm love words on ice cold stone.

If you have dear thoughts about me,  
     why not whisper them to me?  
 Don't you know twould make me happy,  
     and as glad as glad could be?

If you wait till I am sleeping,  
     never to waken here again,  
 There'll be walls of earth between us,  
     and I couldn't hear you then.

If you knew someone was thirsting  
for a drop of water sweet,  
Would you be so slow to bring it,  
would you step with laggard feet?

There are tender hearts all around us  
who are thirsting for our love,  
Why withhold from them what nature  
makes them crave all else above?

I won't need your kind caresses  
when the grass grows over my face,  
I won't crave your love or kisses  
in my last low resting place.

So, then, if you love me any,  
if it's but a little bit,  
Let me know while I'm living,  
so I can own and treasure it.

— Author Unknown

### **Catch Them in the Act**

Finally, when it comes to helping people feel self-esteem and worth through the four things we've talked about, let me leave you with one last thought. As you go looking for opportunities to be an accepting, forgiving, and loving people builder, don't wait until you see somebody doing something

exactly right to say a good word. Instead, be glad to find a person doing something *nearly* right. Praise people when they're trying to go in the right direction and you'll encourage them to make it. Wait till they've already arrived and many of them will never get there. Think about that.

Along the same lines, think about this: if you're better at reprimanding than you are at praising, you're asking for misbehavior from children. Did you get that? Children will repeat the behavior that gets them attention, whether it's good or bad behavior. I saw great human insight coming from Dennis the Menace in the cartoon strip one time. He was sitting in a corner of the kitchen, and he had a little tear coming out of his eye. "Mom," he said, "how come I don't have a special place to sit when I'm good?" That's an insightful question, isn't it?

Let me take you back again to the movie "On Golden Pond." You remember how critical and bitter old Norman was, the character played by Henry Fonda. He never seemed to enjoy life, and he didn't want the people around him to enjoy it very much, either. On the other hand Ethel, his wife, played by Katherine Hepburn, was so beautiful. She loved life. She'd get excited about a strawberry, a little flower, a sunrise or sunset. But Norman didn't see anything exciting in all that mess. He couldn't even hear the loons calling from out on the pond.

Then one day he was trying to light the fireplace, but he had the match backward and he was scratching and fussing and carrying on. Finally when he got it lit, he lit the whole wood bin. So here came Ethel and Billy, the twelve-year-old, and they pour water on the fire, and the water with the soot and ashes went all over the place. Norman turned to Billy and shouted, "You just made a terrible mess here!"

So Billy ran out on the porch crying, and he said to Ethel,

“I wish he wouldn’t holler at me like that.”

But Ethel, so wise and tender, pulled him up and said, “Billy, he’s not hollering at you. You just think he is. He’s hollering at life. He’s like an old lion, and he’s just seeing if he can roar again.”

Then toward the end of the movie, Norman had an apparent heart attack of some kind while he was carrying Ethel’s mother’s dishes out to the car as they were getting ready to leave the cabin for the winter. He was lying out on the porch, and Ethel was holding him and she looked up to heaven and said, “God, you don’t want him yet. He’s just an old poop.”

Well, that experience seemed to soften Norman some, and after they pulled down the curtains in the cabin and shut the doors for the last time, they started to walk hand in hand down to say good-bye to Golden Pond. And this time it was Norman who said, “Listen, listen. The loons have come to tell us good-bye.”

But my point, you see, is that he waited too long. He could have been hearing the loons all summer, and every summer before that. Don’t wait that long. Don’t let the good things you already have in your life pass you by until some tragedy comes along to make you enjoy them. You’ll probably end up waiting too long if you wait for that.

A traveling salesman called home one day. And just as he hung up the phone and walked away, it rang again. He assumed it was going to be the operator telling him to put more coins in, and sure enough it was the operator. But she said to him, “I thought you’d like to know that just as you hung up, your wife said she loved you.”

Did he need to know that? It’s life changing. Would you have been the kind of operator to take the time to call the



guy back? It seems to me that somehow God is saying to me as I write this, “Willard, tell ’em one more time that I love ’em.” I thought you needed to know that, and I love you, too.

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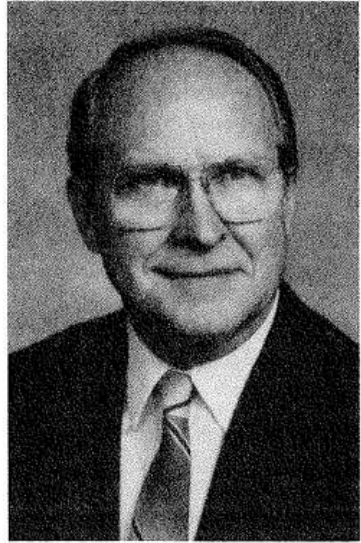
From the book, *Learning to Love*, by Willard Tate. Published by the Gospel Advocate Company 1988. Reprinted by Permission.

# JAMES O. WOODROOF

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# **The Church in Transition**

**By James S. Woodroof**

## **LESSON ONE**

### **“Only the Essential Survives”**

From beginning to end, the book of Acts is an account of a church in transition. Geographically, the church expanded from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the outlying nations of the Roman empire. Individually, the leaders of the church grew from immaturity to maturity, leaving behind the innocence of early discipleship for the confident walk of seasoned ambassadors. Corporately, the church emerged from a gathering of strangers to a close-knit fellowship, sharing both property and lives. Ethnically, the original Jewish sect of disciples evolved into an international movement incorporating people from every race and culture. The account of the first three decades of church history is a chronicle of a church caught in the crucible of change.

One might reasonably think the book of Acts would be also a record of the early disciples' enthusiastically endorsing these God-ordained transitions from the old to the new, from Moses to the cross, from the bay-water of Judaism to the open sea of an international brotherhood. Wrong! Acts is more nearly a record of a church entrenched in tradition, rooted in racial

prejudice, doing all in its power to prevent the transition from taking place.

At first glance this seems unthinkable. Surely the church of God would not try to abort the plan of God! But it did. The attempt to do so is well documented:

1. An all-out persecution was required to scatter the first church to areas beyond the vicinity of Jerusalem. Upon the death of Stephen “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). This is not to imply that the early years of the Jerusalem church were wasted or without purpose. But it does make one wonder whether or when those early disciples would have gone on their own initiative.

2. A special revelation was required to the apostle who had the keys of the kingdom to motivate him to unlock the kingdom to the non-Jews of the world. Even then Peter strenuously resisted the revelation in its original form (involving the eating of “unclean” animals — Acts 10:9-16), saying, “Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” He resisted three times and three times the Lord replied, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

3. Though Peter finally got the point, it did not mean the rest of the church was in agreement. In fact, a special explanation was demanded by the Jerusalem church: “When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them’ ” (Acts 11:2). Peter’s answer is interesting. After explaining that God had given Cornelius and his family and friends the same gift of the Spirit the Jewish believers had received at the beginning of the movement, he then said, “Who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (11:17). Evidently, Peter was as uncomfortable with his actions as were

his Jerusalem brethren. He told them, in essence, "I would not have done such a thing, but I was outvoted."

Luke also records the Jerusalem church's response: "When they heard this, they had no further objections, and praised God. . . ." But just how counter this ran to their natural inclinations surfaced in their remark, "So then God has granted *even the Gentiles* repentance unto life" (11:18).

4. Also, a special ambassador to the Gentiles had to be appointed by God himself to spearhead the campaign to the non-Jewish people. Saul of Tarsus was commissioned to "carry [Jesus'] name before the Gentiles and their kings. . ." (Acts 9:15). He accepted the appointment and made it his life's work. But it set him on a collision course not only with the Jewish people who resisted Jesus outright, but with that Jewish segment of the Christian movement which resisted Gentile inclusion. In fact, his assignment proved ultimately to be his death warrant.

5. A public rebuke was required to make Peter live consistently with the revelation he had received some years earlier:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James; he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a

Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Gal. 2:11-14

6. All this change, all this impending transition required a special convocation in Jerusalem to debate whether the old ways would persist or whether a new and different order would prevail. The debate is recorded quite openly in Acts 15.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' (v. 1)

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (15:1-2).

After thrashing the issue thoroughly, the outcome was expressed in the letter sent from Jerusalem to all Gentile Christians. It read:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul — men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth that we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy

Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

The result, in a word, was a vote for transition. But that vote was not unanimous. Significant segments of the church held their tongues and bided their time to renew the fight for the old paths.

7. In addition to that official letter, it was necessary that five other major documents (Romans, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians) be written to confirm and reinforce the decisions reached in the Jerusalem conference. Add to those five the remainder of Paul's writings which make reference to this problem: First Corinthians (1:10-25), Philippians (3:1-21), First Thessalonians (2:14-16), First Timothy (1:3-11), and Titus (1:10) and one becomes aware of a problem of major proportions. So, in addition to the book of Acts which records the conflict as history, there are ten other New Testament documents which address what proved to be the most pressing problem of the first century.

From the above information we are forced to the conclusion that, had the transition (from a Jewish/national to a non-Jewish/international constituency) been left up to the early Christians, the process would have been snuffed out long before it became a reality. Only at the constant prodding of God did the transition take place.

But why all the resistance to this God-ordained transition? Why did God's people oppose God's plan? Why was there such entrenched opposition, such prolonged resistance?

There can be any number of answers — comfort with the

status quo, aversion to risk, the equating of “what is” with truth (thus any change is tantamount to the abandoning of convictions. Perhaps the most common reason however, is fear — fear of loss of the old and familiar, fear of the new, of the untried. The collapse of the Israeli government in March of 1990 is an example of this. The government of Yitzhak Shamir lost a no-confidence vote Thursday (March 15, 1990), the first such loss ever in the 42-year history of the Israeli parliament. Shimon Peres, former prime minister and leader of the opposition Labor Party, said Shamir “represents an old fear — fear to move forward toward peace, fear to make peace with Egypt, fear to make peace with Jordan, fear to open a dialogue with the Palestinians.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, fear of change was cited as the major cause of the intransigence and subsequent failure of the Shamir government.<sup>2</sup>

Fear of change may also explain the intransigence of some who attempt to follow Jesus. It is, however, a hallmark of true discipleship that disciples follow Jesus wherever he might lead, even when to follow is to fear.

Jesus was an outspoken advocate of change. He openly challenged the traditional view of the Sabbath, ceremonial washings, sexual discrimination, ethnic elitism, social discrimination and much more. His philosophy on change can be summed up by saying 1) though he did not come “to destroy the law, (Matt. 5:17), 2) he did insist that the “new wine of his teachings must be poured into new wineskins” (Lk. 5:38).

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<sup>1</sup>“Israel may be on new peace path,” Abraham Rabinovich, USA Today, 3/16/90.

<sup>2</sup>But Peres was unable to form a coalition government to replace the Shamir government and shortly after the vote of no-confidence the void in leadership was once again filled by Shamir and an even more rabid partisan coalition.



Had the early disciples been watching Jesus' actions or listening to his words, they would have known he was calling them to a perpetual state of flexibility.

Heeding Jesus' call to flexibility requires two major attributes, both of which, though painful, are absolutely essential. It requires, first, a capacity to discern between the eternal and the temporary; the universal and the parochial; the essential as opposed to the incidental; and, second, a humble willingness to hold to the one and release the other. Both these attributes are rare within the church and constantly confrontive of it.

Especially are they confrontive if a particular religious movement is more than a generation or two old. Religious movements are like families: if they live in one place very long, they tend to accumulate excess baggage which reflects the culture around them. And they tend to become attached to the culture and the baggage. It is virtually impossible for a couple to move who have lived in the same house for 40 years. It's too painful! Moving demands difficult decisions: "What should we throw away? What should we take with us? What should we, perhaps, put in storage?" And the process becomes more complicated and more painful if one or the other of the couple tends to be a "pack rat," someone who can't bear to throw anything away or leave anything behind. But families whose jobs require them to move frequently (such as military families) learn what is essential to their existence and what is merely coincidental; what must be brought along and what can be left behind.

The same is true of churches. The longer a church stays in one culture, the more likely it is to accumulate the trappings and baggage of that time and place, and the harder it is to cut loose from those things. But a church which decides to be involved in spreading the good news about Christ over

the earth, must decide to be a church in transition. And that means it must be prepared to travel light; to stand ready to jettison any method or language or practice which may get in the way of their task. Churches can do it just like families do it.

A Lutheran minister in eastern Europe learned this lesson well as he attempted to minister under the oppression of communism. The adverse circumstances required him to distinguish the eternal from the temporary. One day he led 200 adult believers through the center of town in open daylight, in the middle of winter, to a nearby river. He chopped a baptistry out of the ice and proceeded to baptize those 200 believers in that icy grave. As biblical as this was, one of his parishioners objected to his not maintaining the Lutheran traditions of ritual and external trappings. In defense, the minister replied, "In times like these, only the essential survives."

This statement should not surprise us. All of us, at one time or another, make similar judgments as to what can and what cannot be left behind; what survives and what does not. The same challenge faces any serious attempt to spread the Christian message to the world. Constant is the need to separate the true gospel from what is merely cultural or temporary.

The Spring 1982 issue of the periodical *WHEREVER* contains a list of specific practices and commands which appear in the New Testament. Which of these are to be applied at all times and all places (P = Permanent)? Which are merely temporary and parochial, needed only for a specific, limited time and location, and never intended to be universal and eternal in application (T = Temporary)? That list included:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1. Greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16)                              | P T |
| 2. Abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29)                           | P T |
| 3. Be baptized (Acts 2:38)  | P T |
| 4. A woman should have a veil on her head (1 Cor. 11:10)                        | P T |
| 5. Wash one another's feet (John 13:14)   | P T |
| 6. Extend right hand (left hand?) of fellowship (Gal. 2:9)                      | P T |
| 7. Ordain by the "laying on of hands" (Acts 13:3)                               | P T |
| 8. A woman must not "speak in assembly" (1 Cor. 14:35)                          | P T |
| 9. Fixed hours of prayer (Acts 3:1)   | P T |
| 10. Sing songs, hymns, spiritual songs (Col. 3:16)                              | P T |
| 11. Abstain from eating blood (Acts 15:29)                                      | P T |
| 12. Slaves, obey your earthly masters (Eph. 6:5)                                | P T |
| 13. Observe the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:24)                                    | P T |
| 14. Do not make many oaths (James 5:12)   | P T |
| 15. Anoint the sick with oil (James 5:14)                                       | P T |
| 16. Permit no woman to teach men (1 Tim. 2:12)                                  | P T |
| 17. Preach two by two (Mark 6:7)  | P T |
| 18. Go into Jewish synagogues to preach (Acts 14:1)                             | P T |
| 19. Eat what is set before you asking no questions of conscience (1 Cor. 10:27) | P T |

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 20. Prohibit women from wearing braided hair,<br>gold or pearls (1 Tim. 2:9) | P T |
| 21. Abstain from fornication (Acts 15:29)                                    | P T |
| 22. Do not seek marriage (1 Cor. 7:27)                                       | P T |
| 23. Be circumcised (Acts 15:5)   | P T |
| 24. Women should pray with head covered<br>(1 Cor. 11:5)                     | P T |

Even a brief exercise like this underscores the fact that we all are involved in the process of deciding for ourselves about religious matters; whether they are universal or only parochial, eternal or temporary, essential or incidental. And we must concur with the observation: "In times like these, only the essential survives. Admittedly, there is a wide variance of opinion as to what is essential, thus considerable diversity exists on most subjects. And no follower of Christ has ever made the right judgment 100% of the time. No one! Not I, not you, not anyone. To claim otherwise is sheer arrogance.

The missionaries of southern Africa decided to have their 1978 missionary retreat in Malawi. B. Shelburn, an "anti-Sunday School" missionary living and working in Malawi became aware of the retreat of the "Sunday School" brethren and decided to volunteer as host. He and his lovely wife Ruth served all those "Sunday School" brothers and sisters in the most selfless, Christ-like manner. They drove them to and from the airport; they arranged for housing, food, meeting place, etc. They washed feet and served us so well that no one went away from that retreat without feeling loved. B. Shelburn made the decision that the Sunday School/Non-Sunday School issue was not one of the eternal, universal truths worth separating brother from brother. So he set it aside, preferring to welcome and serve people who differed

with him.

In 1988 I was again in Africa and learned that the Christian church missionaries had decided to forego the use of the organ in their evangelistic efforts in Malawi. It was not that they had decided the organ was unscriptural; it was just unwieldy. Never-the-less, their decision illustrates the principle: "In times like these, only the essential survives."

A missionary to France regularly imported, you guessed it, Welches unfermented grape juice. He did so because he felt obligated to use that particular form of the fruit of the vine for the Lord's supper in order to be scriptural. Most who read this will not agree with his conclusion but can't help identifying with the process. The missionary was convinced that unfermented grape juice was one of the eternal, universal, and essential ingredients of Christianity.

Let me say again: we all are involved in the process of deciding about religious matters; whether they are universal or only parochial, eternal or temporary, essential or incidental. And no one does it 100% right. No one!

You may be asking the question: "What are you leading up to?" And you already may be feeling a bit uneasy even without my addressing a long list of things that are troubling the church today. Such things as church autonomy, one-over-one discipling, clapping, instrumental music, a cappella-type music which synthesizes instruments of music but the sound is made with the human voice, choruses, solos, women's role in the church, unity meetings, etc., etc., etc. And eventually all of us get nervous over something.

But before you push the panic button, I'm asking you to visualize yourself in the place of another person who faced similar disturbance in the church of his day. That person was the Jewish Christian of the first century. Think of the trauma he must have felt when he was confronted with the transition

required in the spread of the kingdom from his Jewish culture to the diverse non-Jewish cultures of the Roman world. So much "baggage" had to be acknowledged as just that — baggage; cultural or even religious baggage, but baggage nonetheless. Some of it was the result of centuries of accumulation and proliferation of human traditions recorded in their many books of regulations which in their words, "placed a hedge about the Law," safe-guarding it from infraction.

But there was more to it than that. Much of what the Jewish Christian had to recognize as baggage was not just that which resulted from human accumulation; but also that which had come to them through divine revelation. Much of the religion which the Jews had treasured from the very cradle of their nation had to be re-thought. Were those things universal and eternal, or were they parochial and temporary? For the most part, the Jew never considered for a moment that those things were anything but permanent and non-negotiable. To think otherwise was out of the question.

The list is impressive: circumcision, Sabbath keeping, the feasts such as Passover, Pentecost, etc., kosher foods, ceremonial washings, all of which set the Jew apart as God's peculiar people. These things lay at the very foundation of the Jewish distinctiveness; they had to do with his identity — a matter not lightly dismissed by Jew or non-Jew, then or now.

But there was a peculiar twist to the story of the Jewish-Christian church in transition. There was good news and bad news. The Jewish Christian himself was not required to give up those things. He could go to his grave still keeping the Sabbath, circumcising his children, observing the food and feast laws, thus experiencing no drastic change in national or ethnic customs. In a sense, that was good news. But the bad news was that the Jew was not allowed to bind those things

on other groups as they came to Christ.

But why was that bad news? Because, suddenly the Jewish Christian was confronted with the prospect of there being other Christians who did not act like him. They were not circumcised, did not keep the food laws nor the feast days which were so precious to the Jew, nor did they observe the Sabbath and a host of other traditions. This threatened the distinctiveness which the Jew had felt all his national life. The Jew was like an only child who had enjoyed his father's special attention for 1400 years. Now, suddenly, there came another child into the family who looked different from the Jewish "only child." The Jew felt displaced and threatened.

With the coming in of the non-Jewish nations, uniformity went out the window and diversity became the order of the day. And in order for the Jewish nation to accept such a revolutionary transition, some other things had to go out the window: sectarian pride, separatism, exclusivism, and elitism. They had to go. And to replace those vices? Humility. It was not easy for the Jewish Christian of the first century to accept the presence of people in the kingdom who did not look and act like him. It was not easy for him to say, and mean, what Peter said to Cornelius: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35).

The French have a saying: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." Here we are, standing at the threshold of the third millennium, faced with the same task of communicating the good news to untold millions of people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultural settings. We are almost as concerned about identity and distinctiveness as was the first century Jewish Christian. What must we, like they, accept as temporary and parochial, appropriate for a certain limited time but not intended for all times? What must

be admitted as being peripheral and incidental? Will we be more willing than the Jew to acknowledge those things and turn loose of the controls of the kingdom? I dare say that turning loose should not be as difficult for us as for them, for there is nothing that we, in the American Restoration Movement, have accumulated in our short history that can in any way compare with those things the Jews accumulated and revered in the course of their 1400 year history.

And probably like the Jew, these accretions to our faith are matters that, in themselves, are good; they are things we can go to our graves practicing. Should we recognize that we too are a church in transition, there probably will be no massive revolution in our worship practices or in the general manner in which we behave religiously. In a sense that is good news. And yet, there is some bad news as well: We, 20th century "American Restoration" Christians, like the 1st century "Jewish" Christian, are suddenly confronted with a threat to our distinctiveness. For, if we are free to continue serving God in the manner of our fathers, we are not free to bind those traditions on others. Those who come to God from backgrounds and traditions different from our peculiar heritage must be permitted to accept the eternal and reject the temporary. We, however, are faced with the unsettling prospect of there being Christians on earth, as fully acceptable to God as we, who do not look and act exactly like us.

We have always balked at this prospect. Look at the thirty or more official divisions among us if you doubt our unwillingness to fellowship those who differ from us. We stand convicted by irrefutable evidence that we have been practicing and perpetuating sectarianism and divisiveness. The Jewish Christians, known as the "Judaisers," constituted the first sect in Christendom. Following in that tradition of religious elitism has been a long line of groups who felt equally con-



fidant that their traditions and customs were sufficiently sacrosanct to justify splitting the body of Christ.

Among the elitists' most ardent followers are many of us in the churches of Christ in America today. Intent on maintaining our distinctiveness, we have been guilty of severing the body of Jesus limb from limb. We have divided over such matters as cups and kitchens, organs and orphans, race and ritual, puppets, pastors and personalities, contribution and cooperation, and a host of other things. None of these issues can hold a candle to the sacredness of the ancient practices cherished by the Jews of the first century. If God did not allow the Jewish Christians at that time to bind on others things he himself had commanded, God is not going to allow us to bind on others things that we have arrived at by Aristotelian logic and inferential syllogism.

The church in transition will accumulate much innocent, incidental, and even beneficial baggage while existing in a particular culture. But it must never elevate these to the level of the essential and bind them on others as it attempts to witness relevantly to a lost world. The church must be willing to recognize what is temporary, parochial, and incidental to the everlasting good news of Jesus Christ. To do otherwise is to contribute to the spread of sectarianism. To do otherwise is to drop the baton committed to us by the eternal, universal Lord when he commissioned us to preach the good news of peace to every person on earth.

## LESSON TWO

### God's Logo

In the preceding lesson we left the Jewish Christians resisting the transition that God intended to be part and parcel of the Christian religion. We left them chaffing under the prospect of there being Christians who were not like them. While many came reluctantly to the conclusion that this was God's will, others concluded "the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). Had you asked this latter group to explain its position, they would have made sound, even scriptural, arguments, but they still would have been wrong and opposed to the express will of God.

Let's go back and pick up the story in Acts 10 and watch the early Christians struggle with the transition that was inevitable in the spread of Christianity from Jewish to non-Jewish people. What was the universal, eternal message that was preached to the non-Jewish nations? It is of special importance to us in this study as we relate to the world today.

Simon Peter was visiting in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Simon Tanner on Seashore Drive in Joppa, Israel. The time is the early 40s A.D. About noon:

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth

and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back into heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you are looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

Cornelius started from the beginning and related to Peter the things that had happened; how he had seen the vision and had been instructed to send for Peter.

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

With these historic words Peter ushered in an entirely new age, never before known by humans. Between Peter's puzzled statement, "Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" and his bold admission, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" lay an enormous distance in attitude. It may not be possible for 20th century Gentiles to realize what a phenomenal transition of attitude had taken place in this first century Jew. Coming from the absolute exclusivism of Judaism to an inclusivism so broad as to encompass every nation was truly a giant step. We must not minimize the distance covered by it.

We should be aware also of the precarious change of latitude it posed as a consequence. His statement, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" must have sounded like rank universalism to the Jewish brothers who accompanied Peter. If God did not play favorites, why had he chosen the Jews? Could Peter really mean that right-heartedness was more important than right heritage? At this point the Jews with Peter did not know where Peter was going or where the things he was saying would lead. But let's leave the rest of the story till later, and make some observations before we move on.

There is a startling parallel between those early Christians'

experience and that of the 20th Century church. We, like they, balk at the prospect of there being Christians not totally like ourselves. We, like the Jewish Christians of the first century, have been sitting in a position of sectarian elitism for years. Just like Peter, we have protested, "No, Lord we have never associated with religious people not like us." The numerous divisions among us attest to this unwillingness.

And so we have gone our separate ways — brothers and sisters who have been born of the same God washed by the same blood, filled with the same Spirit — alienated by cups and buildings and kitchens and translations and methods and a score of other things. How many times will we reject the vision of God and scorn his command "Do not call unclean what I have cleaned" before we confess with Peter, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men of every nation (notion?) who fear him and do what is right." Humility must replace the pride that has controlled us before we will accept God's plan for the human race. Are we listening?

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The phone rang. It was my second cousin, Greg Haygood, calling from Tampa, Florida. He was the campus minister for the college church — the one near the campus of Florida College. Florida College was once known as Florida Christian College but, because of their opposition to "institutionalism," the board decided to delete "Christian" from the name of the college. Now Greg was the campus minister for that college church and a delightful, dedicated Christian.

"Hi, Greg," I said. "What's up?" "Uncle Jim," as he called me, "I want to invite you to come down to Tampa and spend a few days talking to my campus group about Jesus."

And he laughed a bit nervously.

“But Greg,” I said, somewhat skeptical, “the church there will tar and feather both of us. You know they regard me as a heretic.”

“No,” he assured me, “it will be O.K. Just talk to us about Jesus. We really want you to come.”

And it was O.K. The students had been converted to Christ so they were able to overlook the doctrinal differences centering around the issue of institutions, etc. I spent about three days among them, thankful for the common bond that held us together.

I boarded the plane and flew back to College Station, Texas, where I was in regular contact with another young man. Whereas Greg was part of a church a good bit to my right theologically, this man was a preacher for a conservative Christian church, a church somewhat to my left. He was a fairly recent convert from Roman Catholicism. He had adopted me as a father figure (no pun intended). He borrowed ideas from me and I got some from him. He borrowed our Jule Miller filmstrips, our projector, our baptistry, our vacuum cleaner. We always talked at length about the Bible, and we prayed for unity among believers.

It so happened that I was in a sermon series at the A&M church on the book of Ephesians. The text for the sermon that particular Sunday morning, after returning from Florida, was Ephesians 2:14-17.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put

to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

I was struck by the immediate application to me and those who differed from me. All three of us were men who were intent on living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As certainly as Christ had destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile with their mega-differences, so had God surely done the same between these men and me with our minor differences.

As I stood there before the congregation of believers, none of whom held the exact convictions, opinions or faith of any other person in that assembly, I became aware of an intense longing to spend the rest of my life walking the path of peace. I paused a moment and then said,

I want to go on record this morning, and I want you to bear me witness, that I fully intend — God being my helper — to spend the rest of my life preaching peace as Jesus did, and being a peacemaker as he was. I intend to spend the rest of my life building bridges, not walls.

It was four more years before I would discover Acts 10:36 — “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.” I was impressed by the simplicity of this statement: “You know the sermon God preached to Israel.” The allegory is powerful. God is the preacher, Israel is the congregation, and Jesus himself is the sermon. Suddenly, God’s activity on earth came sharply into focus. What God was trying to say to the human race was embodied in Jesus and was characterized as being “good news of peace.”

God was the first great cross-cultural communicator. That was accomplished first when he communicated from the realm of light to the realm of darkness and stated verbally, "Let there be light." He continued that cross-cultural communication through the years as he "spoke . . . through the prophets at many times and in various ways." "But," the writer says, "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1, 2). Once more, Jesus is declared to be God's sermon.

The word used for "message" in Acts 10:36 is the Greek word "LOGOS." You are aware of the significance of this word. It was a trans-cultural word known and revered by Jew and Greek alike. John used it to describe God's visit to this planet:

In the beginning was the Word (LOGOS), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

To sense the importance of LOGOS in our culture we need only look to the advertising media and their adoption of that word in the form of "logo." A logo is a visible representation of an idea. It is a symbol which most nearly represents a person or business. It is the essence of that for which a person stands and becomes the vehicle chosen to communicate the nature of the person employing it. When Peter used the word LOGOS to speak of God's sermon he was saying, "This is what God is all about."

God's message was enfolded in the man Jesus in general and exhibited specifically in the attribute of peace. Peace was



God's big picture. It was his cardinal doctrine; the bottom line of his mission. It was the essence of what he was doing, the sum and substance of what he was all about. It is the heart, the core of his agenda on earth.

This shouldn't surprise us. The Messiah is pictured by Isaiah as "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6), and "of the increase of his reign and of peace there will be no end" (9:7). The angels at his birth announced that there would be on earth "peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Lk. 2:14). Peace was a major plank in his platform. Jesus brought peace between God and man; peace between a man and himself; peace between man and fellowman. He often was heard to say, "Peace be with you," or "Go in peace." He wept over Jerusalem because they "did not know the things that make for peace" (Lk. 19:41, 42).

His teachings directed people to peace. The beatitudes, which have been called the "essence of the essence" of Jesus' teachings, are woven throughout with the thread of peace:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The seventh beatitude (the peacemakers) describes the ultimate quality of the kingdom mindset, enjoyed only after one has experienced all the attitudes which precede it. Having come, then, to the peacemaker's frame of mind, one is able to be at peace even in the midst of persecution. Only because his peace initiative aroused opposition did Jesus describe his coming as bringing a sword (Matt. 10:34). He is, in reality, the "Prince of Peace."

Practically speaking, the most visible result of God's intervention into the human predicament is the restoring of peace to an estranged, separated, alienated humanity — "thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (2:16). Man's inhumanity to man had reached pandemic proportions. The wedge of alienation had been driven deeper and deeper into the social soil of the planet earth. Someone had to step in and interrupt the vicious cycle of animosity.

Enter the Prince of Peace who:

. . . broke down the dividing wall of hostility . . .  
 that he might create in himself one new man in place  
 of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us  
 both to God in one body through the cross, thereby  
 bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and  
 preached peace to you who were afar off and peace  
 to those who were near. . . .

Eph. 2:14-17

The love offering that Jesus made on the cross was a peace offering, pure and simple. The transaction was complete; the chasm was spanned; the walls of separation were removed. There was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for all were one in Christ. They were no longer "strangers and sojourners," but . . . fellow citizens with the saints and members of the family of God. Peace had finally

been restored and the insistent hunger in the human heart had been filled by the Prince of Peace. It is no wonder Peter described the message that God sent to Israel as “the good news of peace through Jesus.”

As those who profess to be followers of Jesus, what has been our cardinal doctrine over the last century? What has been our “logo?” What have we highlighted as our major emphasis? Has it been the same as that which God came preaching? Has it been peace? Have we been known as peace makers? To anyone who has his finger on the pulse of our movement, the answer to these questions is obvious. Peace has not been our hallmark. We have not been identified as peacemakers. Both within and without our ranks we have left a trail of a different kind.

Gayle Erwin, author of *THE JESUS STYLE*, is not a member of our movement. His background had been with Assemblies of God until he broke with that group because of their focus on something other than Jesus. It was Gayle who said, “The real Pentecostal revival has not yet occurred; when it does, it will be Christ-centered, not Spirit-centered.”

He was once a guest in our home in Boston. At breakfast one morning my wife Louine asked him, “Have you ever known any members of the church of Christ before you met us?”

There was a brief pause. Then he said, “Yes.”

There was a long pause. We kept waiting for him to continue.

When he offered no further comment Louine asked quiz-zically, “Well??” He looked a bit embarrassed and replied, “Well, I wondered, ‘What on earth did they put in that water?’ Because, everyone of you I had ever met had always come up out of the water arguing.”

We’ve not been known as peacemakers.

What *has* been our major concern, our cardinal doctrine, our big picture over the years? Has it not been an overriding concern for purity of doctrine? One doesn't have to be a student of church history to know that our historical roots are sunk deep in the soil of doctrinal purity. Our mottos express this concern: "Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent." "Call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways." As fine and noble as these mottos are, it must be noted that we have made our logo something different from God's logo of peace. We have made our emphasis different from God's.

But the most disturbing point is that, not only has our emphasis on doctrinal purity been different from God's, our emphasis has actually worked counter to God's expressed emphasis of peace. Our preoccupation with doctrinal purity, instead of fostering peace, has fueled war. Our "logo," instead of bringing us to peace, has brought us to pieces. Our desire for purity of doctrine at all costs has fractured our movement, aborting Jesus' peace initiative and making a mockery of his prayer for unity. This should disturb us deeply.

"What are you saying?" you ask. "Are you suggesting we no longer make purity of doctrine our cardinal concern, but rather peace?" That is precisely what I am suggesting. In light of the above information, what other conclusion can one draw unless one is willing to spend his life preaching a different message from the one God came preaching.

In a very real sense, I have nothing against pure doctrine. But I insist on letting God determine what that doctrine is, what is central to it and what is peripheral, what is vital and what is incidental. I am not content to allow some man or group of men to set a doctrinal agenda for the church, especially when that agenda subverts the principal message of Jesus. Instead we must have the courage to let God deter-

mine what is to be our major doctrine, and then go to the gallows for it. If we are content to let God set the tone and determine the doctrine, then we will go the route of peace, for that is what God came preaching. How can we possibly do otherwise and still call ourselves God's church?

## LESSON 3

### The Long and Short of It

The sermon God preached to Israel was “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). Peace was the cardinal doctrine God communicated cross-culturally from the realm of light (where he lives) to the realm of darkness (where man lives). It was not a nondescript sort of peace, nebulous and undefined. Rather it was the peace demonstrated by Jesus in his life (John 14:27) and documented by Jesus in his death (Eph. 2:14-18). Jesus is the embodiment of the peace of God on earth. The “good news of peace through Jesus Christ was the first eternal truth to come through the cultural filter and be proclaimed universally.

Never was the “sermon of peace” preached more boldly than in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10). Peter’s confession that God is no respecter of persons, and the subsequent baptism of a Gentile household, opened the flood gates through which the good news of peace flowed to all men. The events at Cornelius’ house stand as the pivotal point in the transmission of the divine message to the planet earth. All the pieces of the divine puzzle were in place; all the players of the divine/human drama were on stage; the long-awaited Abrahamic promise was about to unfold.

God’s peace initiative (which had been in preparation for centuries) had begun with the birth and ministry of the Prince of Peace. The cross opened a door through which an estranged human was given access to the peace of God. The resurrec-

tion of Israel's Messiah brought in a new age free of the fear of death. The Jewish contingent had been ushered in (Acts 2) and was standing center stage in the drama. Now, in Acts 10, the non-Jew was brought on stage and was waiting expectantly to hear "words by which he could be saved." And Peter began to speak:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men of every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel: telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached — how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were

astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus.

This text first came alive for me in early April of 1970. It happened on the Aegean seacoast in the country of Turkey. My family and I were making our way home from our work in New Zealand, camping our way through Asia Minor and Europe. The place we happened to camp on this particular evening was in the general area of the seven churches. I sat there thinking of all the sacred scenes this area had witnessed. Paul had traversed this area by ship and on one occasion, had walked through this very region (perhaps a few miles more to the north — Acts 20:13-14). It was in this same region where John the apostle was exiled to Patmos. As I looked out across the sea I saw an island and imagined it to be Patmos.

My mind was soaking up the spiritual atmosphere of the region. I thought of John and his beautifully sensitive insight into the heart of his Master. I thought of his exile; of his later years which tradition says he spent in Ephesus with Jesus' mother Mary as his house guest. With all these visions and more swimming round in my head, I lay down and slept, confident that God really was at work in the world and in my life.

About 5:30 the next morning, as was my custom, I awoke and reached for my Bible for some early morning reading. I turned to the place marked and found it to be Acts, chapter 10. I began to read and, for the first time in my life, I understood the significance of what was recorded. There in vv. 36-38 was a record of the message which Peter says "God



sent to Israel.” When I grasped the importance of that statement (this was God’s sermon to the world!), and saw the simple outline of that message, I nearly fell out of the camper!

Admittedly, it is only an outline, but it succinctly sums up the contents of the full record of Jesus’ life found in the gospels. As an “outline” it has no more power, in itself, to satisfy spiritual hunger than a recipe has the necessary ingredients, in itself, to satisfy physical hunger. In fact, if Cornelius had had only the outline recorded in 10:34-38, there would not have been enough information to have moved him to faith. But notice something Peter acknowledged from the start: “You know the message God sent to Israel.” Peter affirmed that Cornelius already knew the message of peace God had preached through Jesus; that Cornelius had “realized, perceived, experienced, learned to know”<sup>1</sup> the great event that had happened during those years of Jesus’ ministry. It is not just surface, passing knowledge, but an experiential awareness.

But how could that be? Did Cornelius cross paths with Jesus during Jesus’ personal ministry? Well, it’s possible. They were contemporaries in time and also in location. (Caesarea was only forty miles from Jerusalem — though forty miles was a much greater distance then than now, it was not prohibitive to regular travel.) Could Cornelius have known Jesus? Definitely. Cornelius is described as a “devout and God-fearing man who gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” From this description we know that Cornelius was heavily involved in the religious life of the Jewish nation at the very time Jesus was going about his ministry.

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<sup>1</sup>Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), vol. 5, p. 110.

So the pieces are all there for this man to have had a personal knowledge of Jesus.

Interestingly, there was a centurion who personally experienced God's peace initiative through Jesus. We don't know his name, but we know in detail the event which caused him to "know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached." The story is told in Luke 7:1-10. He had a valuable servant who was at the point of death. He heard of Jesus and sent some of the elders of the Jews to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. The elders came to Jesus and described the centurion in words similar to those describing Cornelius: "This man deserves you to do this, for he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion did something that demonstrated his faith in a powerful way. He sent other friends to tell Jesus, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. . . . But say the word and my servant will be healed. . . ." Jesus turned to those who followed and remarked, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

It is pure speculation to suggest that these two men were one and the same, but it is intriguing and instructional to work with the possibility. If it were so, then Peter (who was in Jesus' entourage at the healing of the Centurion's servant) could have looked right at Cornelius and said with confidence, "Cornelius, you know the message God sent to the nation of Israel. . . ." Be that as it may, these hypothetical details give color to the narrative and help bring the pieces together as we, 2000 years later, listen to discern what was communicated to this Italian officer. For in Peter's sermon we hear the message the God of peace was bringing to the whole non-Jewish world. And that's very important to us non-Jews.

But Peter gets more detailed as the sermon progresses. From v. 37 he sets out the component parts of that message of peace. Peter tells Cornelius (and us) the specifics of what God was trying to communicate through Jesus, his living sermon, the Logos. Peter lists these major points in God's "sermon":

1) "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power." The word "anointed" is the verb form of the word for "Christ." The first point of God's message to the planet earth was the identity of Jesus. When we go to the gospel records to verify this we see clearly that Jesus' first and major concern was to establish his identity. This concern lay at the very foundation of his ministry. Summing up the whole issue was his bold statement to the Jews, "Unless you believe that I am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins." This line of thought proved to be the common concern throughout his ministry — both on his part and on the part of his contemporaries. "How long will you hold us in suspense," they asked. "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus himself took samplings: "Who do men say that I am?" And then he followed up with "Who do you say I am?" The most heated arguments during his ministry were over the question of his identity. The high priest, in exasperation, asked him at his trial, "I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." When Pilate heard that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God, he was all the more afraid and returned to Jesus, asking, "Where do you come from?" Everyone was attempting to ascertain the identity of Jesus. And Jesus spent the three years of his personal ministry attempting to establish the truth of the matter.

Point #2 of God's sermon follows in 38b: "How he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, for God was with him." Peter summarizes the

ministry of Jesus as loving and benevolent service to people. The gospel records are filled with the accounts of Jesus' doing good and of his healings. This was the part of Jesus' life/sermon which could not be denied. He was out among the people, looking for the lost, healing the injured and ill, comforting the hurting, raising the dead, feeding the hungry — he went about doing good. People debated Jesus' theology, but they never debated the goodness of his ministry.

Point #3 of God's message, according to Peter, is stated in the next verse (vv. 39): "They killed him by hanging him on a tree." Peter points to the central event around which all four gospels are written. The cross was a stark message of sacrificial love expressed in the extreme. It occupies center stage in the divine drama. God's peace initiative was embodied in the cross. God's message to man through the cross is, "I love you more than life itself."

Paul pointed to the cross as the focal point of God's peace plan. I quote him again here for emphasis. You can't separate God's peace initiative from the cross.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . his purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Eph. 2:14ff

Peter, Paul, and the other apostles understood that the cross proved beyond all doubt just how far God would go to establish peace. So dear was peace to God, so abhorrent was the "wall" which separated people, that God gave himself in his Son to die in order to bring down that wall. Robert

Frost claims that “good walls make good neighbors.” While Frost was a great poet, he was no theologian. In God’s eye the only good wall is a destroyed wall and the dynamite which brings all such walls crumbling down is the cross of Christ.

Point #4 of God’s message to man (v. 40) was simply that death had died. “God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.” Though the disciples did not anticipate the resurrection (in spite of Jesus’ repeated predictions, and though they were slow to grasp the implications of it when it actually occurred, once they realized that death had been defeated the resurrection became the foundation of their hope and the cornerstone of their preaching. So, the 4th point of God’s message to the earth is, “You need fear death no longer; I’ve taken care of it.” The hope-filled message transmitted from the empty tomb to a dying race is, “It’s over; fear death no more!”

These four events in the life of Jesus: 1) his identity, 2) his ministry, 3) his death and 4) his resurrection are the four historical realities upon which all human hopes are founded and all human needs are met. No wonder they comprise the message God came preaching to the nation of Israel and to the world.

If you would like to cross-reference this affirmation to check its accuracy, you might look at two places in the record: First, go back to the sermon Peter preached on Pentecost (Acts 2). It concurs exactly with the message he spoke in the home of Cornelius. (The same is true of the sermons recorded in Acts 3:11-15 and 13:23-39.)

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over

to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Acts 2:22-24

2) Then go on back to the records themselves (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — the full account of God's incarnate message), and you will be impressed by the fact that once these four issues (Jesus' identity, ministry, death, and resurrection) have been exhausted in the gospels, there is not a single topic that remains; not a word is left. The gospel records of the life of Jesus (God's message) draw totally from these four themes, from first to last.

Thus, by "overlapping" all the early sermons and then adding the gospel records of the life of Jesus, we are able to verify that the statement of Peter to Cornelius was the consistent message of the apostles, the gospel writers, and God himself.

Look again at Peter's sermon in Acts 10. Peter announces two theological implications which are dependent on, and flow from, the four historical events of Jesus' life: 1) Jesus has been appointed as judge of the living and the dead (v. 42) and 2) everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (v. 43). This is truly good news: the one who will judge us is the same one who has saved us. It is like standing before a judge who has already commuted our sentence. Here is more good news about peace that God announced through Jesus (Acts 10:36).

On that most historic occasion (Acts 10), the message of God to the planet earth, which he had originally announced in the person of his son Jesus, was transmitted through the

original hearers (the Jews) to the final hearers (the non-Jewish nations of the world). And the message given to both groups was identical.

The message was significant both from the standpoint of what it excluded and what it included: 1) It **excluded** those many purely Jewish items (the Law with all its ordinances such as circumcision, Sabbath observance feasts, foods, etc.) — items which certain Jewish Christians would have given their right arms to bind on the Gentiles. Those things are conspicuously and consistently absent. There was certain Judaistic “baggage” that God determined to leave behind. It was no longer essential, and so was “filtered out” by a higher Authority.

2) The message **included** only those eternal, universal truths — the historical foundations of Christianity (Jesus’ identity, ministry, death, and resurrection) and the theological implications (Jesus has been appointed as the judge of the living and the dead, and Jesus is the savior of all who believe in him). This is the long and short of God’s message. Nothing else was allowed to get through the divine “filter.” Nothing was permitted that would allow the distinctive identity of the original Jewish Christians to become the norm for all subsequent nations and cultures. As a result, uniformity went out the window, diversity became the order of the day, and Jesus himself was preached as the only message. There was no other.

Though this was the end of the message, it was not the end of the story. There were two responses this Christ-centered message produced: one from God and one from Cornelius and his friends.

1) The response from God was the spontaneous out-pouring of his Spirit on the Gentile recipients — just as he had responded to their Jewish counterparts “at the beginning”

(Acts 2). It was God's way of identifying with the hearers and placing his stamp of approval on the whole occasion. This, at least, was Peter's interpretation of the event. He told the Jerusalem council:

Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

Acts 15:6-8

Thus the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Gentile was used to show God's acceptance of the Gentile without his becoming a Jew.

2) The response provided by this Christ-centered message in the non-Jewish believers was baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (vv. 47-48). God had identified with them in the giving of his Spirit; now he asks them to identify with him and his Christ. The form of this identification was a similar death, burial, and resurrection — a baptism which allotted these believers to acknowledge Jesus' identity as Lord and participate in his death and resurrection. They thus owned him as Savior and Judge.

The transaction was complete; nothing further was required. These people, though different in externals from their Jewish brothers, were now full-fledged members of the same family with identical access to the Father through the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Consequently:

. . . [they were] no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as



the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Eph. 2:19-22

All the pieces were finally in place, and place was thus found for all nations and generations to come to God through faith in Christ alone (Acts 10:43) with no addendums or amendments attached. That was, and continues to be, unbelievably good news to all the nations who subsequently have come to God through Christ.

But there is a sad note. There was a segment of the Jewish (Christian) church which could never accept this universal mandate. They felt betrayed, their distinctiveness compromised, the "old paths" forsaken. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved' "(Acts 15:1). These Judaizing Christians dug their heels in and prepared to resist the Spirit of God in the name of religion. They thought they were doing right, but time and divine revelation have proven them terribly wrong. They refused to accept the church as a body of believers in transition. They failed to see what is perhaps the most practical, visible aspect of Christianity: its universality and diversity. They thought all faithful Christians had to look just like them.

They were the ones who opposed Paul, trying to undo his work. The letters to the Galatians, Colossians, Romans, Ephesians and the second letter to the Corinthians all address their troublemaking as a major disruption to the spread of the gospel of grace. Their presence is also noted in 1 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, and Titus. They were

the first Christian sectarians. These “defenders of the faith” rode their exclusivism with pride and fanaticism until they almost destroyed the very faith they thought to defend.

There is a sadder note: Those Judaizing Christians were not the last to resist the transition inherent in the spread of Christianity. There have been believers in every generation, especially among restorationists, who so revered their own traditions that they felt justified in excluding all other believers who did not share their beliefs. This is purely and simply sectarianism, and all who practice such exclusivistic theology are guilty of fragmenting the body of Christ. We see clearly that the Judaizers were wrong; we do not see so clearly that, if we do the same thing, we also are equally wrong. It matters not what the amendments are which we would add to the basic message, nor how pure the motives are of those who would do the amending. Those who add to the fundamental message are preaching “another gospel.” All who do so are fragmenting the body of Christ in this 20th century as certainly as those who did it in the 1st century.

All who want to transmit the good news of God’s salvation to a lost world are forced to answer one unsettling question in regard to what is required to “stand approved before God.” And that is: “Once we have preached God’s message (the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, his identity as Savior and Judge, his ministry, death, and resurrection) and called on all who believe in him to be baptized in his name and receive his Spirit as a gift, are we willing to shut our mouths?” Or will we insist on tacking on additional requirements which others must meet in order to stand right before God? Are we willing to accept those who do not share our own peculiar theological deductions, those who — having different backgrounds and perceptions — see things differently?

The answer to these questions will determine whether we

join the long list of those who, in the name of religion, protect the status quo and thus perpetuate sectarianism, or take our place with those who are willing to allow the church to be forever under the lordship of Jesus Christ and forever in a state of transition.

